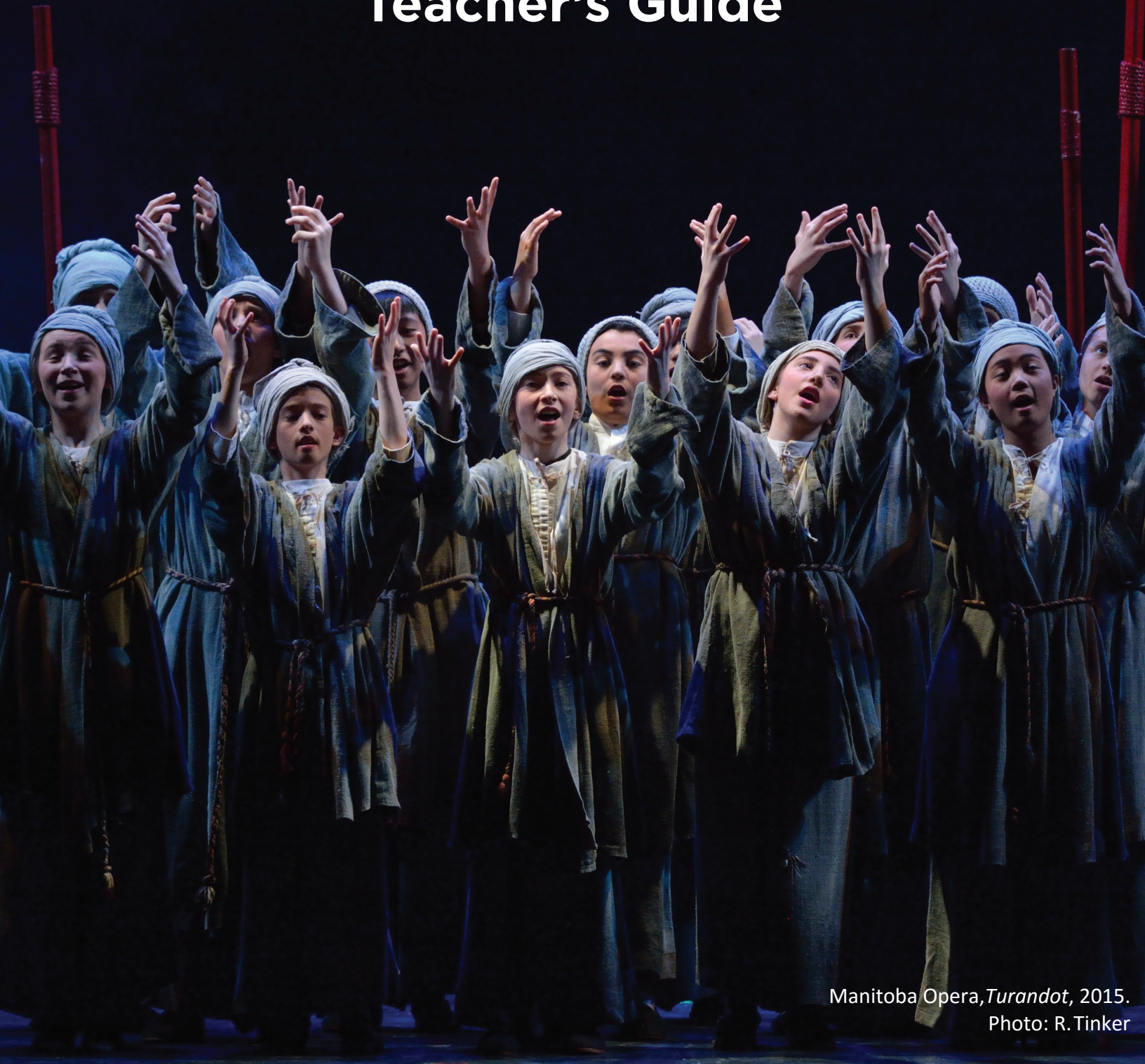




What is Opera?

