



OPERA  
SAN ANTONIO

# OPERA 101





**Dear Friends,**

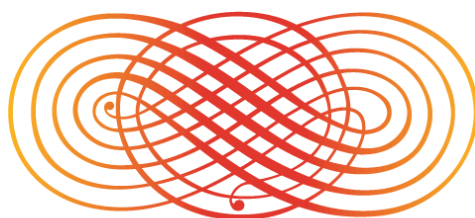
OPERA San Antonio is pleased to offer this guide as an educational resource to help prepare and further enrich your students' introduction to the art form of opera.

Through this guide, students will learn about the basics of opera including what to expect, common terminology, facts about training to be an opera singer, and voice types. On behalf of all our staff, thank you for your dedication to the arts, for advocating for arts education in your school, and for your support of OPERA San Antonio. We are proud to partner with you on this journey and hope this guide serves as an enhancement to your curriculum.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Madeline Elizondo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

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## Table of Contents

### About OPERA San Antonio

[Who we are](#)

[Our mission](#)

### Opera 101

### Behind the Scenes

### Training to be an Opera Singer

[What? No Microphones?!](#)

[So many languages, so many words!](#)

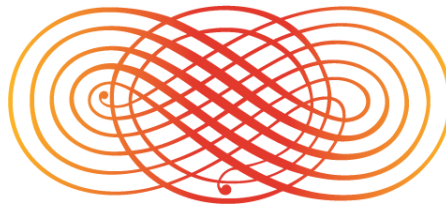
[Don't forget to act!](#)

### Voice Types (Fachs)

### OPERA 101 Word Search

### OPERA 101 Word Search (Answer Key)

### Glossary of Common Opera Terminology



## About OPERA San Antonio

### Who we are

OPERA San Antonio was formed in 2010 as the resident opera company of the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts. OSA produces two world-class operas per season at the Tobin Center and one smaller opera in an alternate venue in addition to creating opportunities through education and outreach events. Programs include *Explore Opera for Kids!* in partnership with the Opera Guild of San Antonio and the San Antonio Public Library system; *Behind the Scenes*, which provides students with access to discussions with the creative team and invitations to attend productions free of charge at the Tobin Center; *OPERA in Schools*, a program offering 20-50 minute interactive presentations for K-12 students; and the *Summer Voice Program* in partnership with the Classical Music Institute to provide training and mentorship opportunities for local artists. Since its founding, OSA has formed important partnerships within the arts community and remains dedicated to making opera an important part of the cultural fabric of San Antonio. The company will continue to create and promote educational programs that encourage the community to venture out and experience the arts.

For more information on any of these programs, please visit the “Learn” tab on our [website](#) or contact Madeline Elizondo at [madeline@operasa.org](mailto:madeline@operasa.org).

### Our mission

OPERA San Antonio’s mission is to produce opera of uncompromising artistic quality and to enrich our community through educational outreach and social engagement. The company is committed to preserving and sharing opera as an art form that is relevant, inspirational, and accessible to residents and visitors of all ages and backgrounds. The civic premise of OPERA San Antonio is that the community needs, and the citizens deserve, access to the major performing arts.

Please visit our [website](#) for more information.



## Opera 101

*“As long as there is a story to tell and ideas to be aired, opera will flourish. It is, after all, simply a heightened, multi-sensory means of making sense of the painful, glorious, complicated truths about the human condition.” -San Francisco Opera*

Click [here](#) for a brief history of Opera.

### What is an Opera?

**Full Opera** – An opera is a story set entirely to music. Opera is similar to any other drama – a TV show, movie, or play, but requires the use of the unamplified voice combined with music. A **composer** works carefully with a **librettist** to adapt the story and bring it to life through music. What makes an opera unique is that it is all-encompassing: there are elements of visual art, drama, dance, literature, and music. If you take a peek backstage, you’ll note that the people working there are not necessarily musicians. As an all-inclusive art form, opera requires people with knowledge of math, science, and other technical skills to produce the complete staging of an operatic work. In fact, the Italian word *opera* means “work,” both in the literal sense referencing a musical work or collection of songs, but also alluding to the amount of labor invested in its production.

