

A GUIDE TO THE OPERA



**BOSTON
LYRIC
OPERA**

EURDYDICE

BOSTONLYRICOPERA

February 14, 2024

Dear Opera Curious and Opera Lovers alike,

Boston Lyric Opera is pleased to welcome you to the Huntington Theatre as we present Matthew Aucoin's opera based on Sarah Ruhl's play, *Eurydice*. In a vivid retelling of the Orpheus myth from his bride's perspective, composer Matthew Aucoin and librettist Sarah Ruhl's stunning opera follows Eurydice as she travels to the underworld on her wedding day. This compelling new production is a resonant story of love's beauty and brutality – and the power of music to find us in the dark.

Opera is an art form that can contain big emotions. The experience of seeing and hearing live, professional opera is one of a kind, and we encourage you to explore the world of the opera outside the theater, as well. We are proud to offer this Guide to support your engagement with this opera. Please note that this Guide describes plot details. Our intent is to provide support in historical as well as contemporary context, along with tools to thoughtfully reflect on the opera before or after you attend.

Boston Lyric Opera inspires, entertains, and connects communities through compelling performances, programs, and gatherings. Our vision is to create operatic moments that enrich everyday life. As we continue to develop additional Guides, we want your feedback. Please tell us about how you use this guide and how it can best serve your learning and engagement needs by emailing education@blo.org.

If you're interested in engaging with us further and learning about additional opera education opportunities with Boston Lyric Opera, please visit blo.org/education to discover our programs and initiatives.

See you at the opera!

Sincerely,



Rebecca Ann S. Kirk, M.Ed.
Director of Community and Learning



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EURYDICE

STUDY GUIDE

SYNOPSIS

Act I

We meet two lovers, Orpheus and Eurydice, on a beach. They're young and helplessly, deeply in love. However, Eurydice is frustrated that Orpheus's mind always seems to be elsewhere: he hears music in his head, represented by a spirit double or Daemon, invisible to Eurydice. Orpheus proposes by playfully tying string around Eurydice's ring finger. She says yes.

In the Underworld, Eurydice's father—who has recently died—writes her a letter, offering fatherly advice for her wedding day. He laments that he doesn't know how to get his letters to her.

At their wedding, Orpheus and Eurydice dance. Eurydice finds the party overwhelming. She says she's feeling warm, and steps outside to find a drink of water. Alone outside, Eurydice realizes how much she misses her father. At that moment, a mysterious man appears, claiming that he has a letter from her father, but that she must follow him to his penthouse apartment to retrieve it.

At his apartment, the man gives Eurydice champagne and puts on terrible mood music. He does not give her the letter. Eurydice realizes she's made a terrible mistake and turns to leave. The man reveals the letter. Eurydice recognizes her father's handwriting. She tries to grab the letter and run away, but she trips. She falls down hundreds of stairs, into the Underworld, to her death.

Act II

In the Underworld, we meet three Stones (Little Stone, Big Stone, and Loud Stone), obnoxious bureaucratic guardians of the land of the dead, who serve as a kind of Greek chorus. They explain that Eurydice has died, and that, as a dead person, she will lose her memory and the power of language.



Orpheus and Eurydice by Edward Poynter, 1862. Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

Eurydice arrives in the Underworld in a raining elevator. When she is doused with the waters of this alternate Lethe, she loses her memory. When she steps out of the elevator, her father greets her. Eurydice has no idea who he is. Her father tries to make her comfortable.

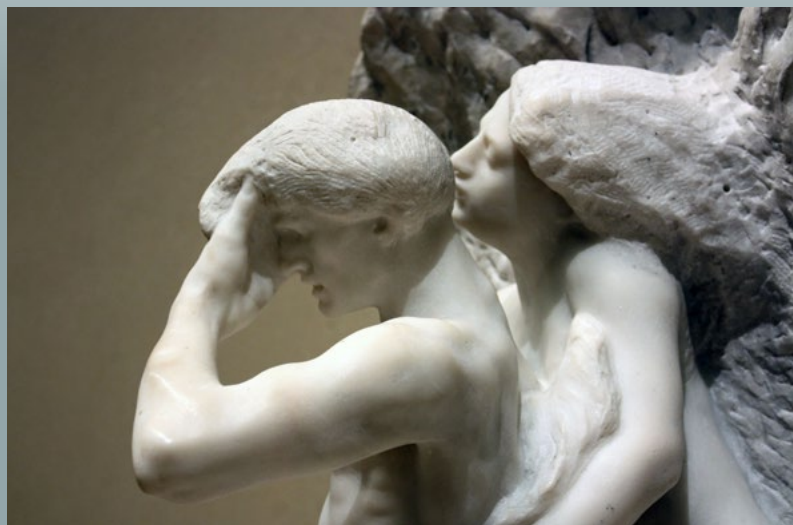
In the world above, Orpheus mourns Eurydice's death. He writes her a letter, but does not know how to get it to her.

