

# Opera: A Crash Course

## A Brief History of Opera and its Indispensable Composers

“Opera, next to Gothic architecture, is one of the strangest inventions of Western man. It could not have been foreseen by any logical process.”

~~Kenneth Clark~~



This engraving depicts a 1763 riot at Covent Garden because management's refusal to admit those with discounted tickets. Opera was taken very seriously!

Opera is the Italian word for “work.” According to Merriam-Webster, opera is “a drama set to music and made up of vocal pieces with orchestral accompaniment.” When people think of opera they usually think of elaborate costumes, sets and choreography. However, opera is essentially just a play that is sung. Opera can be spectacular and grand or simple and tender. It is a remarkable display of visual and auditory brilliance.

The history of opera begins in Italy in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. A group of intellectuals, scientists and musicians calling themselves the **Florentine Camerata** wanted to recreate Greek theater as it was performed by the ancients and assumed that it was entirely sung. (It turned out they were wrong.) They were also striving to clarify sung text, which had become increasingly obscured by the multi-voiced compositions of the Renaissance. In their first attempts, the



music was simple and the text and voice most important. These early musical plays were often performed during the intermission of a play as incidental entertainment. The oldest, extant opera that is still performed is *Orfeo*, written in 1607 by Claudio Monteverdi. Rediscovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is now performed all over the world and considered the first work of operatic genius.

In 1637, the first public opera house opened in Venice, Italy, and opera became a “spectator sport!” Between 1637 and 1640, over 388 operas were produced and performed in Venice. Seventeenth century opera singers were the super-stars of their time. They lived or died by their popularity and their talent was tested each night. Rowdy, passionate, Venetian audiences were known to be lavish with their praise, but they were just as likely to run an unpopular singer right off the stage!

Opera became the first major Italian export. Germany, France and England were all influenced by Italian opera, but eventually each country created operas based on its own cultural traditions. By 1618, German composers were writing *singspiels* (German language operas with spoken dialogue). In France, under the patronage of Louis XIV, opera was heavily influenced by the ballet—in fact, the French king decreed that all French opera (indeed all opera performed in France, whether of French origin or not) must include a ballet. English opera was based on a type of English play called a *masque*.

During the latter part of the **Baroque Period** (1600-1750), composers re-fined and codified opera. Opera adopted a formal musical structure. Elements of opera such as the **overture** (a musical introduction), **recitative** (sung dialogue), and the **aria** (a song developing emotional information about the character) were defined. There was still a lot of artistic freedom for the singer, however. Singers were expected to improvise in their arias. To give singers this opportunity, composers created the *da capo aria*. Da capo means “back to the beginning.” In it, the main idea (A) was followed by a second musical idea (B) and then A was repeated again with improvised fast-moving notes called ornaments. Today “Da capo!” shouted from the audience is high praise to a singer—it means repeat what was just sung! (This hardly ever happens in the United States. It is mostly an Italian custom.) The most famous composers of Baroque opera are George Frideric Handel and Alessandro Scarlatti.



1723 engraving of the opera *Flavio* by Handel. The exaggerated proportions of the male singers are because they are “castrati,” singers that were castrated as boys to preserve their treble sound. This changed the way these men matured, making them extremely tall and barrel-chested, as well as maintaining their high voices. The practice was finally outlawed in Italy in 1861.

The standardization of style in the Baroque Period paved the way for composers in the Classical Era (late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) to reform the style to a simpler, more balanced form with renewed interest in dramatic integrity. Singers were stripped of their power to improvise on a whim, because in the heavily ornamented singer-driven style of the *da capo* aria, composers saw a distinct lack of taste and balance between music and drama. Flexibility was given to the singer at the end of the piece with a **cadenza**—an improvised, fast moving, flashy ending. Two distinct Italian styles emerged in this era: **opera seria**, serious opera, often with a tragic ending; and **opera buffa**, comic opera, or opera with a happy ending. Famous opera composers of this period are Christoph Willibald Gluck, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and to a lesser extent Ludwig von Beethoven and Gioachino Rossini. These latter are considered transitional composers, acting as a sort of bridge to the Romantic Period.

