



## Glossary of Common Opera Terminology

**Acoustics:** The science of sound; qualities or characteristics of a space such as an auditorium, concert hall, opera house, or theater which determine how sound is transmitted in it.

**Act:** A section of the opera, play, etc. usually followed by an intermission.

**Arias and Recitative:** Solos sung by one person only. **Recitative**, are sung words and phrases that are used to propel the action of the story and are meant to convey conversations. Melodies are often simple or fast to resemble speaking. The **aria** has more recognizable structure and melody. Arias, unlike recitative, are a stop in the action, where the character usually reflects upon what has happened. When two people are singing, it becomes a **duet**. When three people sing a **trio**, four people a **quartet**.

**Backstage:** The area of the stage not visible to the audience, usually where the dressing rooms are located.

**Bel canto:** Although Italian for “beautiful song,” the term is usually applied to the school of singing prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Baroque and Romantic) with emphasis on vocal purity, control, and dexterity.

**Blocking:** Directions given to actors for on-stage movements and actions.

**Bravo, brava, bravi:** An acknowledgment of a good performance shouted during moments of applause (the end of the word is determined by the gender and the number of performers).

**Cadenza:** An elaborate passage near the end of an aria, which shows off the singer’s vocal ability.

**Chorus master:** Person who prepares the chorus musically (which includes rehearsing and directing them).

**Coloratura:** A voice that can sing music with many rapid notes, or the music written for such a voice with elaborate ornamentation using fast notes and trills.

**Composer:** A person who writes music, especially as a professional occupation.

**Cord, vocal:** The wishbone shaped edges of muscles, housed in the lower part of the throat whose movements or oscillations create variations of pitch as air passes between them.

**Diaphragm:** The muscle which separates the chest cavity from the abdominal cavity. It is used by singers for breath control and it allows them to “project” their voices to the back of the auditorium.

**Diva:** Literally “goddess”, refers to an important female opera star. The masculine form is divo.

**Downstage:** The front of the stage nearest the audience.

**Encore:** Literally means “again”. Singers customarily repeated a popular aria in the middle of an opera if they were given an encore by the audience. This practice is still done across the globe.

**Ensemble:** Two or more people singing at the same time, or the music written for such a group.

**Fach:** Method of classifying singers, primarily opera singers, according to the range, weight, and color of their voices.

**Falsetto:** The falsetto voice is of high pitch and produced by the vibrations of only one part of the vocal folds allowing the male voice to sing above its natural range.

**Final dress:** The final rehearsal before opening night.

**Finale:** The last musical number of an opera, or of an act of an opera.

**Formant:** A characteristic component of the quality of a speech sound, specifically any of several resonance bands held to determine the phonetic quality of a vowel.

**Green room:** The lounge backstage where performers and crew can relax.

**House:** A term for the audience seating area in a theater.

**Interlude:** A short piece of instrumental music played between scenes or acts.

**Leitmotiv:** A recurring musical figure used to identify a person, event, or idea.

**Legato:** A smooth, flowing line demanding steadiness of breath without breaks between notes and a sensitivity to phrasing.

**Librettist:** A person who writes the text of an opera.

**Libretto:** The words or text of an opera like a script to a play, often in a foreign language.

**Mezza voce:** Half-voice, with reference to a passage required to be sung softly throughout.

**Motive:** A short musical idea on which a melody is based.

**Overture:** An orchestral introduction to the opera, usually played before the action begins.

**Portamento:** An Italian singing term, asking the voice to slide from one note to another.

**Repetiteur:** A member of the music staff who plays piano for rehearsals and often performances. They frequently coach singers in their roles and assist with orchestra rehearsals.

**Range:** Distance from the lowest to the highest pitch an artist can play or sing.

**Role:** The character that a singer portrays.

**Score:** The music of an opera or other work in which parts for different performers appear vertically above one another.

**Sitzprobe:** A sit-down rehearsal where the performers sing with the orchestra for the first time without moving on the stage.

**Stage left:** The left side of the stage from the performer's perspective as s/he faces the audience.

**Stage right:** The right side of the stage from the performer's perspective as s/he faces the audience.

**Supertitles:** A caption projected on a screen above the stage in an opera, translating the text being sung.

**Tessitura:** Literally "texture." The approximate range of a role or an aria.

**Timbre:** the quality given to a sound by its overtones: tone distinctive of a particular singing voice or musical instrument.

**Trill:** A musical ornament requiring the rapid alternation of two adjacent notes.

**Trouser role:** Also called "pants role." The part of a male character sung by a woman, usually a mezzo-soprano.

**Understudy:** A replacement for a particular role in case of illness or emergency (also called a "cover").

**Upstage:** The back, or rear of the stage, farthest away from the audience. This term can also be used when one actor is drawing audience attention away from the proper focus.

**Vibrato:** A rapid, slight variation in pitch in singing or playing some musical instruments, producing a stronger or richer tone.

**Wings:** The sides of the stage where the performers wait before making their entrances.