In the Underworld, the Father builds a room out of string for Eurydice. A letter falls from the sky. The Father reads it and tells Eurydice it is from Orpheus. The name "Orpheus" triggers something in Eurydice, and she begins to remember who she is. She finally recognizes her father.

Orpheus slowly lowers the collected works of Shakespeare into the underworld on a string. The Father reads to Eurydice from *King Lear*. Eurydice begins to learn language again, word by word.

Orpheus resolves to find a way to get to the Underworld and bring Eurydice back.

In the Underworld, the Stones hear Orpheus singing wordlessly as he approaches the gates. Distressed, the Stones call their boss, Hades. When he appears, it is revealed that he was also the man who lured Eurydice to her death.



Marble Sculpture of Orpheus and Eurydice by Auguste Rodin, 1893. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain.

Intermission

Act III

Orpheus and his Daemon sing at the gates of the Underworld, pleading to be let in. Hades appears and dismissively informs him of the rules for bringing Eurydice back to the world above. She can follow him, but he must not look back to make sure she is there.

Eurydice is torn between following Orpheus and staying with her father. Her father insists that she follow Orpheus and live out her life in the world above.

When she sees Orpheus up ahead, Eurydice is afraid, not convinced that it's really him. She follows, but eventually rushes toward him and calls his name. Orpheus turns around, startled. The lovers are slowly, helplessly pulled apart.

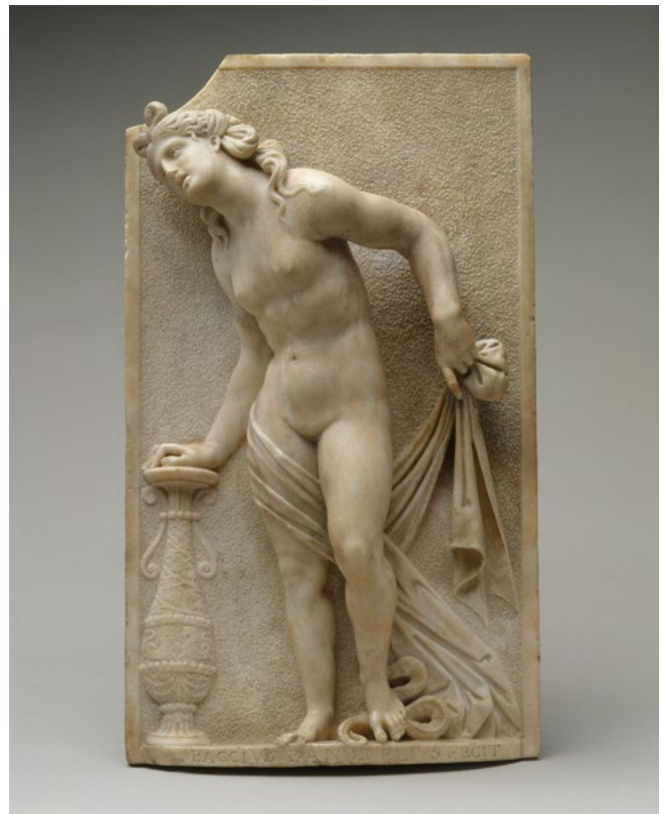
The Father is desolate that Eurydice is gone. In despair, he decides to dip himself in the river of forgetfulness and obliterate his memory. He quietly speaks the directions to his childhood home and lowers himself into the water.

Eurydice returns to the Underworld and finds, to her horror, that her father has dipped himself in the river. Hades reappears to claim her as his bride. She asks for a moment to prepare herself.

She finds a pen in her father's coat pocket and writes a letter to Orpheus, with instructions for his future wife on how to take care of him. She dips herself in the river of forgetfulness.

The elevator descends once again. In it is Orpheus. He sees Eurydice lying on the ground. He recognizes her and is happy. But the elevator rains on Orpheus, obliterating his memory. He steps out of the elevator. He finds the letter Eurydice wrote to him. He does not know how to read it, and his music has deserted him. We end in silence.

Synopsis by Matthew Aucoin & Sarah Ruhl



Marble sculpture of Eurydice by Antonio Lombardo, circa 1515-1524. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

CHARACTERS

- Eurydice** (*soprano*) – Orpheus' lover and new bride.
- Orpheus** (*baritone*) – Eurydice's lover and new husband.
- Orpheus Double** (*countertenor*) – Orpheus when he's performing his entrancing music.
- Father** (*baritone*) – Eurydice's father, who is in the Underworld.
- Hades** (*tenor*) – The god of the Underworld.

- Little Stone / Ensemble** (*soprano*) – A guardian of the Underworld.
- Big Stone / Ensemble** (*mezzo-soprano*) – A guardian of the Underworld.
- Loud Stone / Ensemble** (*tenor*) – A guardian of the Underworld.

OPERA MAKER: MATTHEW AUCOIN



Composer Matthew Aucoin. Photo credit: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Matthew Aucoin (b. 1990) is a composer, conductor, pianist, and writer who grew up surrounded by art, music, and theatre in the Boston area.

