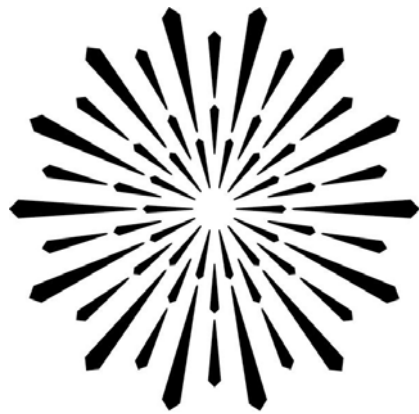




Samson and Delilah

**San Francisco Opera Guild
Teachers' Resource Guide
Cinemacast 2008**



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OPERA GUILD**

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A Short Introduction to Opera

An **opera**, like a play, is a dramatic form of theatre that includes scenery, props, and costumes. However, in opera, the actors are trained singers who sing their lines instead of speaking them. An **orchestra** accompanies the singers. A conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians in the pit.

Opera consists of many dimensions that are combined to make it a unique whole: the human voice, orchestral music, the visual arts (scenery, costumes, and special effects), drama (tragedy or comedy), and occasionally dance. The melding of these elements can make you cry tears of joy or sadness, produce laughter or anger, but most importantly transport you to a magical land of music and song.

Opera originated in Florence, Italy, in the late 1500's, with a small group of men who were members of a Camerata (Italian for society). They called themselves the Camerati Baldi or Camerati Fiorentini. The intellectuals, poets, and musicians of the Camerata decided they wanted words to be a featured aspect of music to coordinate thought with emotion. They used ancient Greek drama as their inspiration, including the use of a chorus to comment on the action. The Camerata laid down three principles for their new art form:

1. The text must be understood; the accompaniment must be very simple and should not distract from the words.
2. The words must be sung with correct and natural declamation, as if they were spoken and not rhyme like songs.
3. The melody must interpret the feeling of the text.

The first significant composer to fully develop the ideas of the Camerata was Jacopo Peri (1561-1633), whose opera *Dafne* was performed in 1594 and was regarded as the first opera. Some purists regard the later *L'Orfeo*, written in 1607 by Claudio Monteverdi as the first real contribution to the art form.

Operas are divided into scenes and acts that contain different types of vocal pieces for one or many singers. An aria is a vocal solo that focuses on a character's emotions rather than actions. A recitative is sung dialogue or speech that occurs between arias and ensembles.

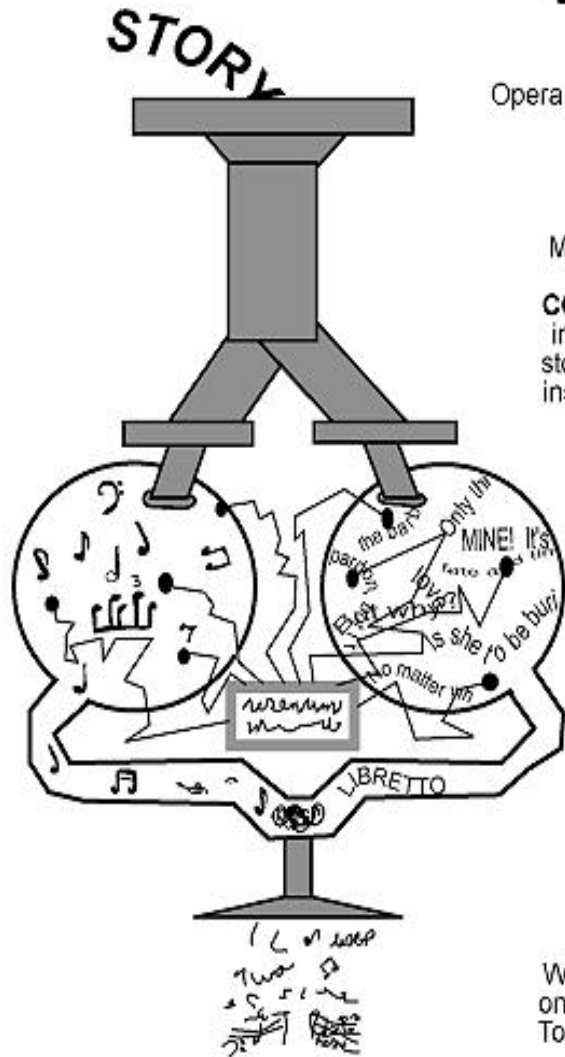
Composers write the score or the music for the opera. Sometimes the composer will also write the text for the opera, but most often they work with a librettist. The story of the opera is written as a libretto, a text that is easily set to music. In the past, the libretto was also bound and sold to the audience. Today, the audience can easily follow the plot with the use of supertitles. Supertitles are the English translation of the libretto, which are projected on the screen above the stage.