Romantic opera sets the standards for opera today. The composers at the top of the list for Romantic opera are Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, and Giacomo Puccini. The Romantic Period encompasses the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This style engages an expansive musical line and a more innovative use of the voice and orchestral instruments. Opera plots based on true life experiences and ordinary believable characters created a sub-genre of the Romantic Period known as **verismo** opera.

Opera has continued to change and grow throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. During the last 100 years, opera in the United States has come into its own with modern masterpieces by American composers such as Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, GianCarlo Menotti, Carlisle

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Floyd and Douglas Moore and welcomed new masters such as Philip Glass, John Adams, David Lang, and Jake Heggie. In addition, the U.S. has contributed the Broadway musical to music theater tradition.

With the world-wide popularity of the Three Tenors (even after Pavarotti's death) and crossover artists like Andrea Bocelli, Josh Groban, and Charlotte Church, opera attendance continues to grow. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will continue to bring innovations to the stage, new works to the forefront, and new productions of old standards. The world of opera is enduring and universal and will continue to move and delight audiences into the foreseeable future.



Opera audience of the future enjoying a Portland Opera To Go production of *The Elixir of Love*.

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# The Indispensable Composers

Some may argue that there are more “indispensable” opera composers—and likely there are, but for the layman, these are unassailable masters of the form and quite enough to be getting on with!



**George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)** German born composer who made much of his career in England writing Italian *opera seria*. His style used a lot of fast-moving notes (the “note-y” passages are called “runs” or melismas) and a fairly simple accompaniment. He is most famous today for his oratorios (basically un-staged, often religious, operas). *The Messiah* is the most famous of these. During his life, however, he was considered the greatest opera composer of his day.



**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)** Austrian composer of Italian opera and *singspiel* during the Classical Period. Mozart was one of the very few opera composers who was a master of all musical forms existing at his time. His operas were written for specific singers—and he wrote exquisitely difficult music for those he really hated! His operas *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, and *The Magic Flute* all continue to be “bread and butter” pieces of operatic repertoire.



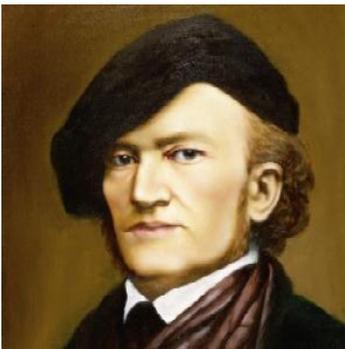
**Gioachino Rossini (1792-1848)** Italian composer who became a bridge from the Classical Era to the Romantic Era and a writer of the *bel canto* (literally, “beautiful singing”) style of opera. He is most famous today for his *operas buffa*, *The Barber of Seville* and *La Cenerentola* (*Cinderella*). He also wrote *William Tell*, the overture of which became the theme song for *The Lone Ranger*! Rossini was extremely prolific and wrote about 39 operas in 19 years.



**Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) & Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)** Composers of the *bel canto* style. Bellini and Donizetti perfected a style which celebrated beautiful vocal lines. Bellini's opera, *Norma*, is recognized as the best example of *bel canto* style. Donizetti is famous for his amazing productivity and beloved for his operas *The Elixir of Love* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. *Bel canto* opera features arias made of two contrasting parts: the cavatina, which is slow and melodic, and a cabaletta which is fast with a lot of flashy runs.



**Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)** Arguably, the greatest Italian opera composer of all time. His contributions are among the most beloved operas on stage and include such lions of the theater as *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto* and *Aida*. Many more of his titles are staples of opera houses today. He was a great evolutionary step in the history of opera—a perfect culmination of opera composers from Mozart through Bellini and an undisputed master of operatic form.



**Richard Wagner (1813-1883)** The most influential operatic composer of all time. After Wagner's operas, no opera was ever composed that was not influenced by his works. He departed from the Italian lyric form and developed the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—music theater that places equal weight on text, drama and music—a Total Art, epic in length. Wagner's operas include *The Ring Cycle*, which is comprised of four operas, each of which lasts 4-5 hours. His harmonies are far more complex than those in Italian opera and much greater emphasis is placed on the orchestral music than is in Italian opera.



**Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)** If Wagner is the most influential composer of opera then Puccini is the most popular and accessible. His operas are full of lush, beautiful melodies, believable, enduring, characters and extremely affecting theater. His operas include: *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca*, and *Turandot*. Each of his operas shows Puccini's remarkable facility at evoking time and place. He was unafraid of utilizing musical techniques that other more *avant garde* composers were using, but he continued to remain, unmistakably, Puccini.

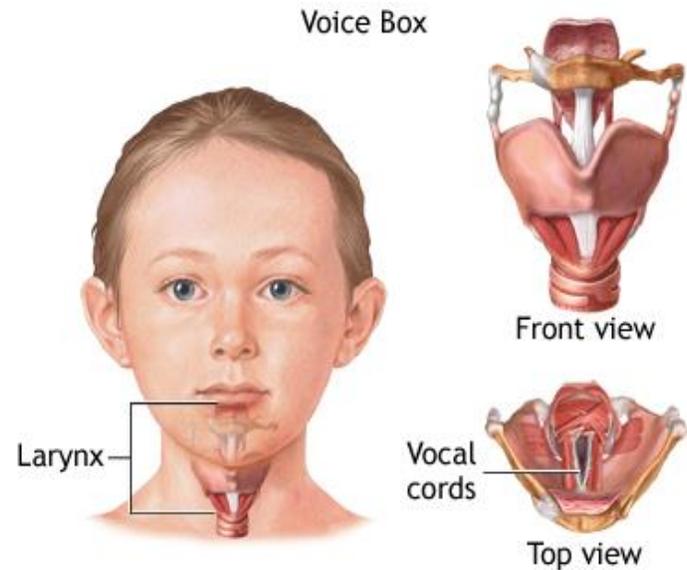
# Why Do They Sound Like That?

## How Opera Singers are Trained and How the Voice Works

Opera singers are highly trained specialists. Each singer learns to maximize the potential of their voice so that they do not need to use microphones. The technique of an opera singer utilizes breath and acoustic resonance in such a way that they can produce enough sound to sing over an orchestra of 30-80 instruments and have every audience member in the theater hear them. To give you some perspective, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York seats about 3900 people. That is a lot of noise for one person to produce without a microphone!

Opera singers are the only professional singers in the world that consistently do not rely on artificial amplification. On occasion, when singing outside or in an amphitheater, singers will be amplified, however that is the exception, not the norm. Opera singers undergo rigorous training—much like professional athletes. Most of the singers in Portland Opera To Go began piano lessons as small children, sang in choirs, and began formal vocal training when they were about seventeen years old. Most voice teachers will not teach voice to young people under the age of about seventeen because of the strength and physical maturity necessary for safe singing. Younger people interested in voice lessons would be better served by singing in choirs, learning breath technique, and learning to read music. Vocal training takes about ten years, and the voice is not fully mature and ready for the rigors of opera until a singer is in their mid-twenties. Some types of voices—usually larger, heavier voices—will not be ready for their repertoire until they are in their early to mid-thirties. The trade-off for this lengthy training is a long career—an opera singer can expect their career to last thirty-plus years.

In addition to studying vocal technique, opera singers study Italian, French, and German, because most operas are written in those languages. A singer may not be fluent in all of these languages but will at least have a working understanding of them. A singer may also study Russian and Czech. Singers will also take classes in acting, piano, music history, music theory, and—if they are smart—dance.



A diagram of the voice box. Vocal cords are tiny and vibrate together to create sound. When you breathe in, they open to allow air to pass through. When you breathe out, your breath passing through the vocal cords creates a vacuum, pulling them together and causing them to vibrate. The tauter they are and the thinner they are stretched the faster they vibrate and the higher the sound.

To find work, a singer must audition—that is sing—for each potential employer. Opera singers' salaries cover a vast range—a young professional might expect to make \$500-\$800 per performance, while a super-star like Luciano Pavarotti earned up to \$50,000 per performance—or whatever his agent could negotiate for him!