His dad was a *Boston Globe* theatre critic. Aucoin graduated from Harvard summa cum laude with a degree in poetry and was also very involved with opera, conducting several student productions. He studied and performed classical, rock, and jazz music growing up, and even started composing music around age four after hearing Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. After Harvard, he studied composition at The Juilliard School. To date, he has written 4 solo works, 17 chamber works, 6 orchestral works, and 4 operas.

Today, Aucoin is a leading 21st-century musician. In 2016, he was named Los Angeles Opera's first ever Artist-in-Residence and held this position through 2020, conducting several major productions with the company, coaching singers, and advising the company on new music. In 2017, Aucoin co-founded a new opera company based in Cambridge, MA called the American Modern Opera Company (AMOC), of which he is still Co-Artistic Director. In his words, it's "an opera company, a new music ensemble, a rock band, and a touring theater troupe, rolled into one." He was the youngest 2018 recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant". He is often compared to preeminent historical composers, including Mozart, Wagner, and Bernstein.

So far, Aucoin has written and staged three full operas: *Crossing* (2015), commissioned by Cambridge's American Repertory Theatre; *Second Nature* (2015), commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Chicago; and *Eurydice* (2020), co-commissioned by LA Opera and the Metropolitan Opera. His first opera, *Crossing*, premiered at Boston's Shubert Theatre and featured A Far Cry, one of Boston's premiere music ensembles, with Aucoin conducting. Before his opera *Eurydice* was fully developed, Aucoin explored the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as part of his *The Orphic Moment*, a work for countertenor, violin, and orchestra. The 15-minute-long work premiered at Salem's Peabody Essex Museum in 2014, and continues to be performed throughout the United States and abroad.

Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*, the play upon which the opera was based, premiered at Madison Repertory Theatre in Wisconsin in 2003, making its off-Broadway debut four years later. Like Aucoin, Ruhl is a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" for her work. She is a celebrated contemporary playwright and professor



Playwright Sarah Ruhl.
Photo credit: Zak DeZon



Students performing Matthew Aucoin's first opera, *Crossing*, at Brooklyn Academy of Music in October 2016. Photo by Steven Pisano. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Orpheus en Eurydice by Dutch artist Jacques-Louis David, 1817. Museum of Fine Arts Ghent. [Wikimedia Commons](#). *Public Domain*.



who is known for many of her works, including *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, with which she made her Broadway debut in 2009. Since 2003, her *Eurydice* has become a popular

piece for student productions and has been produced by hundreds of high schools and colleges. The play is a contemporary retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, unique in that it tells the story from Eurydice's perspective, with most of the action taking place in the Underworld.

Matthew Aucoin was interested in the Orpheus and Eurydice story as a contemporary opera and first heard about Ruhl's play from his sister. In Aucoin's 2021 book *The Impossible Art: Adventures in Opera*, he describes Ruhl's play as "mythic yet personal, grand yet intimate, theatrically savvy but also patient and wise." Aucoin's first instinct upon reading Ruhl's *Eurydice* was to fuse her writing with his earlier work, *The Orphic Moment*. He soon found that the characterizations within the two works were incompatible and decided instead to start fresh, using Ruhl's play as a template. He felt the play embodied operatic qualities, and that there was "room to expand on the play through music." He was taken by how he could make some of the moments in the play come to life through music, including the raining elevator down to the Underworld and the "string room," not to mention the characters, especially Orpheus.

Aucoin worked with Ruhl to remove about 40 percent of her play's text to form the opera's libretto – once the text is set to music, the story expands in a new way. Due to considerations like this, an opera can take a long time to

write. In the case of a large-scale opera like *Eurydice*, the creation process took several years. *Eurydice* premiered at Los Angeles Opera in February 2020, with Aucoin conducting. Music critic Mark Swed of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote, "there's a little something for everyone in the score, from intimations of Vivaldi to Puccini, to Philip Glass and particularly John Adams, to Gregorian chant, to a glimpse of rock and the sound of radio static." *Eurydice* premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City the following year in November 2021. At the Met, *Eurydice* had seven total performances, including one which was livestreamed in movie theaters across the country, reaching thousands of viewers as part of the Metropolitan Opera Live in HD series.

Boston Lyric Opera's 2024 production of *Eurydice* will be conducted by Matthew Aucoin himself. It will feature a brand-new chamber arrangement of the work, commissioned in collaboration between Boston Lyric Opera and Opera Grand Rapids. This marks the third production of this groundbreaking opera.

OPERA BEHIND THE SCENES

Watch this video to hear more about the origins of the premiere of *Eurydice* at The Metropolitan Opera in 2021: [Matthew Aucoin, Sarah Ruhl, and Mary Zimmerman on *Eurydice* - YouTube](#)

OPERATIC ORPHEUS

The biggest adaptation Aucoin made in writing Ruhl's play into an opera was to have the character of Orpheus be portrayed by two singers – a baritone, Orpheus, and a countertenor, Orpheus' Double. This was to musically portray Orpheus as having both human and superhuman characteristics.