Teacher's Guide



Manitoba Opera, *Turandot*, 2015.
Photo: R. Tinker



The Marriage of Figaro, Manitoba Opera, 2015.

Photo: R. Tinker

Opera Facts

- Opera is a multi-dimensional art form which combines the human voice, orchestral music, visual arts (scenery, costumes and special effects), drama (tragedy or comedy), and occasionally dance.
- Opera originated in Florence, Italy, in the late 1500's, with a small group of men who were members of the Camerata (Italian for society). The intellectuals, poets, and musicians of the Camerata decided they wanted words to be a featured aspect of music. They used ancient Greek drama as their inspiration, including the use of a chorus to comment on the action.
- Opera singers don't use microphones. Operatic singing was developed during a period when there was no microphones, so special singing techniques had to be developed in order to heard by all audience members. Opera singers are able to project their voices to fill a large theatre and sing at a frequency that allows them to be heard above an orchestra!
- Traditional opera, often referred to as "number opera," consists of two modes of singing: recitative, the plot-driving passages sung in a style designed to imitate and emphasize the inflections of speech, and aria (an "air" or formal song) in which the characters express their emotions in a more structured melodic style.
- Many opera singers begin their operatic training in university. Opera students study singing, music history, composition and vocal pedagogy. In addition to music classes, they study diction and at least one foreign language. After university, their first professional roles are usually small parts, but if they continue to study and train, they can move on to bigger principal roles.
- Sometimes operas are sung in English, other times in Italian, German, French, Russian, and Spanish. Operas can be written in any language.

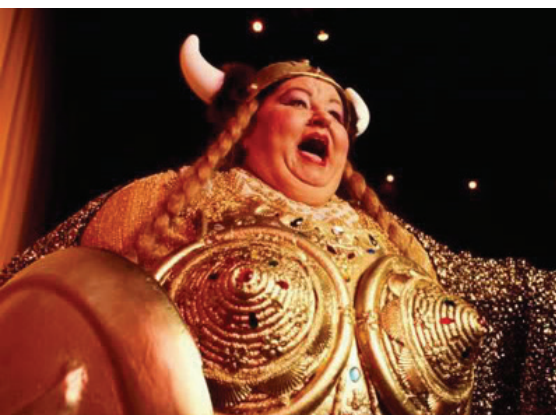


The Daughter of the Regiment, Manitoba Opera, 2012.
Photo: R. Tinker

Opera vs. Musical Theatre

Although both opera and musical theatre combine music and drama, there are several key differences between the two art forms:

- One significant difference is the 'partnership' found between the music and the drama. Musicals are plays with music; the music is incidental and the action is advanced mainly through dialogue. In opera, it is the music that advances the action, it does not only accompany it.
- Musical style is another important difference; opera is usually classical and complex, while musicals feature pop songs and sometimes rock and roll.
- Singers in musicals have microphones hidden in their costumes or wigs to amplify their voices. The voices of opera singers are so strong no amplification is needed, even in a large venue.
- Operas are almost completely sung, while the use of spoken words is more common in musicals. There are some operas with spoken words and these are called singspiels (German) and opéra-comique (French). Examples are Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Bizet's *Carmen*, respectively.



It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings!

This expression refers to Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (often referred to as the *Ring Cycle*) and its last part, 'Götterdämmerung.' The 'fat lady' is Valkyrie Brünnhilde, who is traditionally presented as a very fulsome lady with braids, a horned helmet, spear and round shield. Her final aria lasts almost 10 minutes and marks the end of the opera. A full performance of the opera usually takes place over four nights, with a total length of about 15 hours!

The Operatic Voice

Each person's vocal tract is constructed differently. The roles that a singer performs are dependent mostly upon their vocal range, but within the vocal ranges, there are many colours and weights of voice.

Vocal colour refers to the richness of the sound and **vocal weight** refers to how powerful a voice sounds.

