

The Elements of Opera

A **score** is the blueprint to an opera. It consists of the words, music, stage directions, and often performance notes for the entire show. The opera score consists of different parts including:

Overture	Music played before the action begins that sets the mood and sometimes introduces music that is part of the opera.
Aria (AR-ee-uh)	A musical solo piece sung by one character. Arias allow singers to demonstrate their vocal skills while reflecting on one emotion.
Duet	A musical piece sung by two people.
Trio	A musical piece sung by three people.
Quartet	A musical piece sung or played by four people.
Ensemble	A musical piece sung by a group of individual characters.
Chorus	A musical piece sung by a group of people. An opera chorus may represent townspeople or soldiers or forest creatures or any other group.

The Creators

Opera is created by a **composer** who writes the music, and a **librettist** who writes the words. Most operas are composed in European languages—mainly Italian, German, French, Russian, and English.

To perform Opera, you need a team!

The Interpreters

Once an opera is created, a team of artists begins the process of transforming the words and music into a visual spectacle. These artists are called **directors** and **designers**. Their role is essential in interpreting the intentions of the composer and librettist. Sometimes directors and designers choose to stay true to the history and setting of the work. Other times they elect to change the location or historical period of an opera.

Artistic Team

The **Stage Director** is responsible for the action on the stage. This is accomplished by working with the singers for weeks before the performances, directing their movements (**blocking**) and developing their individual characters.

The **Music Director**, also known as the **conductor**, interprets the music of the opera and rehearses it with the singers and the orchestra. During rehearsal the music is shaped to express different moods of the opera. For example, the conductor decides how fast or slow (**tempo**) and how loudly or softly (**dynamics**) the music is played.

The **Set Designer** designs the scenery for the opera.

The **Lighting Designer** manipulates the lights to create effects which help set the mood and complement the action on stage.

The **Costume Designer** creates the clothes that the singers will wear on stage.

The **choreographer** is responsible for creating and directing any dancing that takes place in the opera.

The Performers

On the stage

Opera singers are specially trained, like athletes. They must acquire skill in controlling the flow of air, which means developing abdominal muscles and good lung capacity. Many singers attend a college music school. There they study their craft and practice **technique**—including breath control, vowel production, and **diction**. A singer must also study **artistry**, the expressive interpretation of songs. This includes the study of multiple languages, literature, and history.

The Types of Singers:

- **Soprano:** Female singer with a high voice, who sings roles such as Gretel.
- **Mezzo-soprano:** Italian term meaning “middle soprano.” Woman with a voice slightly lower than a soprano, who can sing roles such as Hansel.
- **Tenor:** Male singer with a high voice.
- **Baritone:** Mid-range male singer who sings some high notes and some low notes, who sings roles like Hansel and Gretel’s father. .
- **Bass:** A male singer with a low voice.

Down Below: The Orchestra

The **orchestra** is a group of instrumentalists who accompany the singers. The orchestra performs in the pit, the sunken area in front and under the stage.

Keeping it Together: The Conductor

The conductor has the task of unifying the singers and orchestra. Since the orchestra and the singers cannot see one another, the conductor is charged with directing all musicians. With the use of his/her hands s/he provides tempo, volume, and other expressive elements of the music.

Behind the Scenes

While all the action is happening on stage, some very important people are orchestrating all the action backstage. They are the **production crew**, and this is what they do:

The **Stage Manager** leads the crew and directs all the action that happens backstage. Stage Managers direct scene changes, artists’ entrances and exits, sound/light changes, curtain movement and all other activities that make the opera run smoothly. Their job requires great leadership and quick decision-making.

A crew of **stage hands** works in synchrony with the Stage Manager. They move scenery and set props (short for “properties”), which are objects used in the scene. The **Props Supervisor** makes sure that all props are placed appropriately and are available when the singers need them.

The **Wardrobe Supervisor** oversees the costumes and attends to last minute fittings and repairs. The Wardrobe Supervisor may be assisted by **dressers**, who help with fast costume changes.

The **Makeup Artist** assists singers with dramatic stage makeup that must be applied in order for their features to be seen from the back of the theatre.

The **Master Electrician** directs the positioning of the lights and then operates the lights during a show. Both need to be in the audience to hear and see what is happening onstage.

The **rehearsal pianist** accompanies the artists as they rehearse the opera. This job also entails serving as a **coach**, assisting the artists with language and musical preparation.