



SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA EDUCATION

OPERA GLOSSARY

Accompaniment	An instrumental or vocal part designed to support or complement a principal voice, instrument, or group of voices and instruments. In an aria, the voice is the primary focus and the orchestra is the accompaniment.
Baritone	A baritone is a male singer who sings neither as high as a tenor nor as low as a bass. Like a bass, a baritone will often play a villain. Composers might also write the part of a trusted friend of the main character for a baritone. The role of Pagageno in <i>The Magic Flute</i> is played by a baritone.
Bass	A bass is a male singer who sings in the lowest vocal range. They often play villains or authority figures, like kings or priests. In <i>The Magic Flute</i> Sarastro is played by a bass.
Bravo [brah-voh]	“Brave” or “courageous” in Italian. You may hear it shouted by members of the audience at the end of an especially pleasing performance. Bravo is used for a single man, brava for a woman, and bravi for more than one performer.
Choreographer	The person who designs the steps of a dance.
Composer	The person who writes the music of an opera (or other musical work).
Concertmaster	The “first chair” violinist who plays occasional solos and is responsible for coordinating all the stringed instruments. He or she will walk out into the orchestra pit right before the conductor enters.
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.
Finale [fi-nal-ee]	“The end” in Italian. The ending segment/song of an act or scene. It usually involves many singers and is very dramatic.
Intermission	A break between acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around. Intermissions usually last between fifteen and twenty-five minutes.
Libretto [li-bret-oh]	“Little book” in Italian. 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 [li-bret-ist]	The person who writes the libretto, often a poet or playwright.
Opera [op-ruh]	“Work” in Italian. Most likely this word was used to indicate that operas contained many different kinds of art forms or work: musical composition, writing, set design, etc.

Orchestra	The group of musicians who are led by the conductor and accompany the singers. Orchestras vary in size depending on how many instruments the score requires.
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 main part of the opera.
Props	Shortened from the word properties. Small items carried or used by singers during a performance, such as fans, letters, or an ice cream cone!
Recitative [rech-i-tah-teev]	Sung dialogue that moves the action along by providing information. It usually has no recognizable melody and the singing is generally faster with a rhythm more like normal speech.
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.
Soprano	A female singer who sings the highest vocal range. They usually play the lead female character in an opera, but they will also play friends and villains on occasion. Pamina and the Queen of the Night in <i>The Magic Flute</i> are both sopranos.
Supertitles	Translations into English of the original words of the opera projected on a screen above the stage.
Synopsis	A short version of the story of the opera, usually one or two pages.
Tenor	A male singer who sings the highest male vocal range. Tenors usually play the lead male character in an opera, often the hero. The roles of Tamino and Monostatos in <i>The Magic Flute</i> are played by tenors.
Usher	The person at an opera house or theater who will direct you to your seats and hand you a program. You can often identify ushers because they are dressed in all black or in formal attire. They are very helpful and can usually answer any questions you have.