

OPERA TREASURE CHEST GLOSSARY

A

ACT A portion of an opera designated by the composer, which has dramatic structure of its own

ARIA A solo piece written for a main character, which focuses on the character's emotion

ASIDE A comment from an actor directly to the audience that the other character cannot hear

ARTIST MANAGER OR ARTIST REPRESENTATIVE An agent who represents artists by publicizing their talents, finding roles for them, negotiating their contracts, and handling other business matters for them

B

BANDA A small group of instrumentalists who play either on the stage or backstage, not in the orchestra pit, often as a part of the crowd or military scene

BARITONE The male singing voice that is higher than bass but lower than tenor

BASS The lowest male singing voice

BATON A short stick that the conductor uses to lead the orchestra

BEL CANTO An Italian phrase literally meaning "beautiful singing." A traditional Italian style of singing that emphasizes tone, phrasing, coloratura passages, and technique. Also refers to opera written in this style.

BUFFO From the Italian for "buffoon." A singer of comic roles (basso-buffo) or a comic opera (opera buffa).

BLOCKING Directions given to actors for on-stage movements and actions

BOW, BOWING The bow is the stick used to play string instruments. The concertmaster determines when bows should be drawn up or down across the strings, and this bowing is noted in the score so that all the players move in the same direction.

BRAVO Literally, a form of applause when shouted by members of the audience at the end of an especially pleasing performance. Strictly speaking, "bravo" is for a single man, "brava" for a woman, and "bravi" for a group of performers.

C

CABALETTA Second part of a two-part aria, always in a faster tempo than the first part

CADENZA A Passage of singing, often at the end of an aria, which shows off the singer's vocal ability

CANZONE, CANZONETTA A folk-like song commonly used in opera buffa

CARPENTER The carpenter works on the construction of the sets.

Production Carpenter is the title given to the one in charge of the backstage crew, even though working with wood may not be involved.

CAVATINA The meaning of this term has changed over the years. It now usually refers to the opening, slow section of a two part aria. In Rossini's time it referred to the entrance, or first aria sung by a certain character. Norma's "Casta diva" is an example of a cavatina in both senses. See also SCENA.

CHOREOGRAPHER The person who designs the motions of a dance

CHOREOGRAPHY The act of setting movement to create a dance

CHORUS A group of singers, singing together, who sometimes portray servants, party guests, or other unnamed characters; also, the music written for them

CHORUS MASTER The one in charge of choosing chorus members and rehearsing them for performance. If there is a backstage chorus, it is usually conducted by the chorus master who is in communication with the conductor of the orchestra.

CLAUQUE A group of people hired to sit in the audience and either applaud enthusiastically to ensure success or whistle and boo to create disaster. In past years, leading singers were sometimes blackmailed to pay a claque to ensure that claqueurs would not create a disturbance. Even now, a claque is sometimes used, but rarely acknowledged.

COLORATURA Elaborate ornamentation of vocal music written using many fast notes and trills

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE A type of comic opera popular in Italy in the 16th to 18th centuries that involved improvisation using stock characters and gestures. The characters were often masked to represent certain archetypes.

COMPOSER A person who writes music

COMPRIMARIO A secondary or supporting role, or a person singing such a role

CONCERTATO A large ensemble of soloists and chorus generally found in the second movement of a central finale, to which it forms the lyrical climax

CONCERTMASTER The first- chair violinist who plays occasional solos and is responsible for coordinating all of the string instruments. The concertmaster decides on the bowing so that all of the string players' bows move in unison.

CONDUCTOR The leader of the orchestra, sometimes called maestro

CONTINUO An extemporized chordal accompaniment for recitative secco, usually by a harpsichord, cello, or double bass. Opera seria continuo often used an ensemble of harpsichord and theorbo (member of the lute family). Opera buffa continuo used a single keyboard and string bass.

CONTRALTO The lowest female singing voice

COSTUME DESIGNER Works with the set designer to prepare costumes that are appropriate for the rest of the production. Often oversees the preparation of the costumes.