**Concert and semi-staged Opera** – An innovative approach to opera which establishes an intimate relationship with the audience, the musical drama, the orchestra, and the conductor. The orchestra and conductor are present onstage, bringing the music into a different focus than when the musicians are in the orchestra pit. The conductor and orchestra do not distract from the action, but rather underscore the drama. The presence of the orchestra onstage provides an unusually strong bond with the characters in the opera, allowing for a dynamic interplay of voices and instruments. This fusion of voices and instruments actually heightens the dramatic effect and the minimal use of scenery encourages members of the audience to fill in the background with their imagination.

### How will I know what is going on?

No need to worry if you don’t know the language of the opera. There will be a highly visible screen with “**supertitles**” that provides a complete translation of the words being sung. The experience of watching an opera has been truly transformed by making it possible for everyone to follow the story.

### How long is the Opera?

Operas are typically performed with a total run time of three hours, but some operas are much shorter or, on rare occasions, even longer.

## What do people wear to the Opera?

Opera is for everyone. People can come to our performances dressed in everything from jeans to gowns. When choosing your attire, wear what is most comfortable or pleasing to you. Some people love dressing up and going out. If that is you, dress up, and you will not be the only one.

## When is it appropriate to clap if I like what I hear?

Your applause is welcome and very much appreciated by our cast of performers! It is standard practice to clap at the end of large musical numbers, or special solos (“**arias**”) sung by one character. If you really love a performance, the traditional thing to do is shout “**Bravo!**” (to men) or “**Brava!**” (to ladies). It's fun to sometimes literally give a shout-out.

## What else should I expect?

Magic. Opera is a magical combination: a story of people under pressure, a dramatic situation, fabulous sets and costumes, towering symphonic music, and a solo instrument – the human voice – that expresses human emotion like nothing else can. In this magic space, the emotion of the music will give you an experience you will never forget.

## A few more tips:

1. Remember, the opera is a live performance. You can hear the performers on stage and that means they can hear you too! Please refrain from talking or whispering during the opera. It is distracting to others around you as well as to the singers. Please do not leave your seat during the performance.
2. Please turn off all cell phones, beeping watches, and anything else that may go “beep” in the night. Photographs, video, or audio recordings of the performance are strictly prohibited. We invite you to unplug and immerse yourself in the experience.
4. If you like what you have seen and heard, let the performers know. Applause and a standing ovation is always welcome.

## Behind the Scenes

It takes more than singers to put on an opera. Although you may see only the performers in the spotlight, there are many people behind the scenes who make what you see possible.

## Backstage

The **Stage Director** tells singers how to move on stage so that the audience is able to understand what is being sung, even if it is in a different language.

The **Technical Director** coordinates lighting, set, and costumes, supervises the building and mounting of scenery onstage, and oversees the work of all crews during rehearsals and performances.

The **Stage Manager** handles administrative duties related to a production, assists the director during rehearsals, and is responsible for all backstage activity once the show opens. They tell the singers when to walk onto the stage and keep everyone safe.

The **Scenic Designer** is responsible for the visual appearance and function of all scenic elements in an opera to help bring the story to life onstage. They plan or design the set and supervise its construction.

The **Lighting Designer** plans or designs the color, intensity, and frequency of the light onstage.

The **Wig and Make-Up Designer** creates and oversees hairstyles, wigs & make-up.

The **Costume Designer** plans how each singer is dressed and makes sure that all the costumes will help the singers accurately portray their characters in the opera's setting.

The **Properties (Props) Manager** is in charge of finding objects for the singers to use while on stage that will correctly reflect the time period of the opera and give the actions on stage a more realistic feel.

The **Choreographer** invents dances and movements and teaches them to dancers and/or cast members.

The **Crew or Stagehands** assist in the construction, installation, and changes of the set, costumes, lights, and props. Stagehands know when to change the scenery.

### On Stage

**Cast:** All singers and actors who appear onstage.

**Actors:** Performers who have dialogue but do not sing.

**Principal:** A singer who performs a large role in the opera.

**Comprimario:** A singer who specializes in the small character roles of opera, from the Italian meaning "next to the first".