Many question the difference between an opera and a musical like *Les Miserables* or *Phantom of the Opera*. There are many differences. One, most operas are through-composed, meaning there is no spoken dialogue while musicals tend to alternate between spoken scenes and songs, using the music to comment upon and augment the dialogue. There are of course exceptions. Many present day musicals are indeed through-composed and are often referred to as rock operas. Examples include *Rent* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. There are musical differences between the two as well. Operas require classically trained singers who must be able to sing in a distinct style while there is more variety in the voice of a musical theatre performer.



Operetta is the term used for an operatic stage piece of a lighter nature with dialogue as well as singing

What Makes an Opera?



Opera begins with a story. The story is told with two things:

MUSIC

Music is organized sound and rhythm. **COMPOSERS** write music in the best way to tell the story. They write music for instruments, and music for singers.

WORDS

Words are written to help tell the story. **LIBRETTISTS** write the words for an opera. **LIBRETTO** means "little book" in Italian. It is the script of an opera.

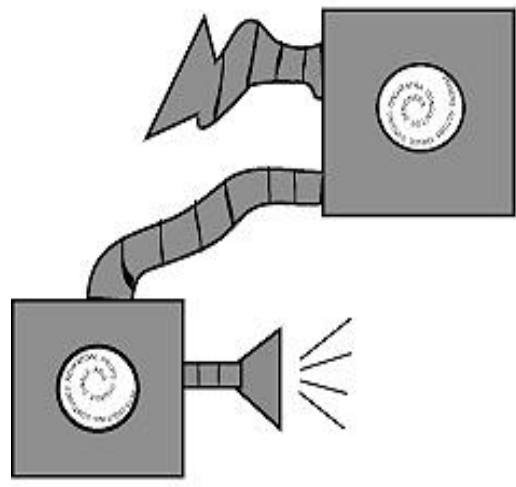
The composer and the librettist work together. They help each other so that the music will fit the words, and the words will fit the music.

All the music and words of an opera are written down in a book called the **SCORE**. Now that the opera is finished, someone needs to perform it!

When a group or company of people get together and put on an opera, their performance is called a **PRODUCTION**. To make a new production of an opera, a company needs:

- singers to perform onstage
- musicians to play in the orchestra
- carpenters to build sets
- costumers to make costumes
- electricians to work and operate lights
- ticket sellers to get an audience

...and much more!



So what really makes an opera? A good story, and a lot of people!!!

Opera Glossary

Accompaniment - An instrumental or vocal part designed to support or complement a principal voice, instrument, or group of voices or instruments. In an aria, the voice is the primary focus and the orchestra is the accompaniment.

Acoustics - The science of sound. The qualities of sound in an enclosed space.

Aria - An extended musical passage performed by one singer. It is used to express feelings or comment on the action and is accompanied by the orchestra. The action usually stops while an aria is sung.

Ballet - A form of dance that tells a story.

Banda - A small group of instrumentalists who play either on the stage or backstage, not in the pit.

Bel Canto - Literally “beautiful singing,” bel canto passages are lyrical, and often very florid.

Bravo - Literally “brave, courageous.” A form of applause when shouted by members of the audience at the end of an especially pleasing performance. Strictly speaking, *bravo* is for a single man, *brava* for a woman, and *bravi* for more than one performer.

Cabaletta - The final section of an extended aria or duet, generally short and brilliant, to display the voice and rouse applause.

Cadenza - An elaborate unaccompanied passage near the end of an aria designed to show off the voice. Originally used to close a number and improvised on the spot.

Choreographer - The person who designs the steps of a dance.

Choreography - A dance or the making of a dance.

Chorus - A group of mixed voices, or the musical passage sung by such a group.