COSTUME SHOP A special area set aside for the making of the costumes or for adjusting those that are rented

COUNTERTENOR The countertenor is a natural tenor (or sometimes baritone) with an elevated vocal range. With training and practice this higher range, similar to that of a female alto, becomes the natural voice.

COVER The name given to an understudy in opera; someone who replaces a singer in case of illness or other misfortune

CRESCENDO A gradual increase in volume. Orchestral crescendos were one of Rossini's trademarks.

CUE In opera, a signal to a singer or orchestra member to begin singing or playing

CURTAIN CALL At the end of a performance, all of the members of the cast and the conductor take bows. Sometimes this is done in front of the main curtain, hence the name curtain call. Often, however, the bows are taken on the full stage with the curtain open.

CUT To omit some of the original material from the score

D

DA CAPO ARIA An aria in the form ABA. A first section is followed by a shorter second section. Then the first is repeated, usually with added ornamentation.

DESIGNER A person who creates the lighting, costumes, and/or sets

DIAPHRAGM A muscle beneath the lungs and above the stomach which acts as a trampoline does, pushing the air from the lungs at a desired rate

DIRECTOR (STAGE DIRECTOR) A person who instructs the singer-actors on their on-stage movements and in the interpretation of their roles

DIVA Literally "goddess," it refers to an important female opera star. The masculine form is divo.

DOUBLE ARIA An aria which consists of two parts. The first part, or cavatina, is usually slow, and the second, or cabaletta, is faster. There is often recitative between the two sections.

DOWNSTAGE See STAGE AREAS

DRAMATIC (VOICE TYPE) The heaviest voice, capable of sustained declamation and a great deal of power, even over the largest operatic orchestra of about 80 instruments. This description applies to all voice ranges from soprano to bass

DRAMATURG One who suggests repertory, advises on the suitability of competing editions of operas and writes or edits material for program books and supertitles

DRESS (A WIG) To prepare a wig for use

DRESSER A member of the backstage staff who helps the artists change their costumes. The principal singers usually have their own dresser. Supers and chorus members share dressers.

DRESS REHEARSAL A final rehearsal that uses all of the costumes, lights, etc. While sometimes it is necessary to stop for corrections, an attempt is made to make it as much like a final performance as possible.

DUET An extended musical passage performed by two singers. They may or may not sing simultaneously or on the same musical line.

DYNAMIC The degree of loudness and quietness in music. See PIANO and FORTE.

E

ELECTRICIAN One who is charged with executing the lighting design according to the specifications of the lighting designer

ENCORE Literally means “again.” It used to be the custom for the singer to repeat a popular aria if the audience called “encore” loudly enough. This is still done in the middle of an opera in countries such as Italy, but it is rare elsewhere. Soloists frequently give encores at the end of a concert, but not an opera.

ENSEMBLE Two or more people singing at the same time, or the music written for such a group

F

FALSETTO A method of singing above the natural range of the male voice. Often used in opera for comic effects, such as a man imitating a woman.

FINALE The last musical number of an opera or the last number of an act

FLY, FLY TOWER A high space above the stage where pieces of the set are often raised up or flown out of sight when not in use

G

GENERAL DIRECTOR The head of an opera company. The one ultimately responsible for all artistic and financial aspects of everything in which the company is involved.

GRAND OPERA Strictly speaking, opera without spoken dialogue. It is usually used to refer to opera which uses a large orchestra and chorus and grand themes.

H

HELDEN Prefix meaning “heroic.” Applicable to other voices, but usually used in Heldentenor.

I

IMPRESARIO A person who sponsors entertainment. In opera, the general director of an opera company.

INTERLUDE A short piece of instrumental music played between scenes or acts

INTERMISSION A long break, usually about 20 minutes, between acts of an opera, during which the audience is free to move around

L

LEITMOTIV, MOTIF A short, recurring musical phrase associated with a particular character or event

LIBRARIAN In charge of preparing the music for the orchestra. Scores are usually rented and have to be annotated to reflect cuts and other changes for a given production.