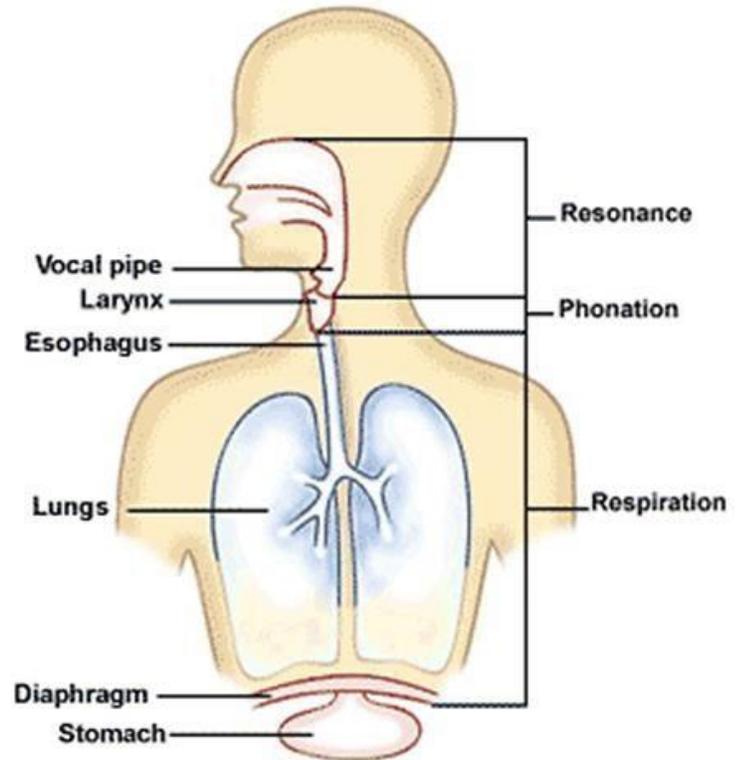
**Let me give you a little perspective!** Though it may sound like opera singers make an awful lot of money—especially to your students—here are some things to remember:

- A per performance fee includes 4-6 weeks of 6 hour per day rehearsals, 6 days a week, and that is just once you are at your job— it doesn't count all of the individual preparation a singer does on their own. They are expected to arrive at rehearsal with their music fully memorized.
- Voice lessons and coachings cost MONEY! Most singers will have practice sessions with voice teachers who specialize in the technique of singing, and coaches who rehearse singers and give them information on style and interpretation. These sessions are hourly and can cost anywhere from \$50-\$250 per hour depending on who your teacher/coach is and where you are. One expert from the Metropolitan Opera estimates that it costs a singer at least \$500 to prepare each 7-minute aria they sing for an audition—and again, that is in real money, not just time.
- It costs a lot to audition! First of all, if you don't live in New York City, you will probably have to fly there to audition. You may also have to fly to opera houses around the country and the world to audition. Sometimes, as a young singer, particularly, you will have to pay an application fee (nonrefundable) to audition. This practice is slowly changing because of concerns over equity. The appropriate clothing also costs money.
- Music costs money. Head shots (the 8" X 10" photos you hand to auditors) and resumes cost money to have taken and to print. And you may have to send out hundreds of them! Today, printing costs may often be defrayed by sending electronic copies.

So, by the time you figure in all the expenses of your business, even Pavarotti wasn't making quite so much money as it sounds—although he certainly wasn't hurting!

# The Anatomy of the Voice

1. **Larynx** (pronounced LAIR-inx)  
The larynx is the voice box. The vocal folds (also called vocal cords) are part of the larynx. The vocal folds vibrate to create the sound of the voice.
2. **Pharynx** (pronounced FAIR-inx)  
The pharynx is the throat. It goes up from the larynx and divides into the laryngopharynx (just above the larynx), oropharynx (going into the mouth) and nasopharynx (going into the nose).
3. **Trachea** (pronounced TRAY-key-ah)  
The trachea is your windpipe. It's the tube that connects your lungs to your throat. The larynx sits on the top of the trachea.



Some other nearby organs important to singing:

4. **Esophagus**  
The esophagus is your food pipe. It's just behind the larynx and trachea. Your pharynx carries both air and food/water. The air goes through the larynx and trachea, and food and water go into your esophagus.
5. **Spinal column**  
The spinal column is behind the esophagus. You can feel it by pressing the back of your neck.
6. **Diaphragm**  
The diaphragm is underneath the lungs, inside the rib cage. It's shaped like a dome. The diaphragm is your main muscle for controlling respiration (breathing).