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DISCUSS:

How does telling a story through different art forms or mediums impact the way that story is told?

GREEK MYTH: EURYDICE & OPERA



Greek mythology began as an oral tradition, with storytellers sharing with their communities or traveling to different villages to perform stories. Many of these stories were set in poetic verse and often accompanied by musical instruments so that the poetry could be sung. As often happens with oral tradition, stories retained crucial plot points and morals or lessons, but each storyteller likely came from a lineage that curated and emphasized particular details. Gifted storytellers may have even embellished their stories over time to appeal to the emotions of their audience. Stories from Greek mythology survive today, both because of this continued oral tradition, as well as the work of Greek and other scholars and writers documenting them. Many of the stories have interconnecting characters—a whole world that everyone knew about (not unlike the Marvel Universe), so that when storytellers referred to a character, people understood whether they were a Titan or

Above: *Orphée ramenant Eurydice des enfers*, 1861. Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. [Wikimedia Commons](#). *Public Domain*. Inset: Singers Anneliese Müller and Tiana Lemnitz portray Orpheus and Eurydice in a 1945 production of Christoph Willibald Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, which premiered in 1762. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

HUMAN MYTH

The story of Eurydice and Orpheus has many similarities to myths from other cultures, like the Japanese story of Izanagi and Izanami, the Mayan tale of Ixchel and Itzamná, or the Indian legend of Savitri and Satyavan. Even the Old Testament Biblical story of Lot and his wife parallels the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in certain aspects.

an Olympian, what their origin story and powers were, where they lived, and who their parents and children were.

Eurydice was a mountain meadow nymph of a family that often spent time with Pan. Orpheus was a demi-god, son of Apollo, and a legendary musician, gifted poet, prophet, and teacher. He is credited with teaching agriculture, writing, and medicine to mankind. He was also a great adventurer. Orpheus' playing and singing was entrancing to all. He caught the attention of Eurydice once when he was performing, and they fell in love and married. Soon after, she was bitten by a snake and died, traveling to the Underworld. Orpheus decided to retrieve her from the Underworld, and played his enchanting music to lull the guardians into a stupor so he could find Eurydice. Hades, the god of the Underworld, agreed to let Orpheus bring Eurydice back under one condition: he must walk ahead of her out of the Underworld and not look back. Doubt, mistrust, and curiosity got the better of Orpheus, and he did look back right after he'd arrived back in the world, but Eurydice had not yet, so she was swept back into the Underworld. Many

years later, Orpheus was killed and then reunited with his love at last when he entered the Underworld for good.

This is the basic outline of the myth, yet there are many details and variations that shape the characters, their motivations, and the moral of the story. It's also surmised that this may have been an Orpheus story that was added later among those told of all his adventures. The name Eurydice in Greek means "she who extends justice widely" or "profound judgement," implying that Eurydice was a character meant to teach Orpheus—and the audience—a lesson.

Although Eurydice is the protagonist in Aucoin's opera, the story has historically been most often told from Orpheus' perspective. Orpheus as a gifted musician, combined with the oral poetic and melodic tradition of performing Greek myth, makes his stories enticing to retell through opera. There are over 70 operas written about Orpheus, many of which retell the Eurydice story. Although the 1607 opera *L'Orfeo* by



Costume design by Alfredo Edel Colorno for Orpheus as a pants role sung by a mezzo-soprano for Gluck's opera *Orphée et Eurydice*, performed in Italy 1889.

GREEK MYTH: EURYDICE & OPERA



The Death of Eurydice by Erasmus Quellinus II, 1630. Prado Museum. Creative Commons. Public Domain.

Claudio Monteverdi is often said to be the first-ever opera, there is an opera that premiered seven years prior entitled *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri, which is actually the oldest surviving opera (Peri wrote another opera two years prior, but it has since been lost). Since then, there have been many other operas and plays—including the one by Sarah Ruhl which tells

Eurydice's story from her perspective and sets it in the 21st century. This is the play that inspired Matthew Aucoin's opera. There are also musical stage productions, including the Broadway play *Hadestown*, which opened in 2019.

Greek myth has served as inspiring source material for opera composers for over 400 years. There are over 100 operas and musicals across the centuries that retell these ancient and well-known stories, each time retaining the heart of the story and updating it to touch contemporary audiences.