Claque - A group of people hired to sit in the audience and either applaud enthusiastically to ensure success or whistle or boo to create a disaster. In past years, leading singers were sometimes blackmailed to pay a claque to insure they would not create a disturbance. Even now, one is sometimes used but rarely acknowledged.

Coloratura - A kind of vocal music that requires the singer to execute a variety of technically brilliant and difficult passages. These may be fast runs (scales), trills (rapid alternation of two notes), or other devices that embellish the vocal line.

Composer - The person who writes the music of an opera or other musical work.

Comprimario - A secondary role in an opera.

Concertmaster - The “first chair” violinist who plays occasional solos and is responsible for coordinating all of the stringed instruments. The concertmaster decides on the bowing so that all of the bows move in unison.

Conductor - The person who leads the orchestra and singers.

Cover - A replacement for a role in case of illness, as with an understudy in theater.

Cue - Signal to a singer or orchestra member to start.

Curtain Call - At the end of a performance all of the members of the cast and the conductor take bows. Sometimes this is done in front of the main curtain, hence the name. Often, however, the bows are taken on the full stage with the curtain open.

Diva - Literally “goddess,” it refers to an important female opera star. The masculine form is *divo*.

Dress (a wig) - To prepare a wig for wear.

Dresser - A member of the backstage staff who helps the artists dress in their costumes. While each of the principal singers usually has his or her own dresser, supers and chorus members share dressers.

Dress Rehearsal - The final rehearsal(s), using all of the costumes, lights, etc. While sometimes it is necessary to stop for corrections, an attempt is made to make it as much like a final performance as possible.

Duet - A song for two voices.

Dynamics - The degree of loudness or softness in the music.

Encore - Literally means “again.” It used to be the custom for a singer to repeat a particularly popular aria if the audience called *Encore* loud enough. While this is still done in countries like Italy, it is rare elsewhere.

Ensemble - Any extended musical passage performed by more than one player. Very often they are all singing different words and different musical lines. *Duets*, *trios*, and *choruses* are all ensembles.

Finale - Literally “the end.” The ending segment/song of an act or scene. It usually involves many singers and is very dramatic.

Fly, or Fly Tower - Sufficient space above the stage, i.e., if there is a *fly tower*, pieces of the set are often raised up or *flown* when they are not in use.

Forte - Literally “strong.” A dynamic marking meaning loud.

Impresario - The general director of an opera company.

Interlude - An orchestral selection played between scenes in an opera. It is used to set a mood and even advance the story.

Intermission - A break between acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around. Intermissions usually last up to twenty minutes.

Leitmotiv or motif - A short musical phrase associated with a particular character or event.

Libretto - Literally “little book.” The text of an opera. The libretto is always shorter than a normal play because it takes so much longer to sing a line than to say it. The action is often interrupted for an aria which limits the length of the text even more.

Librettist - The person who writes the libretto, often a poet or playwright.

Maestro - Literally “master.” Used as a courtesy title for the conductor, whether a man or woman.

Mark - To sing very softly or not at full voice. A full-length opera is very hard on a singer’s voice so most mark during rehearsals.

Melody - The tune of a piece of music.

Opera - A drama set with music. Different than a play or musical for the orchestra is an equal partner with the singers. Literally the word *opera* is the plural of the Latin word *opus*, which means “work.” Like a play, an opera is acted on a stage, with costumes, wigs, scenery, etc. Almost all of it is sung, in contrast to an operetta or musical, where a great deal of the text is spoken.

Opera Buffa - A comic opera first developed in the eighteenth century. Each act usually ends with a large ensemble finale.

Orchestra - The group of musicians who are led by the conductor and accompany the singers.

Orchestra Pit – The sunken area in front of the stage where the orchestra plays.

Overture - An orchestral piece several minutes in length played before the beginning of an opera. Usually, but not always, it contains some themes from the music of the opera.

Patter Song - A song or aria in which the character sings as many words as possible in the shortest length of time.

Piano - Literally “plane.” A dynamic marking meaning soft.

Prelude - Usually short in duration and without an ending, a *prelude* leads into an act without pause, as opposed to an *overture* which is longer and can be played as a separate piece.

Principal - A leading role or character in the opera.

Prima Donna- Literally “first lady.” The leading woman singer 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, demanding and difficult fashion.

Production - The combination of sets, costumes, props, lights, etc.

