

PALM BEACH OPERA

Stories Told Through Singing



OPERA BASICS
A Learning Guide



OPERA: Stories Told Through Singing

We believe that opera tells stories to which we can all relate, and that's why the operatic art form has thrived for centuries. The education programs at Palm Beach Opera strive to immerse the community directly into those stories, revealing timeless tales of love, passion, and joy. We challenge each person to find his or her own connection to opera's stories, therefore inspiring learners of all ages to explore the world of opera. At Palm Beach Opera, there is something for everyone! **#PBOperaForAll**

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A photograph of an opera performance. In the foreground, a male singer in a red jacket and a female singer in a red dress are in a dramatic pose. The male singer is leaning over the female singer, who is leaning back. They are surrounded by other performers in elaborate costumes. The background is dark with some stage lighting.

What is Opera All About?

LA TRAVIATA | PHOTO: Bruce Bennett

What exactly is Opera?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, an opera is a dramatic work in one or more acts that is set to music for singers and instruments.

Simply put, opera is musical storytelling!

The stories are often fictional, although they may be based on historical events. Some operas are fairytales, others are about kings, queens, and rulers, and some operas tell a love story. The storytelling possibilities are endless!

Opera is a unique art form because it combines elements from several different disciplines. Opera features musical arts (singing and instruments), theatrical arts (writing and acting), visual arts (scenery, set design, props, lighting, and video/projections), costuming (design and construction), and dance (choreography) to create the ultimate work of art.

Opera is written by a composer (music) and a librettist (words). Sometimes operas are sung in English, other times in Italian, German, French, Russian, and Spanish. Opera can be written in any language.

Operas vary in length; some are quite short, others very long. Most operas last 1 to 3 hours (just like a movie) and usually include an intermission (like halftime at a football game).



When did it all begin?

Back in 1597, a composer named Jacopo Peri wrote the first opera, titled *Dafne*, based on a story from Greek mythology. After Peri's creation, Monteverdi took the opera concept to the next level, solidifying the art form and propelling the genre into the future. In the 1600s, opera took root and flourished in Italy. Attending an opera performance in the 1600s was like attending a rock or pop concert today. The singers were incredibly famous and the crowds could be quite rowdy!

For several hundred years, opera audiences were entertained by the operatic works of composers such as Mozart, Rossini, Donizetti, Puccini, and Verdi. Operagoers were spellbound not only by the unbelievable skills of the singers, but by the sheer spectacle of the performances.

The same holds true today.

Audiences are enjoying the masterpieces from days past and embracing new works by a myriad of accomplished composers! (Check out Benjamin Moore, Jake Heggie, John Adams, and Benjamin Britten to start.)

Most importantly, people continue coming to the opera so that they can hear incredible singing and experience the art form as a collective...there's nothing quite like it!



CANDIDE | PHOTO: Bruce Bennett



PHOTO: Coastal Click Photography

ABOVE: Associate Conductor and Chorus Master, Greg Ritchey, leads the Palm Beach Opera Orchestra for our 2019 Children's Performance *The Revenge of the Bat*.

LEFT: Soprano Alisa Jordheim as Cunégonde and mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves as The Old Lady in Palm Beach Opera's 2018 production of *Candide*.

Bringing Opera to Life on Stage



TOSCA | PHOTO: James Clements

The artists who give voice to Opera

The composer—he or she writes the music of the opera. Sometimes the composer will also write the words for the opera. The music is often considered its own “character” in the opera since it plays a large part in the storytelling. The music can help the audience feel and understand the emotions or intentions of the characters on stage. Music is powerful! *Some well-known opera composers include: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Richard Wagner, Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini, and Gioachino Rossini.*

The librettist—from the Italian word *libro*, meaning “book,” the librettist writes the words of the opera, just like a playwright pens the words for a play or a screenwriter develops the script for a movie. The librettist’s words tell us the action (or plot) of the opera. *Some well-known opera librettists include: Lorenzo Da Ponte, Pietro Metastasio, W.S. Gilbert, Felice Romani, and Giuseppe Giacosa.*