DISCUSS:

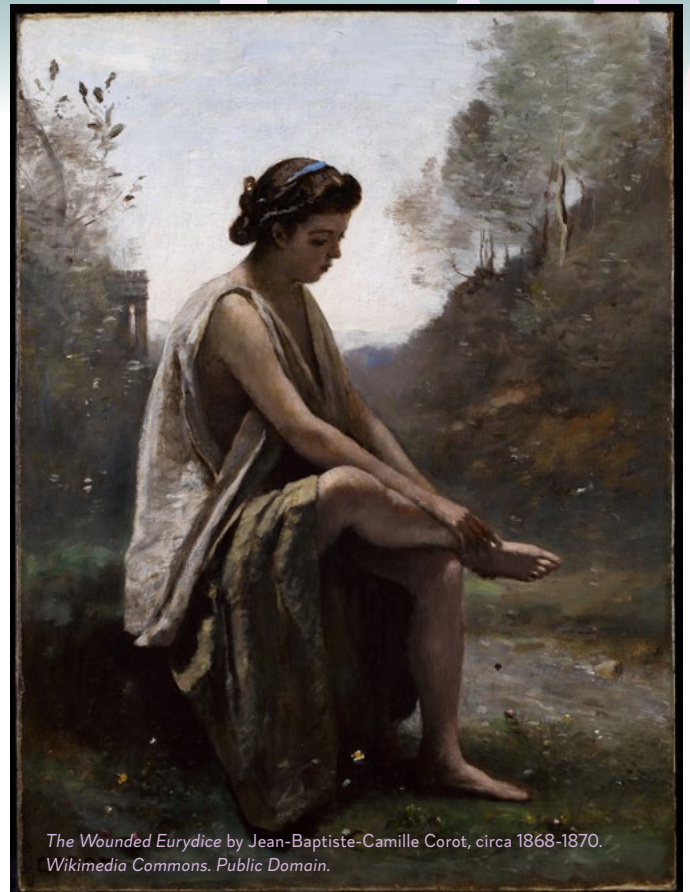
Which Greek myth would you retell through opera? How would you update it for today's audiences?

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL MUSIC: MATTHEW AUCOIN'S SOUND WORLD

Sometimes it is challenging to define an emerging style, trend, or genre and the characteristics that make it so.

Only in retrospect can we see the full picture of similarities and relationships that define Romantic or Baroque music, for example. So, describing how Matthew Aucoin's specific style fits within contemporary classical music today is a job for critics and musicologists; yet as Aucoin is still very much in the thick of his creative output, the whole picture remains elusive.

Matthew Aucoin is a 33-year-old contemporary composer who also conducts his own music and sometimes writes the libretti, or lyrics, as well. He has been studying music for most of his life — not only classical music, but also rock and jazz — and enjoys many different genres. All of these elements of his personal and professional experience—including being an American millennial—have influenced his compositions. He describes his music as “explosively tonal” with a “very American sense of groove.” Aucoin cites many musical influences, from Giuseppe Verdi to Alban Berg, to musicians from other genres, like Duke Ellington and even Radiohead. He has been compared to



The Wounded Eurydice by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, circa 1868-1870.
Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

Leonard Bernstein and other composers like Mozart and Wagner, who similarly not only composed music, but also conducted their compositions and had very particular visions for what they were creating.

The character of Orpheus in *Eurydice*, for example, is part mortal, part divine. He certainly has nearly



Orpheus Charming Wild Beasts with his Lyre by Franz von Stuck, 1891.

superhuman talents when it comes to performing music. For this, Aucoin wanted to use two singers with two different voice types to distinguish between the two attributes of this character. The baritone represents Orpheus, the mortal, while a countertenor portrays Orpheus while performing music, almost in a trance. This creates a contrast between the medium-low voice of the baritone and the high voice of the countertenor, whose timbre as Orpheus when performing his music is meant to mimic overtones.

Aucoin is also a poet and has written the libretti for some of his own operas and other works. He sees the languages of music and words as tightly intertwined—language being musical, and music being linguistic. When inspired by Sarah Ruhl’s words and setting them to music, Aucoin was meticulous about portraying the emotional landscape of the characters

in individual moments in addition to portraying the larger-scale drama that the text evokes. He even pays attention to the lyricism and percussiveness of spoken text, which bring their own inherent musicality to the composition process. Together with music and words, the Eurydice story comes to life for contemporary audiences and illuminates our fallible moments and processing of grief.



LISTEN UP!

1

Crossings Aucoin’s first opera premiered in 2015. Listen to these two excerpts—one purely instrumental, and the other a chorus. What kinds of music does it remind you of? Do you hear influences from other genres?

Crossings: Prologue Excerpt

Crossings: Suite Chorus

2

The Orphic Moment Matthew Aucoin composed this cantata for chamber ensemble and voice that premiered in 2017. This piece helped inspire the full-length opera *Eurydice*. Listen to this piece. What does it make you think of? *The Orphic Moment*

3

“Dear Orpheus” Listen to this aria depicting the moment when Eurydice writes a letter to Orpheus after arriving in the Underworld. How do the vocal line and accompaniment work together to convey the meaning of the text?

“Dear Orpheus”

4

“This is What it is to Love an Artist” Listen to this excerpt of an aria in Act II of *Eurydice*, in which Eurydice sings about loving Orpheus. Listen to the words. Is the musical orchestration echoing the meaning in the words or highlighting the unspoken emotional subtext?