Prompt - To help a singer who has forgotten a line. In some opera houses, the *prompter* sits in a box at the very front of the stage. It is not customary for opera houses in America to use a prompter.

Props (properties) - Small items carried or used by singers during a performance, such as fans, letters or a rope.

Proscenium - The front opening of the stage which frames the action.

Recitative - Sung dialogue that moves the action along by providing information. A recitative (or recit) usually has no recognizable melody and the singing is generally faster with a rhythm more like normal speech. *Recitativo secco* is accompanied only by a keyboard instrument such as a harpsichord, sometimes with added cello or bass.

Roulade or Run - A quick succession of notes sung to one syllable.

Score - The written music for a piece or group of pieces with separate lines for each instrument and each singer’s voice.

Set - The decoration on stage that indicates the place and overall world of the opera.

Sitzprobe - Literally “sitting rehearsal.” It is the first rehearsal of the singers with the orchestra, with the former seated, and no acting.

Solo - A piece or portion of music where only one performer has the melody.

Stage Director - The person responsible for directing the movement of the characters and creating the story on stage.

Supernumerary or Super - An “extra.” Someone who is part of a group on stage but does not sing.

Supertitles - Translations into English of the original words, projected on a screen above the stage.

Synopsis - A short version of the story of the opera, usually one or two pages.

Tempo - Literally “time.” The speed at which the music is played.

Trill - The rapid alteration of adjacent notes. A characteristic feature of coloratura singing.

Trouser role - A role which depicts a young man or boy, but sung by a woman. Also called a *Pants Role*

Verismo - Describes the realistic style of opera that started in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century.



Operatic Voices



Operatic singing developed in Europe during the 17th century. The vocal demands are far greater on an opera singer than on any other singer. Opera singers rarely use microphones and therefore must develop their voices to make a sound that will project and be heard above an orchestra in a large theatre.

How do they do it?

After years of practice and study, an opera singer learns to use his or her body as an amplification device. By controlling the muscles of the diaphragm (a balloon-like muscle beneath the lungs and above the stomach) the singer can regulate the amount of breath used. By tightening the diaphragm the singer can push out the right amount of air to make the vocal cords vibrate. The speed at which the chord vibrates determines the pitch. As the sound passes through the mouth it resonates in the upper chest cavities and the sinus cavities of the face and head. These cavities act as small echo chambers and help amplify the sound. The shape of the mouth and the placement of the tongue near the lips contribute to the tone and sound of the words.

Many singers begin their operatic training in university or before. Opera students study singing, music history, composition, acting, movement, and theory. In addition to performance skills, they study diction and at least one foreign language. The most popular opera languages are Italian, German, and French. After university, singers begin to work in the professional world. Their first roles are usually small parts, but if they continue to study and train, they may move on the bigger principal roles.

Professional singers develop a number of roles in their repertoire. Since the principal artists are required to have their parts memorized before rehearsals begin, singers must prepare well in advance of each contract. Singers have voice teachers who help them refine their singing techniques and many will also have an acting coach. Even a well-established singer will have a vocal coach for specific roles.

Each person's vocal mechanism is constructed differently. The roles that a singer performs are dependent mostly upon their vocal range, but within the vocal ranges there are many colors and weights of voice that determine which roles he or she can sing safely and artistically. Vocal color refers to the richness of the sound while vocal weight refers to how powerful a voice sounds.

After the role has been studied intensely and the singer is hired to perform, the singer arrives at the opera company for the rehearsals. This time is spent refining the music with the conductor and staging the action with the stage director. Each director has a different idea of how the character should be played, and each

conductor has a different idea of how the character should sound, therefore the singer must modify his or her techniques to reach the desired result.

Physical health is a major priority to a singer. Contrary to popular belief, not all opera singers are overweight. Conventional wisdom used to state that excessive weight gave added volume and richness to the voice. However, in recent years, people have discovered that physical fitness can give similar benefits to a voice.

Six Basic Vocal Categories

Women:

Soprano: The highest female voice, similar to a flute or violin in range and tone color. Usually plays the heroine in the opera since a high, bright sound can easily suggest youth and innocence.

Mezzo-soprano: The middle-range female voice, similar to an oboe in range and tone color. Called an alto in choral arrangements, can play a wide variety of characters including gypsies, mothers, nurses, and even the part of a young man (also called a *trousers role*).