**Supernumeraries** (or Supers): Actors who participate in the action but do not speak or sing.

**Dancers:** These performers train for years and perform choreographed routines onstage. From flamenco to ballet, dance plays a supporting role in countless operas.

**Chorus:** A group of singers with more than one person singing each part, like a choir. The choruses in opera represent certain groups required by the story such as soldiers, priests, peasants, or townspeople. Certain operas include the use of a children's chorus.

### In the Pit

The **Conductor** or **Maestro** shows the orchestra when to play and the singers when to sing. The conductor controls how fast or slow the music goes.

The **Orchestra** is made up of a group of musicians who play instruments. They typically stay with the conductor in the **orchestra pit** during operas, as opposed to onstage for concerts. What is the orchestra pit? It is a partially covered area right in front of the stage. You'll generally only be able to see the back of the conductor's head in the pit if you are an audience member. A composer typically uses woodwinds, brass, percussion, and string instruments in various combinations in the orchestra to help express a variety of emotions and environments. **Woodwinds** include piccolos, flutes, and reed instruments such as the oboe, clarinet, and bassoon, all requiring a very focused stream of air. **Brass** instruments produce sound through the buzzing or vibration of the player's lips resonating within a tubular chamber. They include horns, trumpets, and trombones. **Percussion** is a broad term describing any instrument that is struck, scraped, or rubbed by hand. Timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, xylophone, glockenspiel, and chimes are just an example of a few utilized by composers. **Strings** include any instrument that produces sound from vibrating strings such as violins, violas, cellos, double bass, and harp.

### In the House

**The Audience** (that's you!) also has an important role to play. It would not be a real performance without you! Sometimes as an audience member, you have to be creative too. A setting might be suggested by a few panels or a background requiring you to engage your imagination. You can become a part of the communal experience, living and breathing with the cast and musicians as they create art onstage.





## Training to be an Opera Singer

### What? No Microphones?!

The performance of opera today is like a living piece of history. The first opera dates back to 1598, over 300 years before the invention of the microphone. This required singers to produce sound in a much different way for their voice to be heard over the orchestra. Due to the power of the natural voice, opera singers are able to sing over an entire orchestra and fill the whole house with their sound without the use of a microphone! Instead, opera singers rely upon their extensive training and the acoustics of the hall. To stay true to the art and performance practice of its origin, opera is still performed today without the use of any amplification of instruments or singers.

In physics, the phenomenon of a singer achieving the perfect resonating spot for a certain pitch on a specific vowel is called hitting that pitch's "**formant**." This is why it takes singers years and years of diligent study to develop the needed muscle memory and stamina to achieve these formants for every vowel and pitch combination...in fact many train for longer than doctors! They must learn to manipulate muscles inside their mouth called articulators and isolate and train their **vocal chords**, soft tissue about the size of a dime for women and quarter for men with flaps that open and close to create **vibrato**. The added challenge is, unlike other musicians, they are not able to see their instrument and must learn by sensation.

### So many languages, so many words!

Imagine having to memorize several hours of music in a language you don't know or speak, then interpret the meaning and convey the emotion behind it while performing for a live audience. This is just one of the many feats an opera singer must accomplish. Operas are now usually performed in the language they were written in. This means, in addition to training their voices, opera singers must also study German, French, Italian, English... even Russian or Czech!... to be able to pronounce words correctly and understand the basic structure and meaning of the language. For many roles, they are often coached by a language expert.

### Don't forget to act!

In addition to achieving perfect resonating tones sung from memory in a foreign language, opera singers must also successfully execute **staging**, or **blocking**, in the show to successfully portray their character. Many have to sing while dancing, lying down, kneeling, crawling, jumping among all sorts of other physically demanding feats...and often in very uncomfortable, awkward, or confining costumes such as hoop skirts, corsets, cloaks, and wigs.

## Voice Types (Fachs)

In opera, a singer's voice type or **fach** is determined by the combination of their **timbre** and **range**. Timbre is the unique character or quality of a musical sound produced by a voice or instrument. Range is the distance from the lowest to the highest pitch one can sing or play.