“This is What it is to Love an Artist”

GENERAL QUESTIONS

TO GUIDE YOUR LISTENING

- What instruments do you hear?
- How fast is the music? Are there sudden changes in speed? Is the rhythm steady or unsteady?
- Key/Mode: Is it major or minor? (Does it sound bright, happy, sad, urgent, dangerous?)
- Dynamics/Volume: Is the music loud or soft? Are there sudden changes in volume (either in the voice or orchestra)?
- What is the shape of the melodic line? Does the voice move smoothly, or does it make frequent or erratic jumps? Do the vocal lines move noticeably downward or upward?
- Does the type of voice singing (baritone, soprano, tenor, mezzo, etc.) have an effect on you as a listener?
- Do the melodies end as you would expect, or do they surprise you?
- How does the music make you feel? What effect do the above factors have on you as a listener?
- What is the orchestra doing in contrast to the voice? How do the two interact?
- What kinds of images, settings, or emotions come to mind? Does it remind you of anything you have experienced in your own life?
- Do particularly emphatic notes (low, high, held, etc.) correspond to dramatic moments?
- What type of character (romantic, comic, serious, etc.) fits this music?

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THE HISTORY OF OPERA

People have been telling stories through music for millennia throughout the world. Opera is an art form with roots in Western Europe that is over 400 years old. Here is a brief timeline of its lineage.

RENAISSANCE

1500-1620

BAROQUE

1600-1750

CLASSICAL

1730-1820



ROMANTIC

1790-1910

20th CENTURY

1900-2000

RENAISSANCE (1500-1620)

1573 The Florentine Camerata was founded in Italy, devoted to reviving ancient Greek musical traditions, including sung drama.

1598 Jacopo Peri, a member of the Camerata, composed the world's first opera – *Dafne*, reviving the classic myth.

1607 Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) wrote the first opera to become popular, *L'Orfeo*, marking him as the premier opera composer of his day and bridging the gap between Renaissance and Baroque music. His works are still performed today.



Toccata from *L'Orfeo*. Claudio Monteverdi *Favola in musica*. Reprint of the First Edition of the Score, Venice 1609 [Public domain], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

1637 The first public opera house, Teatro San Cassiano, was built in Venice, Italy.

BAROQUE (1600-1750)

1673 **Jean-Baptiste Lully** (1632-1687), an Italian-born composer, brought opera to the French court, creating a unique style, *tragédie en musique*, that better suited the French language. Blurring the lines between recitative and aria, he created fast-paced dramas to suit the tastes of French aristocrats.

1689 **Henry Purcell's** (1659-1695) simple and elegant chamber opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, premiered at Josias Priest's boarding school for girls in London.

1712 **George Frederic Handel** (1685-1759), a German-born composer, moved to London, where he found immense success writing intricate and highly ornamented Italian *opera seria* (serious opera). **Ornamentation** refers to stylized, fast-moving notes, usually improvised by the singer to make a musical line more interesting and to showcase their vocal talent.



Dido and Aeneas, 1747, Pompeo Batoni
[Public domain], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

CLASSICAL (1730-1820)

1750s A reform movement, led by **Christoph Willibald Gluck** (1714-1787), rejected the flashy ornamented style of the Baroque in favor of simple, refined music to enhance the drama.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Posthumous painting by Barbara Krafft in 1819 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

1767
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) wrote his first opera at age 11, beginning his 25-year opera career. Mozart mastered, then innovated, in several operatic forms. He wrote *opera serias* (serious operas), including *La Clemenza di Tito*, and *opera buffas* (comedic operas) like *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*). He then combined the two genres in *Don Giovanni*, calling it *dramma giocoso* (comedic drama). Mozart also innovated the *Singspiel* (German sung play), featuring a spoken dialogue, as in *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*).

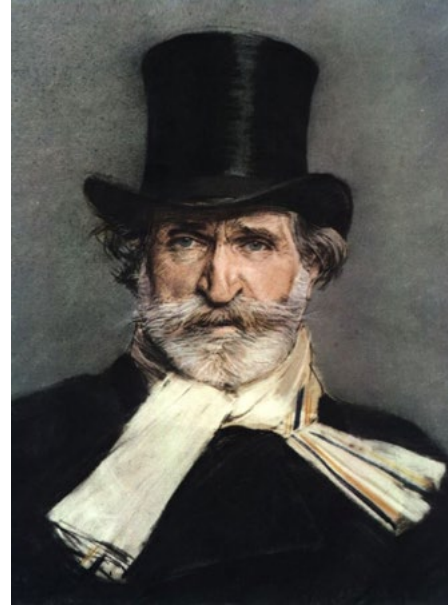
1805 **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827), although a prolific composer, wrote only one opera, *Fidelio*. The extremes of musical expression in Beethoven's music pushed the boundaries in the late Classical period and inspired generations of Romantic composers.