Contralto: The lowest female voice, similar to an English horn in range and tone color. Usually plays unique roles including fortune-tellers, witches, and older women.

Men:

Tenor: The highest male voice similar to a trumpet in range, tone color and acoustical “ring”. Usually plays the hero or the romantic lead in the opera. A **Countertenor** sings even higher, usually in his falsetto range.

Baritone: The middle-range male voice similar to a French horn in tone color. Often plays the leader of mischief in comic opera, or the villain in tragic opera. Is occasionally the hero.

Bass: The lowest male voice, similar to a trombone or bassoon in tone color. Usually portrays old, wise men, or foolish, comic men.

The vocal parts overlap each other. The notes that are high for a baritone to sing are low for a tenor. The notes that are low for a baritone maybe be high for a bass. For this reason you may see a high range mezzo-soprano singing a soprano’s role or a low range baritone singing a bass’ role.

Courtesy Opera Columbus

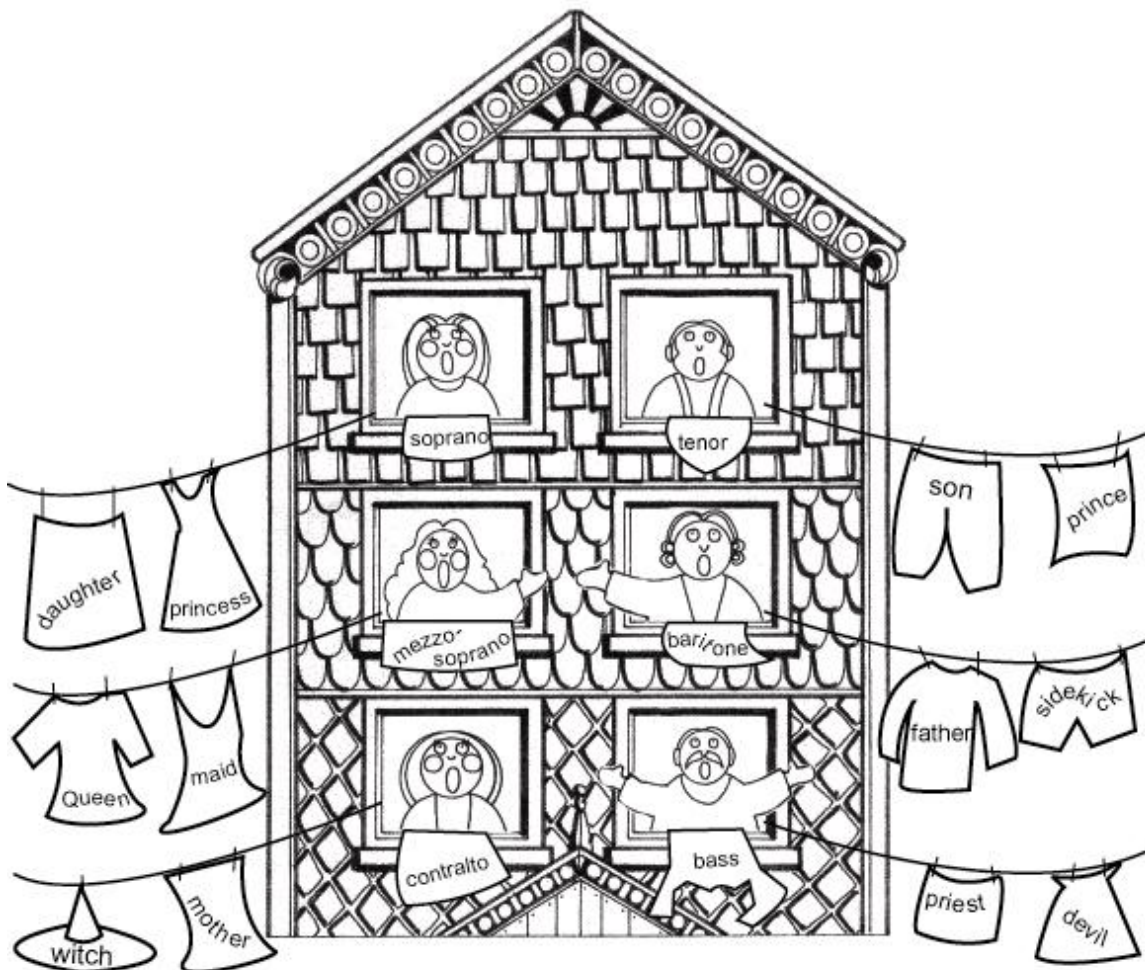
CATEGORIES OF VOICES

As music and style were developing in opera, so did particular characteristics and classifications of voices. Voices can be divided into different categories depending on how low or how high they are. Sopranos are the highest voices. Basses are the lowest voices. Mezzo-Sopranos and Baritones are in the middle.