VOCAL COLOURINGS

COLORATURA: A light, bright voice that has the ability to sing many notes quickly, usually with an extended upper range.

LYRIC: A light to medium weight voice, often singing beautiful sweeping melodies.

DRAMATIC: Dark, heavy and powerful voice, capable of sustained and forceful singing.



Danielle Pastin (Mimi) in *La Bohème*, Manitoba Opera, 2014.
Photo: R. Tinker

VOCAL CATEGORIES

Women

SOPRANO: Similar to a flute in range and tone colour. Usually plays the heroine in the opera since a high, bright sound can easily suggest youth and innocence.

MEZZO-SOPRANO: Similar to an oboe in range and tone colour. Called an alto in choral arrangements, this voice can play a wide variety of characters including gypsies, mothers, and young men (trouser role).

CONTRALTO: Similar to an English horn in range and tone colour. Usually play unique roles including fortune-tellers, witches, and older women.

Men

TENOR: Similar to a trumpet in range, tone, color and acoustical "ring." Usually plays the hero or the romantic lead in the opera.

BARITONE: Similar to a French horn in tone color. Often plays the leader of mischief in comic opera or the villain in tragic opera, sometimes even the hero.

BASS: Similar to a trombone or bassoon in tone color. Usually portrays old, wise men, or foolish, comic men.





Tracy Dahl (Gilda) in *Rigoletto*, Manitoba Opera, 2012. Photo : R.Tinker

Famous Operas and Opera Songs

Even if your students have never been to the opera, chances are they may recognize certain opera tunes, thanks to how often opera music shows up in pop culture. Opera appears in TV shows, commercials, and movies, including kids shows such as *The Muppet Show*, *Bugs Bunny*, and *Sesame Street*! As there are too many to name, here is a list of some of the most popular operas and opera songs.

Operas

Madama Butterfly (Puccini)
La Bohème (Puccini)
La Traviata (Verdi)
Carmen (Bizet)
The Barber of Seville (Rossini)
The Marriage of Figaro (Mozart)
Don Giovanni (Mozart)
Tosca (Puccini)
Rigoletto (Verdi)
The Magic Flute (Mozart)

Opera Songs

Nessun Dorma, from *Turandot*
Ride of the Valkyries, from *Die Walküre*
Vesti la Giubba, from *Pagliacci*
La Donna é Mobile, from *Rigoletto*
Habanera, from *Carmen*
Un bel di vedremo, from *Madama Butterfly*
The Flower Duet, from *Lakmé*
Anvil Chorus, from *Il Trovatore*
Largo Al Factotum, from *The Barber of Seville*
Va, Pensiero, from *Nabucco*



Studies suggest that playing classical music by composers such as Beethoven and Mozart to young children boosts their concentration and self-discipline. Youngsters also improve their general listening and social skills by being exposed to classical composers. In addition, they are likely to appreciate a wider range of music in later years, according to a study from the Institute of Education at the University of London.

Opera Vocabulary

ACT: a section of the opera that is divided into scenes.

ARIA: means “air” in Italian. This is a piece of music written for one singer (soloist), usually with instrumental accompaniment.

BARITONE: the middle singing range of the male voice.

BASS: the lowest singing range of the male voice.

BASSO BUFFO: a bass singer who specializes in comic characters.

BASSO PROFUNDO: the most serious bass voice.

BATON: short stick that the conductor uses to lead the orchestra.

BEL CANTO: Italian phrase literally meaning “beautiful singing.” A traditional Italian style of singing emphasizing tone, phrasing, coloratura passages, and technique. Also refers to the operas written in this style.

BRAVO: a form of appreciation shouted by audience members at the end of a particularly pleasing performance. Technically, bravo refers to a male performer, brava refers to a female performer and bravi refers to many performers.

BUFFO: from the Italian for “buffoon.” A singer of comic roles (basso-buffo) or a comic opera (opera-buffa.)

CADENZA: a passage of singing, often at the end of an aria, which shows off the singer’s vocal ability.