The performers—the singers, dancers, and actors who bring the opera to life on stage. In opera, we have lead roles, comprimario roles (secondary parts), the ensemble (chorus), and supernumeraries (non-singing parts). *Some well-known opera performers include: tenor Luciano Pavarotti, tenor Plácido Domingo, soprano Renée Fleming, soprano Anna Netrebko, soprano Maria Callas, bass-baritone Bryn Terfel, and mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves.*

The director—he or she interprets the librettist’s words along with the composer’s music and decides how the opera story should be told. The director tells the performers what to do on stage. The director helps the audience (that’s YOU) understand the story! *Some well-known opera directors include: Franco Zeffirelli, Werner Herzog, Jonathan Miller, Kristine McIntyre, and Peter Sellars.*

The conductor—he or she uses physical movements, gestures of the hands, and facial expressions to lead the orchestra and the singers during the performance. The conductor cues the performers so that they know when to play or sing, when *not* to play or sing, and how loudly or softly to do so. *Some well-known opera conductors include: Arturo Toscanini, Anton Coppola, Angelo Mariani, Fritz Reiner, James Levine, and Palm Beach Opera’s own chief conductor, David Stern.*



David Stern, Palm Beach Opera’s Chief Conductor, rehearses the orchestra for our 2015 World Premiere of *Enemies, A Love Story*.

The orchestra—the instrumentalists who play the music written by the composer. The orchestra is made up of many different instruments divided into groups.

Strings: *violin, viola, cello, double bass*

Woodwinds: *piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon*

Brass: *trumpet, French horn, euphonium, trombone, tuba*

Percussion: *snare drum, timpani, bass drum, bells, cymbals, gong, xylophone*

Special: *harp, piano, harpsichord, English horn, saxophone, contrabassoon, cornet, flugelhorn, bass trombone, marimba, glockenspiel, celeste, tambourine, triangle, chimes, guitar, mandolin, banjo, (plus many more, as required)*

The Opera Singer

Soprano—the highest of the female voices, sopranos often sing the heroine role, or lead role, in the opera.

Mezzo-soprano—a lower-voiced singer than the soprano, mezzo-sopranos often play mothers, seductive heroines, and villainesses. There are times when a mezzo-soprano will play a “pants/trouser role,” meaning they play a male character.

Contralto—the lowest of the female voices, contraltos are quite rare. They often play villains or comedic characters.

Countertenor—This is a unique male voice type in which the singers use a strengthened falsetto to sing in the soprano range. There are few countertenor roles in opera.



CARMEN | PHOTO: Madeline Gray

Mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron as Mercédès, mezzo-soprano Rinat Shaham as Carmen, and soprano Jessica Fishenfeld as Frasquita in Palm Beach Opera’s 2016 production of *Carmen*.



Tenor Dimitri Pittas as Rodolfo, baritone Tobias Greenhalgh as Schaunard, bass-baritone Thomas Hammons as Benoit, bass Evan Boyer as Colline, and baritone Luis Ledesma as Marcello in Palm Beach Opera's 2015 production of *La bohème*.

Hear the Difference: Check out Royal Opera House's ["Introduction to Opera Voices"](https://youtu.be/hLfvkwTnJVM) as they demonstrate each voice type and include an example of a famous aria they might sing. <https://youtu.be/hLfvkwTnJVM>

Tenor—the tenor is a high-voiced male singer. He often plays the romantic lead in an opera.

Baritone—baritones sing lower than a tenor and higher than a bass. They often play villains or the best friend of the lead character.