CHARACTERS AND VOICE TYPES

In opera, each voice type is used to play certain types of **CHARACTERS** or **ROLES**. The soprano usually plays the princesses, daughters, or other important young women in the opera. The tenor usually plays the princes or other young male heroes. The villains, older men and comic male characters are usually played by the baritones and basses. The contralto often plays nurses and older women, and the mezzo-soprano often plays the evil young women or even teenage boys (in what are called "pants roles," for obvious reasons.)

The house below shows which singers sing which roles. The highest voices are singing on the top floor of the house, and the singers on each floor below sing just a little lower. Each singer has a "laundry line" where they keep the roles that they usually sing.



Samson and Delilah

The Story

Samson and Delilah is a grand opera in three acts by Camille Saint-Saëns to a French libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire. It was first performed at the Grossherzogliches (Grand Ducal) Theater in Weimar on December 2, 1877 in a German translation.

The opera, based on the Biblical tale of Samson and Delilah, is the one opera by this French composer that is regularly performed. The second act, the love scene in Delilah's tent, is one of the set pieces that define French opera.

Saint-Saëns began composing the work as an oratorio in 1868, but his librettist, Ferdinand Lemaire, convinced him of its theatrical potential, and Liszt offered to produce it at Weimar, where he was musical director at the cosmopolitan, progressive and highly musical grand-ducal court. In France, the fact that the opera was composed of Biblical subject matter created resistance to its staging. *Samson*, in fact, wasn't heard in France until 1890, receiving its French premiere in the provincial city of Rouen. By that time, Pauline Viardot, who had championed the opera, for whom it was written, and to whom Saint-Saëns dedicated the score, was too old to sing Dalila. In London, the Lord Chamberlain kept *Samson et Dalila* from being staged, though it was presented as an oratorio, which was the form in which Saint-Saëns had first conceived it. One of the best-known melodies from the opera is the *Bacchanalia*, from which the well-known Jewish song Hava Nagilah is taken.

The episode of Samson and Delilah comes from the Old Testament, in the Book of Judges, chapter 16. Like tales of his approximate contemporary Hercules, the violence and erotic extravagance of this folk hero, with its exotic color, reversal of patriarchal strength and catastrophic heroic end, all appealed especially to European Baroque artists of the 17th century.



Synopsis

Place: Israel Time: circa 1150 BC

ACT I

Palestine, 1150 B.C. In a square in Gaza, a group of Hebrews beg Jehovah for relief from their bondage to the Philistines. This first scene gives the clearest signs of the work's origins as an oratorio, with a fine sombre opening for the chorus leading to a fugue on the words 'Nous avons vu nos cités renversées' (We have seen our cities overthrown).

Samson steps forward and tries to revive the Israelites morale and faith in God.

Abimelech, the Philistine governor, appears and taunts the Israelites, saying that they are helpless because their god has abandoned them.

Samson kills him and leads the Hebrews away. The High Priest of Dagon comes from the Philistine temple and curses Samson's prodigious strength, leaving with the slain man's bier. An Old Hebrew praises the returning Samson. In an attempt to seduce Samson away from his leadership of the Israelite uprising, Delilah and a group of girls dance for him and Delilah sings how spring is blossoming all around her yet, in her heart, she feels like it is still winter.

Delilah invites Samson to come that night to her nearby dwelling, and the curtain falls as it become apparent that Samson has become deaf to the Old Hebrew's dour prophecies.

ACT II

The introduction paints a musical picture of the luxuriant foliage that decks Delilah's retreat. Delilah knows that Samson is entranced with her and will come to her instead of leading the revolution against the Philistines. She sings seductively of the powers of love to ensnare Samson. She says that all of his strength is hopeless to withstand love's onslaught.