LIBRETTO The text or words of an opera

LIGHTING DESIGNER One who designs and coordinates the light changes that help create opera’s overall effect. Much of this is now computerized.

LYRICS The sung words or text of a musical comedy or operetta song

M

MAESTRO Literally “master,” used as a courtesy title for the conductor. The masculine ending is used for both men and women.

MAGIC OPERA An opera in which there are many magical effects, and often animals, appearing on stage. Often the plot of a magic opera involves the rescue of one of the major characters.

MAKEUP DESIGNER One who designs and applies makeup to actors in order to appear properly under stage lighting, or to appear older, younger, as a creature, etc.

MARK To sing softly or not at full voice. A full-length opera is very hard on a singer's voice, so most mark during rehearsals. During dress rehearsals, singers try to sing at full voice for at least some of the time.

MELODRAMA In a technique which originated with the French; short passages of music alternating with spoken words

MEZZO-SOPRANO The middle female singing voice, lower than soprano, but higher than contralto

MUSICAL COMEDY See OPERETTA

N

NUMBER OPERA An opera composed of original numbers, such as recitative, arias, duets, ensembles, etc. Between the numbers there is often a chance for applause.

O

OPERA Italian for "work." A libretto acted and sung by one or more singers to an instrumental accompaniment.

OPERA BUFFA An opera about ordinary people, usually, but not always comic, which first developed in the 18th century

OPERA SERIA A "serious" opera. The usual characters are gods, goddesses, or ancient heroes. Rossini was one of the last to write true opera seria.

OPERA TEXT See SUPERTITLES

OPERETTA, MUSICAL COMEDY A play, some of which is spoken, but with many musical numbers. See also SINGSPIEL.

ORCHESTRA The group of instrumentalists or musicians who, led by the conductor, accompany the singers

ORCHESTRATION The art of applying orchestral color to written music by assigning various instruments different parts of the music. This requires a complete knowledge of instruments and their timbre, range, etc.

OVERTURE An orchestral introduction to an opera. (French: ouverture; German: ouverture; Italian: sinfonia)

P

PANTS ROLE See TROUSER ROLE

PARLANDO A style of singing like ordinary speech. It can occur in the middle of an aria.

PATTER SONG A song or aria in which the character sings as many words as possible in a short amount of time

PIANO-VOCAL SCORE Usually a reduction of an opera's orchestral score. See SCORE.

PIT A sunken area in front of the stage where members of the orchestra play

PIZZICATO Playing a string instrument by plucking the strings instead of using a bow

PRELUDE Usually a short introduction that leads into an act without a break, as opposed to an overture which is longer and can be played as a separate piece. Wagner called his introductions preludes even though some of them are quite long.

PRIMA DONNA Literally "first lady." The leading female singer in an opera. Because of the way some have behaved in the past, it often refers to someone who acts in a superior and demanding fashion. The term for the leading man is primo uomo.

PRINCIPAL A major singing role, or the singer who performs such a role

PRODUCTION The combination of sets, costumes, props, lights, etc.

PRODUCTION CARPENTER Carpenter in charge of organizing and handling all aspects of the sets and equipment

PRODUCTION MANAGER The administrator responsible for coordinating the sets, costumes, rehearsal facilities, and all physical aspects of a production. Often, the person who negotiates with the various unions representing stage hands, musicians, etc.

PROMPT To help a singer remember lines, some opera houses will place a person (prompter) in a box below and at the very front of the stage

PROPS (PROPERTIES) Small items carried or used by performers on stage

PROPERTY MASTER One who is responsible for purchasing, acquiring, and/or manufacturing any props needed for the production

R

RECITATIVE Words sung in a conversational style, usually to advance the plot. Not to be confused with aria.