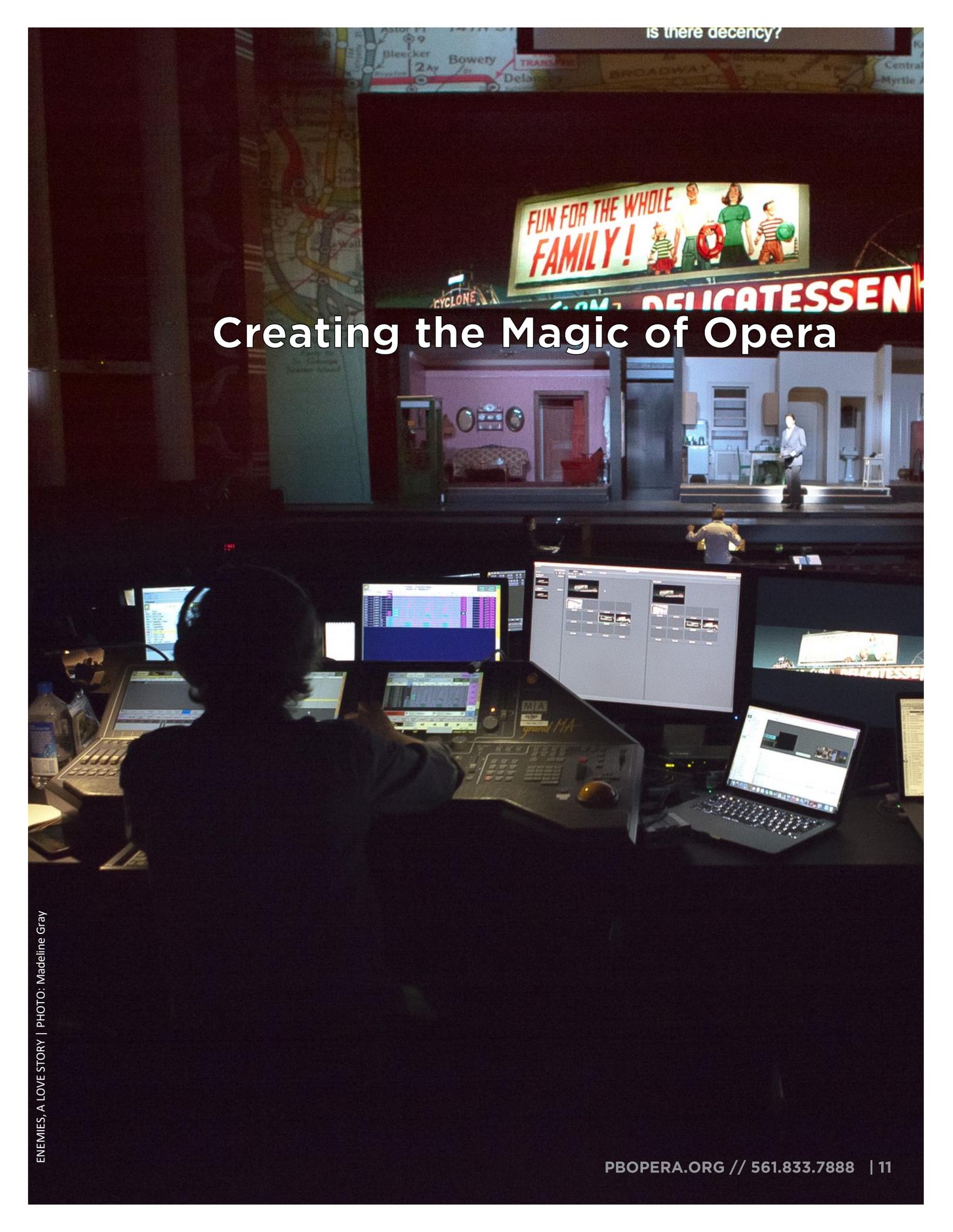
Bass-Baritone—the range of this male singer is between a baritone and a bass. This voice type is used as both villain and hero in opera.

Bass—the lowest and darkest male voice. Basses often play wise characters, evil characters, and foolish characters.

Chorus—the chorus is comprised of singers who each sing one of the designated voice types. They often play townspeople or guests at a party or event. The chorus fills the stage and plays an integral, dynamic role in opera.

The chorus participating in a scene from Palm Beach Opera's 2015 production of *La bohème*.





Creating the Magic of Opera

The artists who work behind the scenes

Performing an opera is hard work and it's not just about singing. There are many people backstage who work to create a stellar opera production...and you never even know they are there! The behind-the-scenes crew makes the MAGIC OF OPERA happen on stage. Here are some of the team members:

Producer/Producing Company—raises funds for a production and hires the personnel and singers.