### Soprano

The highest of the female voice types, sopranos often have very challenging, "show-off" arias to sing and are the most adored or sought-after character in the story. As a result, they are voted "most likely to fall in love or die" by the end of the show... sometimes both! In operatic drama, the soprano is oftentimes the heroine or protagonist. In lighter opera, her high, bright sound suggests youth, innocence, and virtue.

### Mezzo-Soprano

A mezzo has a lower voice than a soprano, but higher than a contralto. "Mezzo" means "middle" in Italian. In the opera, she may fall for a baritone, unless she's playing a young man, in which case she usually gets the soprano. Throughout history, the darker, warmer sound of a mezzo has been used to convey many different types of characters: everything from boys or young men (called a "trouser" role), to mothers, seductive heroines, and villainesses.

### Contralto

The lowest of the female voices. It is hard to find contralto singers, and true contralto roles are few and rare. These roles are usually special characters such as older women, witches, gypsies, maids, or guardians charged with monitoring the virtue of the impressionable soprano.

### Countertenor

The highest of the male voices, the countertenor is a natural tenor or baritone with an elevated range. With training and patience, this higher range (like that of a woman alto) becomes the natural voice. These roles are most common in baroque opera, but some modern composers have written parts for them too.

### Tenor

The tenor has a range between a baritone and a mezzo and is frequently the hero or protagonist of the opera. If there is no countertenor, he will be the highest male voice on stage. Because of their brilliant shimmery tones and often powerful high range, they are usually the "guy who gets the girl" or bravely dies trying.

### Baritone, Bass-Baritone

The **baritone** is the most common male voice. It is lower in range than the tenor and with a darker tone. In comic opera, the baritone is often the ringleader in mischief. **Bass-Baritone** is a category used to describe voices with a range between that of the baritone and bass. The **tessitura**, or vocal range of these roles, is higher than what a bass can comfortably sing, with occasional moments of probing in the bass register, and the need for a darkness of color that the bass brings to a role. Usually the bad guy, guardian, or the hero's best friend.

### Bass

This is the lowest and darkest of the male voices. Low voices often suggest age and wisdom, or evil characters in serious opera. In comic opera, they are often used for older characters that are foolish or laughable. They've been used to portray kings, fathers, or even the devil.



Watch this short [video](#) featuring a selection of singers from the Royal Opera House demonstrating the sound of a baritone, soprano, bass, tenor, countertenor, and mezzo-soprano.

## OPERA 101 Word Search

C O M P R I M A R I O O F W M  
 Q Y H P R I N C I P A L L M X  
 S U P E R N U M E R A R I E S  
 M A E S T R O N G G J E I Z C  
 A Z S U P E R T I T L E S Z P  
 N K M W V D T E N O R L A O Q  
 W V L I B R E T T I S T O S B  
 C I V C B I K A T O P T R O A  
 O B S H I A G N U P I Y C P C  
 M R C O L D R Z C E T B H R K  
 P A M R P M G I A R I A E A S  
 O T V U S R D B T A V S S N T  
 S O C S C D A N A O C S T O A  
 E O B R A V O N A P N I R R G  
 R Y Y A F O E G O U P E A L E

supernumeraries	mezzo-soprano	librettist	comprimario
supertitles	baritone	soprano	vibrato
tenor	aria	principal	composer
bravo	backstage	orchestra	maestro
chorus	opera	bass	pit

## OPERA 101 Word Search (Answer Key)



supernumeraries	mezzo-soprano	librettist	comprimario
supertitles	baritone	soprano	vibrato
tenor	aria	principal	composer
bravo	backstage	orchestra	maestro
chorus	opera	bass	pit



## 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 that 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**, a section meant to propel the action of the story forward, often used to convey conversation. Melodies are often simple or fast to resemble speaking. The **aria** has a more recognizable structure and melody. Arias, unlike recitative, tend to stop 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, 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.

**Opera buffa:** A comic opera (usually in Italian), with characters drawn from everyday life.

**Opera seria:** An opera (especially one of the 18th century in Italian) on a serious, usually classical or mythological theme.

**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.

**Singspiel:** A form of German light opera, typically with spoken dialogue, popular especially in the late 18th century.

**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 as it is 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 or "cover" for a particular role in case of illness or emergency.

**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.