CHORUS: a group of singers of all vocal ranges, singing together to support the vocal leads.

CLASSICAL: the period in music which comes after the Baroque and before the Romantic, roughly from the birth of Mozart to shortly after the death of Beethoven. It represents the greatest standardization in orchestral form and tonality.

COLORATURA: elaborate ornamentation of

music written for a singer using many fast notes and trills. Also used to describe a singer who sings this type of music.

COMPOSER: the individual who writes all the music for both voice and instrument.

COMPRIMARIO: a 19th century term referring to secondary or supporting roles such as confidantes, messengers, and matchmakers.

CONTRALTO: the lowest female voice range.

COUNTERTENOR: a male singer with the highest male voice range, generally singing within the female contralto or mezzo-soprano range.

DIVA: literally *goddess* in Italian. An important female opera star. The masculine form is divo.

DUET: music that is written for two people to sing together.

ENCORE: a piece that is performed after the last scheduled piece of a concert. An encore is usually performed because the audience wants to hear more music even though the concert is over.

ENSEMBLE: a part of the opera written for a group of two or more singers. This may or may not include the chorus.

FALSETTO: the upper part of a voice in which the vocal cords do not vibrate completely. Usually used by males to imitate a female voice.

FINALE: the last musical number of an opera or an act.

GRAND OPERA: spectacular French opera of the Romantic period, lavishly staged, with a historically based plot, a huge cast, an unusually large orchestra, and ballet. It also refers to opera without spoken dialogue.

INTERLUDE: a short piece of instrumental music played between scenes and acts.

LIBRETTIST: the writer of the opera’s text.

LIBRETTO: Italian for *little book*. It is the text or story of the opera.

LYRIC: used to describe a light-to-medium-weight voice with an innocent quality, capable of both sustained, forceful singing and delicate effects.

MAESTRO: means “master” in Italian. Used as a courtesy title for the conductor (male or female).

MEZZO-SOPRANO: the middle singing range for a female voice.

OPERA: a dramatic presentation which is set to music. Almost all of it is sung, and the orchestra is an equal partner with the singers. Like a play, an opera is acted on stage with costumes, scenery, makeup, etc. Opera is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which means “work.”

OPERA BUFFA: an opera about ordinary people, usually, but not always comic. First developed in the 18th century.

OPERA SERIA: a serious opera. The usual characters are gods and goddesses, or ancient heroes.

OPERA-COMIQUE: (*singspiel*) a form of opera which contains spoken dialogue.

OPERETTA: lighthearted opera with spoken dialogue, such as a musical.

OVERTURE: an orchestral introduction to the opera played before the curtain rises. Usually longer than a prelude and can be played as a separate piece.

PRELUDE: a short introduction that leads into an act without pause.

PRIMA DONNA: literally *first lady* in Italian. The leading woman in an opera. Because of the way some of them behaved in the past, it often refers to someone who is acting in a superior and demanding fashion. The term for a leading man is *primo uomo*.

PRINCIPAL: a major singing role, or the singer who performs such a role.

QUARTET: four singers or the music that is written for four singers.

RECITATIVE: lines of dialogue that are sung,

usually with no recognizable melody. It is used to advance the plot.

SCORE: the written music of an opera or other musical work.

SOPRANO: the highest range of the female singing voice.

SUPERNUMERARIES: appear on stage in costume in non-singing and usually, non-speaking roles.

SURTITLES: the English translations of the opera’s language, that are projected above the stage during a performance to help the audience follow the story, much like subtitles in a foreign film.

TENOR: the highest natural adult male voice.

TRILL: very quick alternation between two adjacent notes. See *coloratura*.

TRIO: an ensemble of three singers or the music that is written for three singers.

TROUSER ROLE: the role of an adolescent boy or young man, written for and sung by a woman, often a mezzo-soprano. Also known as a pants role.

VERISMO: describes a realistic style of opera that started in Italy at the end of the 19th century.