Set Designer—designs the physical surroundings on stage to depict where the action of the opera takes place.

Lighting Designer—combines both direct and indirect lighting to illuminate the performers and create an atmosphere to enhance the story on stage.

Production Manager—oversees the entire production in order to bring the director's theatrical vision to life on stage.

Technical Director—makes sure that all technical aspects of the production run smoothly and efficiently.

Stage Manager—supervises all persons on stage, calls all show cues (when the curtains close, when backdrops are changed, when singers come on stage, etc.), and oversees backstage action.



PHOTO: Madeline Gray

LEFT: Brett Finley, Palm Beach Opera's Stage Manager, calling a show.

The Stage Manager plays a vital role in any production. He or she maintains order in rehearsals, marks all show cues and cuts, sends out production notes after each rehearsal or performance, calls the show, and much more. Nothing happens without the Stage Manager knowing and giving his or her permission.

Costume Designer/Wardrobe—helps create the look of a show through careful design and construction of clothing.

Choreographer—plans the movements for any dances in the opera.

Chorus Master—directs and rehearses the chorus.

Properties Master—organizes, supervises, creates, and repairs all props.

Wigs/Hair/Makeup Artists—this team plans and executes the construction of wigs for the opera singers and helps finish the look of each character with makeup. This job is very important because proper makeup will highlight the singer's facial expressions allowing each audience member to see the singer's emotions.



PHOTO: Madeline Gray

ABOVE: Meredith Hinton, Costume Director for Palm Beach Opera's World Premiere of *Enemies, A Love Story*, sews final touches on a costume for the production.

Palm Beach Opera typically rents costumes for our operas from an outside company. The costumes are shipped to us, fit to our singers, and then sent back to the rental company once the opera is complete. In 2015, we produced Ben Moore's *Enemies, A Love Story*, a World Premiere production, which required the design and construction of all costumes.

PHOTO: Madeline Gray



RIGHT: Steven Hampton makes sure that the singer's hair looks perfect before she goes out onto the opera stage. Every details matters.

The Real Opera Experience



What can you expect at the opera?

Palm Beach Opera understands that many people have a preconceived notion of what opera is, who attends, and what happens at the opera. We want to dispel any negative myths so that you feel comfortable going to the opera.

What you may think:

Opera is impossible to understand unless you can speak a foreign language.

The Real Opera Experience:

Not the case! Palm Beach Opera projects supertitles above the stage which provide an English translation. You will be able to understand what each performer is singing so that you can follow the action of the story. We also provide program books that give you a rundown of the plot so you know what is going to happen on stage.

What you may think:

Opera is boring and doesn't apply to my life.

The Real Opera Experience:

Did you know that opera plots are very similar to something you would see on TV or in a blockbuster movie? They can be comedies, dramas, superhero stories, love stories...anything! Remember, opera is a story told through singing—why can't opera tell YOUR story? Have you ever found yourself in a funny situation? Or have you had to make tough decisions? Or have you ever loved someone? **Opera is about human emotions and life—that is something to which we can all relate.**

What you may think:

Opera is fancy and I have to dress up to go see a performance.

The Real Opera Experience:

At Palm Beach Opera, audience members wear whatever they feel comfortable wearing. Some people wear jeans, others wear their favorite party dress or suit, while some people put on their finest attire. **We just want you to be you—come as you are and enjoy the show!**

What you may think:

Opera is different than what I'm used to and I won't know what to do at the performance.

The Real Opera Experience:

Palm Beach Opera wants you to try something different: Discover Opera! Don't worry about knowing what to do. If you love the way a singer is performing, clap for him or her at the end of the aria or musical number and feel free to shout *bravo!* (for a man), *brava!* (for a woman), or *bravi tutti!* (for a group). Opera singers love knowing that you enjoyed their singing, so let them know through thunderous applause and shouts of affirmation. **If you aren't sure when to clap, just wait for someone else to start...there will be many opera lovers in the room and they will know when to kick off the applause.**

