Opera Terminology

Opera shares many of the same words found in theatre and other musical forms. However, a few terms are unique to opera and operatic singing and may be helpful when trying to understand, interpret, and speak about the art form.

- **act** - a group of scenes with a common theme, such as a specific time or place, forming a major section of the opera
- **aria** - a musical piece sung by one person, usually about the emotions a character is feeling; arias are the songs in opera
- **baritone** - the middle low voice, usually male
- **bass** - the lowest, deepest voice, usually male
- **bravo** - Italian for “nicely done”; audience members who really like a performance often shout “bravo!” while applauding
- **chorus** - a musical piece sung by a group of people; also a name for a large group of singers
- **coloratura** - singing in long phrases of fast high notes with leaps and trills; usually a soprano technique
- **composer** - a person who writes music
- **conductor** - the person who leads the musical performance
- **duet** - a musical piece sung by two people
- **finale** - the final musical number in an opera (or an act), often involving multiple people
- **libretto** - the words or script of an opera
- **mezzo-soprano** - the middle high voice, usually female
- **opera** - a play in which the story is told through music and singing
- **operetta** - a “small opera,” usually comic, that features popular-style music (for its time) and uses spoken dialogue instead of recitative
- **overture** - a musical introduction to an opera played by the orchestra
- **production** - the scenery, staging, and costumes of an opera
- **quartet** - a musical piece sung by four people
- **recitative** - sung dialogue, usually more about telling the story than about emotions; recitatives are the conversations in opera
- **score** - a book of all the vocal and instrumental music for an opera
- **soprano** - the highest voice in opera, usually female
- **supernumerary** - a performer with a non-singing role, like an “extra” in a movie
- **tenor** - usually the highest male voice
- **titles** - English translations of what’s being sung projected on a screen above the stage
- **trio** - a musical piece sung by three people
- **trouser role** - a male role, usually the part of a young boy, performed by a soprano or mezzo soprano