REDUCTION In a piano reduction, the orchestra parts are condensed into music which can be played by one person on the piano

REPERTOIRE Stock pieces that a singer or company has ready to present. Often refers to a company's current season.

REPETITEUR A member of the music staff who plays the piano for rehearsal, and, if necessary, the piano or harpsichord during performances. They frequently coach singers in their roles and assist with orchestra rehearsals.

RIGGER One who works on ropes, booms, lifts, and other aspects of a production

ROULADE, RUN A quick succession of notes sung on one syllable

S

SCENA Literally "a scene." A dramatic episode which consists of a variety of numbers with a common theme. A typical scena might consist of a recitative, a cavatina, and a cabaletta.

SCENIC CHARGE One who is responsible for painting by reproducing color, texture, presentation, and aging of stage surfaces

SCORE The written music of an opera or other musical work

SET, SET DESIGNER The background and furnishings on the stage and the person who designs them

SERENADE A piece of music honoring someone or something

SEXTET A piece for six singers

SINGSPIEL German opera with spoken dialogue and usually, but not necessarily, a comic or sentimental plot

SITZPROBE Literally "seated rehearsal." It is the first rehearsal of the singers with the orchestra and no acting.

SOPRANO The highest female singing voice

SOUBRETTE A pert, young female character with a light soprano voice

SPINTO (VOICE TYPE) A lyric voice that has the power and incisiveness for dramatic climaxes

STAGEHAND One who works behind the scenes setting up lighting, props, rigging, scenery, and special effects for a production

STAGE AREAS The various sections of the stage. Left and right are as seen by those on stage, not in the audience. Since many stages are raked (higher in the back than in front), upstage is at the back, and downstage at the front. If an actor stay upstage, all the others have to turn their back to the audience when speaking to him. This is the origin of the phrase, "to upstage someone."

STAGE DIRECTOR The one responsible for deciding the interpretation of each character, the movements of the singers on stage, and other things affecting the singers. Is in charge at rehearsals.

STAGE MANAGER The person in charge of the technical aspects of the entire opera, including light changes, sound effects, entrances (even of the conductor), and everything else that happens.

STROPHIC Describes an aria in which the same music repeats for all stanzas of a text

SUPERNUMERARY Someone who is part of a group on stage but doesn't sing. It is usually shortened to Super.

SUPERTITLES Translations of the words being sung, or the actual words if the libretto is in the native language, that are projected on a screen above the stage

SYNOPSIS A written description of an opera's plot

T

TENOR The highest common adult male singing voice (countertenors are uncommon)

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR Supervisor of those who implement the concepts of the designers. He or she works with carpenters, painters, electricians, sound designers, and stagehands, and oversees the building of sets, props, and hanging of lights.

TESSITURA Literally "texture." It defines the average pitch level of a role. Two roles may have the same range from the lowest note to the highest note, but the one with a greater proportion of high notes has the higher tessitura.

THROUGH-SUNG An opera in which the music is continuous, without divisions into recitative and aria

TRAGEDIE LYRIQUE Early form of French opera that recognized a distinction between the main scenes and divertissements consisting of choruses, dances, etc.

TREMOLO The quick, continuous reiteration of a pitch

TRILL Very quick alternation of pitch between two adjacent notes. See coloratura.

TRIO An ensemble of three singers or the music that is written for three singers

TROUSER ROLE A role depicting a young man or boy, but sung by a female

V

VERISMO Describes the realistic style of opera that started in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century. Although the peak of the movement was past by the time of Puccini, his operas are a modified form of verismo.

VIBRATO A natural wavering of frequency (pitch) while singing a note. It is usually inadvertent, as opposed to a trill.

VOCAL COACH A member of an opera company who coaches singers, helping them with the pronunciation, singing, and interpretation of a role

VOCAL CORDS The wishbone-shaped edges of muscles in the lower part of the throat whose movements create variations in pitch as air passes between them. Often spelled incorrectly as “chord.”

W

WIG DESIGNER Designs and oversees the creation of the wigs used in a production