

Common Opera Terminology

acoustics

The science of sound; qualities which determine hearing facilities in an auditorium, concert hall, opera house, theater, etc.

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** is like a normal song with 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 acknowledgement of a good performance shouted during moments of applause (the ending 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.

cord, vocal

The wish-bone 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. 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 encored by the audience. A practice still done in Italy.

ensemble

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

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.

finale

The last musical number of an opera, or of an act of an opera.

full dress rehearsal

The final rehearsal before opening night with all singers present in full costume.

greenroom

The lounge backstage where performers and crew can relax

house

A term for the theater, or often used to refer to the audience seating area.

interlude

A short piece of instrumental music played between scenes or acts to fill in delays during scenery changes.

leitmotiv

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

legato

A smooth, flowing line demanding steadiness of emission and a sensitivity to phrasing.

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 acting begins.

portamento

An Italian singing term, asking the voice to glide from one note to another at some distance.

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.

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 acting.

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.

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 of the stage or the act of attracting audience attention away from the proper focus.

wings

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