In an attempt to close the trap which she has set for Samson, Delilah tells Samson seductively that she is completely his if he wants her. She begs him to respond to her caresses, hoping that he will finally let go of all other things and concentrate completely on her. Note: At the end of the second verse Samson joins in to make it a duet.

Samson appears, passionate in spite of himself; when Delilah has him in her power, she feigns disbelief in his constancy and demands that he show his love by confiding in her the secret of his strength, weeping when he refuses. Samson hears rolling thunder as a warning from God but cannot resist following Delilah inside. Not long afterward, having finally learned that the secret of Samson's strength is his long hair, she calls to hidden Philistine soldiers, who rush in to capture and blind Samson.

ACT III

Scene i: In a dungeon at Gaza, the sightless Samson pushes a grist mill in a circle, praying for his people, who will suffer for his sin. He hears their voices castigating him.

Scene ii: During a bacchanal in the Temple of Dagon, Delilah and the High Priest taunt Samson.

Dance: "Bacchanale"

When they force him to kneel to Dagon, he asks a boy to lead him to the two main pillars of the temple. Samson prays to Jehovah to restore his strength, and with a mighty effort he pulls down the pillars and the temple, crushing himself and his foes.

"Finale"



Camille Saint-Saëns

9 October 1835 – 16 December 1921

Saint-Saëns was born in Paris, France. His father, a Government clerk, died three months after his son's birth. His mother, Clemence, sought the assistance of her aunt, Charlotte Masson. Charlotte moved in and introduced Saint-Saëns to the piano. One of the most talented child prodigies of his time, he possessed perfect pitch at two years of age and began piano lessons with his great-aunt at that time. He almost immediately began composing. His first composition, a little piece for the piano dated 22 March 1839, is now kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. His precociousness was not limited to music, however. He had learned to read and write by age three and mastered Latin by seven.

At ten years of age, Saint-Saëns gave his debut public recital. As an encore, Saint-Saëns offered to play any one of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas by memory. Word of this incredible concert spread across Europe, and as far as the United States with an article in a Boston newspaper.

He then studied organ and composition. At the age of sixteen, Saint-Saëns wrote his first symphony; his second, published as *Symphony No. 1 in E-flat major*, was performed in 1853 to the astonishment of many critics and fellow-composers.

From 1861 to 1865, Saint-Saëns held his only teaching position as professor of piano at the École Niedermeyer. Saint-Saëns was a multi-faceted intellectual. From an early age, he studied geology, archaeology, botany, and lepidoptery. He was an expert at mathematics. Later, in addition to composing, performing, and writing musical criticism, he held discussions with Europe's finest scientists and wrote scholarly articles on acoustics, occult sciences, Roman theatre decoration, and ancient instruments. He wrote a philosophical work, *Problèmes et Mystères*, which spoke of science and art replacing religion. He was also a member of the Astronomical Society of France; he gave lectures on mirages, had a telescope made to his own specifications, and even planned concerts to correspond to astronomical events such as solar eclipses.

In recognition of his accomplishments, the government of France awarded him the Légion d'honneur.

Saint-Saëns died of pneumonia on 16 December 1921 at the Hôtel de l'Oasis in Algiers. His body was repatriated to Paris, honoured by state funeral at La Madeleine, and interred at Cimetière du Montparnasse in Paris.

Design

- ❖ What design elements did you notice?
- ❖ How did the sets and costumes influence the piece?
- ❖ If you were to set this piece in another time, which time would you pick, and why?



Samson and Delilah. Production photos by Terrence McCarthy

Cinema Prompts for Discussion

- ❖ Have you been to see an Opera live before?
- ❖ If so, how does this experience differ from that?
- ❖ What advantages are there to seeing opera on the big screen? What might you miss from far away?
- ❖ What advantages are there to hearing a performance live?
- ❖ What is your reaction to the orchestra? And how do you think it is different to hear it live than in a movie theatre?
- ❖ What are the differences you find between seeing the filming of a live opera and a real movie?
- ❖ Does this experience make you want to see a live opera? Or would you rather see another in a cinema?

*Please join us later this spring
For Cinemacast Presentations of*

**Don Giovanni
Madama Butterfly**

Thank you!

Credits:

Cover art:

Andrea Mantegna. Samson and Delilah, c. 1505. National Gallery, London
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Guide prepared by Caroline Altman, Director of Education,
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