You can also reach out to our Audience Services Manager or the Education and Community Engagement Department at Palm Beach Opera before you go to the opera to ask questions about the experience. **We are here to make the experience an excellent one for you, so let us know how we can help.**

What you may think:

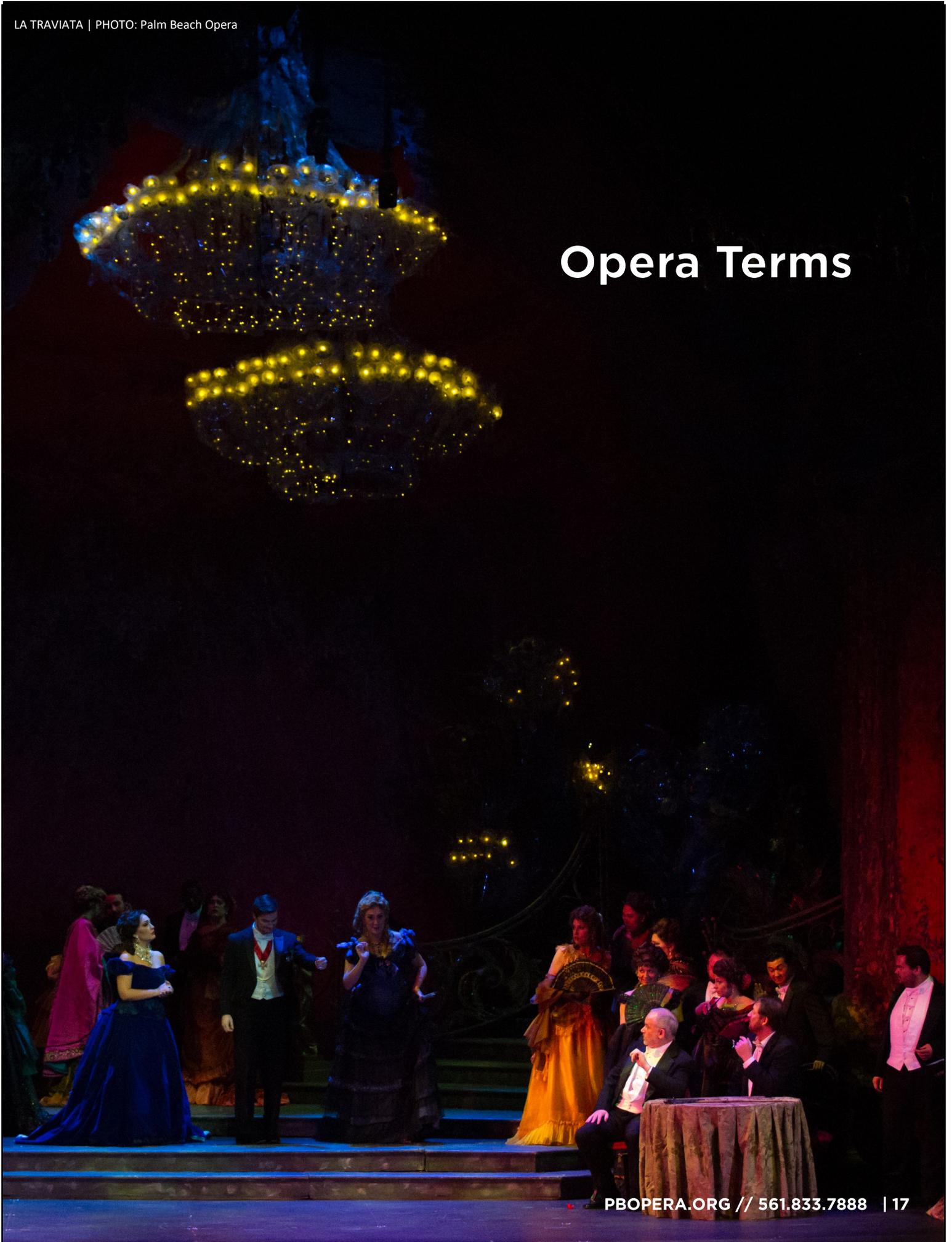
Opera is expensive and I can't afford to go.

