

Opera Vocabulary

Aria -	solo song performed by an opera character; unlike recitative which furthers the plot, an aria is usually a moment in which the character reflects on the action so far or makes pivotal decisions
Baritone -	male voice type between bass and tenor
Bass -	the lowest male voice; can be comic as in the “basso buffo” or very deep as in the “basso profundo”
Contralto -	the lowest female voice, very rare
Grand Opera -	style that emerged in 19 th century France featuring historical plots, lavish sets, huge choruses, and an emphasis on spectacle
Libretto -	the textual basis for an operatic production; usually adapted from a book or play, but sometimes newly written by the composer (as was the case in many of Wagner’s operas)
Mezzo-Soprano -	the middle female voice, can be classified as coloratura, lyric, or dramatic
Opera -	a fully staged dramatic work featuring continuous orchestral accompaniment that is sung throughout
Operetta -	“light opera”; usually lighter and more comedic in nature than traditional opera, often featuring spoken dialogue in addition to singing
Oratorio -	one of opera’s many “cousins”; a semi-staged sacred work featuring choruses, soloists and orchestra usually depicting important biblical events; very similar to an opera in form, but the singers do not wear costumes or use sets
Recitative -	a musical setting of dialogue or other conversational text that attempts to emulate the natural stresses of speech; recitative can be accompanied by the full orchestra or very sparsely
Singspiel -	German variety of opera, literally “sing-play”; like many operatic offshoots Singspiel features spoken dialogue
Soprano -	the highest female voice, it can be classified as coloratura, lyric, or dramatic
Tenor -	the highest male voice