The Magic Flute playbill for the premiere, 30 September 1791 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

1816
Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) composed *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (*The Barber of Seville*), becoming the most prodigious opera composer in Italy by age 24. He wrote 39 operas in 20 years. A new compositional style created by Rossini and his contemporaries, including **Gaetano Donizetti** and **Vincenzo Bellini**, would, a century later, be referred to as *bel canto* (beautiful singing). **Bel canto** compositions were inspired by the nuanced vocal capabilities of the human voice and its expressive potential. Composers employed strategic use of register, the push and pull of tempo (*rubato*), extremely smooth and connected phrases (*legato*), and vocal glides (*portamento*).

1853 **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813-1901) completed *La Traviata*, a story of love, loss, and the struggle of average people, in the increasingly popular realistic style of **verismo**. Verdi enjoyed immense acclaim during his lifetime, while expanding opera to include larger orchestras, extravagant sets and costumes, and more highly trained voices.



Giuseppe Verdi, by Giovanni Boldini, 1886 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

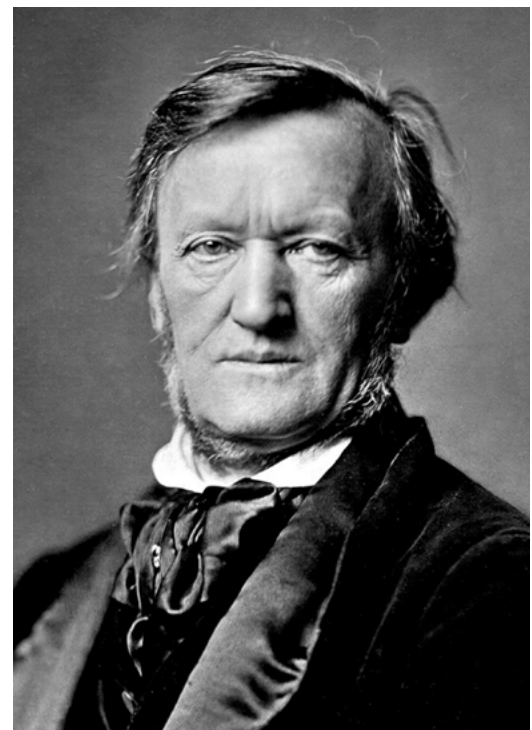
ROMANTIC (1790-1910)

The Golden Age of Opera

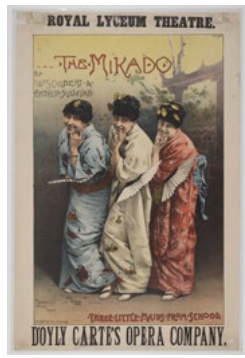
1842 Inspired by the risqué popular entertainment of French vaudeville, **Hervé** created the first operetta, a short comedic musical drama with spoken dialogue. Responding to popular trends, this new form stood in contrast to the increasingly serious and dramatic works at the grand Parisian opera house. **Opéra comique** as a genre was often not comic, rather realistic or humanistic. **Grand opera**, on the contrary, was exaggerated and melodramatic.

1865 **Richard Wagner's** (1813-1883) *Tristan und Isolde* was the beginning of musical **modernism**, pushing the use of traditional harmony to its extreme. His massively ambitious, lengthy operas, often based in German folklore, sought to synthesize music, theatre, poetry, and visuals in what he called a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). The most famous of these was an epic four-opera drama, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which took him 26 years to write and was completed in 1874.

Richard Wagner. Photo taken 1871 in Munich via Wikimedia Commons



1871 Influenced by French operetta, English librettist **W.S. Gilbert** (1836-1911) and composer **Arthur Sullivan** (1842-1900) began their 25-year partnership, which produced 14 comic operettas, including *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Mikado*. Their works inspired the genre of American musical theatre.



Mikado theatre poster, Edinburgh, 1885 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

ROMANTIC (1790-1910)

1927 American musical theatre, commonly referred to as Broadway, was taken more seriously after **Jerome Kern's** (1885-1945) *Show Boat*, words by **Oscar Hammerstein**, tackled issues of racial segregation and the ban on interracial marriage in Mississippi.

1874

Johann Strauss II, (1825-1899) influenced largely by his father, with whom he shared a name and talent, composed *Die Fledermaus*, popularizing Viennese musical traditions, namely the waltz, and shaping *operetta*.

1896

Giacomo Puccini's (1858-1924) *La Bohème* captivated audiences with its intensely beautiful music, realism, and raw emotion. Puccini enjoyed huge acclaim during his lifetime for his works.



Scott Joplin. Public Domain.

1911 **Scott Joplin**, (1868-1917) "The King of Ragtime," wrote his only opera, *Treemonisha*, which was not performed until 1972. The work combined the European late-Romantic operatic style with African American folk songs, spirituals, and dances. The libretto, also by Joplin, was written at a time when when African Americans in the southern United States rarely had access to literacy resources and education.

1922

Alan Berg (1885-1935) composed the first completely atonal opera, *Wozzeck*, dealing with uncomfortable themes of militarism and social exploitation. *Wozzeck* is in the style of 12-tone music, or **serialism**. This new compositional style, developed in Vienna by composer **Arnold Schoenberg** (1874-1951), placed equal importance on each of the 12 pitches in a chromatic scale (all half steps), removing the sense of the music being in a particular key.