The Real Opera Experience:

We have a range of ticket prices available for every Palm Beach Opera performance. **Did you know that you can check out a performance for only \$20?** And those seats are in our balcony which is a fantastic place to see the whole stage, read the supertitles, and be enveloped by the singers' voices that fill the theatre.

Not only that, but you can have a season subscription to see all three of our mainstage operas at the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts for \$60. If you are a middle or high school student, you may come with your class to a dress rehearsal for free through our Opera Rehearsal 101 program! Plus, if you are a Twitter fanatic, you might even be able to get a *Tweet Seat* at a dress rehearsal for free and tweet during the dress rehearsal performance. There are group prices and student tickets as well, so give us a call or check us out online at pbopera.org.

Opera Terms



Common expressions you may hear around the opera house

Act—a section of an opera that is used to divide the work into parts.

Aria—a song for solo voice typically accompanied by the orchestra.

Blocking—on-stage directions provided by the stage director to the singers and actors; blocking helps depict the story's action.

Bravo—an Italian word that can mean “brave,” this is the term that audience members shout at the end of an aria or the end of the opera when they love the singing! *Bravo* is used when a man is singing, *brava* is used when a woman is singing, and *bravi tutti* when more than one person is singing.

Chorus—a group of singers who play unnamed characters in the show; they sing together as a cohesive ensemble.

Comprimario role—a small role that is important to the development of the story.

Concertmaster—the first chair violinist who tunes the orchestra before the opera begins. In addition, the concertmaster typically plays all violin solos within pieces and marks the appropriate bowings so that all the violinists are moving and playing in unison.

Cover—the understudy; the singer who replaces the lead in emergency situations.

Curtain Call—this is the part at the end of the opera where the performers and orchestra take their bows.

Dress Rehearsal—the final rehearsal before opening night done in full costumes, wigs, and makeup with all set pieces and props. This is everyone's chance to run an uninterrupted performance before they are in front of an audience.

Duet—a musical selection or scene that is sung by two people. They do not always sing the same musical line nor do they always sing at the same time.

Encore—a French word meaning “again,” it is a term the audience uses to request that a singer repeat an aria; this term is not used frequently and is saved for only the best performances.

Finale—an Italian word meaning “the end,” it is the last musical number of an act or of the opera. Many times, the finale is grand, with most of the main characters on stage singing together.

Interlude—a short section of music that the orchestra plays between scenes or acts of an opera.

Intermission—a break between acts of the opera usually lasting 15 to 20 minutes. During this time, the audience and orchestra take a short break while the actors and stage crew prepare for the next act.

Maestro—an Italian word meaning “master,” this is a respectful title sometimes used to address the orchestral conductor.

Mark or marking—when a singer sings very softly or not at full voice; singers often mark during dress rehearsals to conserve their voices for the opening night performance.

Opera—an Italian word meaning “work,” opera is defined as storytelling set to music that involved multiple artistic disciplines.

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

Overture—a piece of music played by the orchestra before the opera begins. Sometimes the overture will play musical themes that will be heard throughout the opera. The audience claps at the end of the overture.

Props—items used by the singers and actors on stage during the opera performance (like a pencil, a glass, a telephone, etc.).

Quartet—an extended musical section performed by four singers.

Quintet—an extended musical selection performed by five singers.

Recitative—the speech-like sections between the more lyrical writing of the *aria*. Recitative delivers most of the story’s action, whereas an *aria* is usually an emotional reflection on the character’s circumstances.

Stage—the area where the opera performance happens.

Supernumerary—non-singing roles played by actors who help fill the scene on stage.

Supertitles—a translation of the opera that is projected onto a screen above the stage during the opera.

Synopsis—a short description of the opera’s storyline.

Trio—an extended musical selection performed by three singers.

Vibrato—a natural variation of pitch heard in both voices and instruments.

Vocal Coach—a person hired by the opera company to help singers interpret their individual role with musical accuracy and honest emotions.



PHOTO: Costal Click Photography

**Interested in learning more about opera?
We'd love to hear from you!**

Palm Beach Opera
Education & Community Engagement Department
561.835.7566 or education@pbopera.org

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