

## **OPERA TERMS**

**Aria [AH-ree-ah]:** this seemingly exotic word when literally translated simply means “air (!).” An aria is simply a musical number for solo voice and accompaniment. If you have a number for two voices and accompaniment, it’s a duet...three voices, a trio...four, a quartet, and so on. Opera is famous for allowing numerous voices to express themselves simultaneously, yet distinctly and clearly.

**Bel canto [bell CAHN-toh]:** literally translated as “beautiful singing,” bel canto is a style of singing that is the hallmark of an early-to-mid-19th-century style of Italian opera composition of the same name. Bel canto is characterized by smooth, seamless vocal production; the ability to spin out long, seamless vocal lines; and agility. . . in short, flawless vocal technique. The most famous and enduring bel canto composers are Vincenzo Bellini, Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Donizetti.

**Cavatina [cah-vah-TEE-nah]:** a type of aria common to Italian operas of the bel canto era. The cavatina is a generally slow, contemplative aria, designed to show off the singer’s breath control, soft singing (piano) and long vocal line (legato). **Cabaletta [cah-bah-LEH-tah]:** whenever you hear a cavatina, you know there’s a cabaletta coming up very shortly. They almost always occur in pairs. By contrast to the cavatina, the cabaletta is fast and energetic, designed to show off a singer’s virtuosity and decorative singing.

**Coloratura [COL-oh-rah-TOO-rah]:** vocal music that is highly ornamented or decorated with runs, trills, and other vocal acrobatics. Coloratura is also used to describe a singer whose voice is ideally suited to roles calling for such vocal ornamentation.

**Fach [FAHK]:** the type of voice a singer possesses, or the repertoire sung by a particular type of voice. The basic voice types are, highest to lowest: soprano, mezzo-soprano and contralto (called alto in choral singing) among women, and counter-tenor, tenor, baritone, bass-baritone and bass among men. Within these basic vocal types are sub-categories, or fachs, based on the weight and color of the voice and the repertoire it’s best suited to sing.

**Fioritura [fyoh-rih-TOO-rah]:** sometimes used synonymously with coloratura. This term, however, describes a decorated embellishment of the main vocal line. For instance, when a melody is repeated in bel canto and baroque arias, the second time around, the singer typically embellishes the melody with fioriture, or fioratura.

**Marking:** In the early stages of rehearsing an opera, when singers are learning their blocking (who goes where at each given moment in the production), they don’t want to tire their voices. So they mark, that is, they sing at half-voice.

**Mezza voce [MET-sah VOH-cheh]:** literally meaning “half voice,” mezza voce refers to singing at half power, with the effect of muting the tone.

**Opera Seria [OH-peh-rah SEH-ree-ah]:** a form of opera that held sway in the 17th and early-18th century. Opera seria’s hallmarks were very formal librettos (usually by Zeno or Metastasio) based on serious subject matters from mythology or ancient history, with scores that featured elaborately decorated arias to allow the singers to display their virtuosity.

**Operetta:** It generally entails comedic subject matter, and spoken dialogue instead of recitative. What primarily distinguishes Operetta from Musical Comedy is Operetta’s classical score, requiring classically trained musicians in the orchestra pit and on the stage.

*Passaggio [pah-SAH-jyoh]: literally translated as “passage” (there’s a shocker!), the passaggio is a part of the vocal range (usually two to three notes) in which the singer moves from one register to another. If the singer’s doing his/her job right, we won’t be able to tell where these areas are in his/her voice. Ideally, the voice should sound as though it has one register and one sound quality from the very top of the singer’s range to the very bottom. If you can hear the singer moving from one register to another, you’re hearing a “register break.”*

*Portamento [POHR-tah-MEN-toh]: The Italian word for “carrying” refers, in opera, to a means of vocally moving from one note to another. Rather than going directly from one note straight to the next, portamento allows the singer to vocally “bridge” the notes. Portamento shouldn’t be confused, though, with sliding or scooping, and the decision of whether or not to use portamento is a stylistic one. While it may be appropriate at moments in Verdi, Donizetti or Puccini, it’s really inappropriate stylistically in Mozart, for instance.*

*Sitzprobe [ZIHTS-proh-buh]: The sitzprobe is a full musical rehearsal in which singers, orchestra and chorus sit down (either in a rehearsal room or in the theater itself) and perform the entire score without staging. This word is often abbreviated to sitz, as in “We have a sitz this afternoon at 4:30.”*

*Recitative [RE-chih-tah-TEEV]: often abbreviated as recits, this is the vocal music in opera that connects the arias, duets, choruses, etc.... In early opera continuing well into the 19th century, Secco (“Dry”) Recitative predominated. This is what we hear in Mozart and Rossini: a harpsichord or piano plays a chord and the singer(s) deliver(s) the recitative unaccompanied by the orchestra. The alternative is Accompanied Recitative, in which the full orchestra performs the recitative with the singers. By the end of the 19th century, composers like Verdi blurred the line between numbers and recitative, while others like Wagner and his followers did away with numbers and recits altogether.*

*Tessitura [teh-sih-TOO-rah]: Within a role’s range, there’s the tessitura . . . the part of the range where the role requires the singer to spend most of his/her time singing. T*

*Verismo [veh-REEZ-moh]: a style of late-19th/early-20th-century opera composition, roughly corresponding to the “Realism” movements in art and literature. Turning away from heroic subjects, verismo sought to portray a “slice of life,” examining the ordinary and even the squalid. Among the most notable verismo composers are Umberto Giordano, Ruggero Leoncavallo, Pietro Mascagni and Francesco Cilea.*

*Vibrato [vih-BRAH-toh]: a naturally occurring, slight pitch fluctuation around a center note. When a voice’s vibrato slackens or vibrates significantly more slowly, the voice is said to “spread” (and this usually happens at the top of the voice’s range). When the fluctuation in pitch becomes more than slight, the voice is said to have a “wobble.” When the fluctuation in pitch encompasses a whole tone on either side of the center note or true pitch, the voice is said to have a “wobble you can drive a truck through.”*