A scene from a 19th-century version of the play *The Barber of Seville* by Pierre Beaumarchais. Its origins in the *commedia dell'arte* are shown in this picture which portrays Figaro dressed in the costume and mask of Harlequin. 1884 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons



Porgy and Bess by the New York Harlem Theatre 2009. Courtesy of New York Harlem Theatre

1945 British composer **Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976) gained international recognition with his opera *Peter Grimes*. Britten, along with **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958), was one of the first British opera composers to gain fame in nearly 300 years.

1987

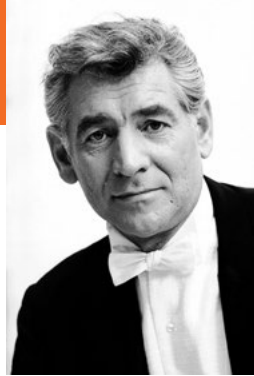
John Adams (b. 1947) composed one of the great minimalist operas, *Nixon in China*, the story of Nixon's 1972 meeting with Chinese leader Mao Zedong. Musical **minimalism** strips music down to its essential elements, usually featuring a great deal of repetition with slight variations.



Pulitzer Prize-winning contemporary composer Ellen Reid. Photo courtesy of Ellen Reid

20TH CENTURY (1900-2000)

1935 American composer **George Gershwin** (1898-1937), who was influenced by African American music and culture, debuted his opera, *Porgy and Bess*, in Boston, MA with an all-African American cast of classically trained singers. His contemporary, **William Grant Still** (1895-1978), a master of European grand opera, fused that with the African American experience and mythology. His first opera, *Blue Steel*, premiered in 1934, one year before *Porgy and Bess*.



Leonard Bernstein via Creative Commons

1957 **Leonard Bernstein** (1918-1990), known for synthesizing musical genres, brought together the best of American musical theatre, opera, and ballet in *West Side Story*—a reimagining of *Romeo and Juliet* in a contemporary setting.

1986

Anthony Davis (b. 1951) premiered his first of many operas, *X, The Life and Time of Malcolm X*, which reclaims stories of Black historical figures within the theater space. He incorporated both the orchestral and vocal techniques of jazz and classical European opera in his score for a distinctly American sound, and a fully realized vision of how jazz and opera are in conversation within a work.

Today

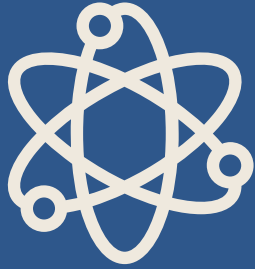
Still a vibrant, evolving art form, opera attracts contemporary composers such as **Philip Glass** (b. 1937), **Jake Heggie** (b. 1961), **Terence Blanchard** (b. 1962), **Ellen Reid** (b. 1983), and many others. Composers continue to be influenced by present and historical musical forms in creating new operas that explore current issues or reimagine ancient tales.



Six-time Grammy Award-winning jazz musician and composer Terence Blanchard. Creativity Commons



Photograph of William Grant Still taken by Carl Van Vechten. Creativity Commons



**THE SCIENCE
AND ART OF OPERA**



So Young Park as the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Photo: Eric Antoniou

WHY DO OPERA SINGERS SOUND LIKE THAT?

Opera is unique among forms of singing in that singers are trained to be able to sing without amplification, in large theaters, over an entire orchestra, and still be heard and understood! This is what sets the art form of opera apart from similar forms such as musical theatre. To become a professional opera singer, it takes years of intense physical training and constant practice — not unlike that of a ballet dancer — to stay in shape. Poor health, especially respiratory issues and even allergies, can be severely debilitating for a professional opera singer. Let's peek into some of the science of this art form.

How the Voice Works

Singing requires different parts of the body to work together: the lungs, the vocal cords, the vocal tract, and the articulators (lips, teeth, and tongue). The lungs create a flow of air over the vocal cords, which vibrate. That vibration is amplified by the vocal tract and broken up into words by consonants, which are shaped by the articulators.

BREATH:



Any good singer will tell you that good breath support is essential to produce quality sound. Breath is like the gas that goes into your car. Without it, nothing runs. In order to sing long phrases of music with clarity and volume, opera singers access their full lung capacity by keeping their torso elongated and releasing the lower abdomen and diaphragm muscles, which allows air to enter into the lower lobes of the lungs. This is why we associate a certain posture with opera singers. In the past, many operas were staged with singers standing in one place to deliver an entire aria or scene, with minimal activity. Modern productions, however, often demand a much greater range of movement and agility onstage, requiring performers to be physically versatile, and bringing more visual interest, authenticity of expression, and nuanced acting into the storytelling.

VIBRATION:



If you run your fingers along your throat, you will feel a little lump just underneath your chin. That is your "Adam's Apple," and right behind it, housed in the larynx (voice-box), are your vocal cords. When air from the lungs crosses over the vocal cords it creates an area of low pressure (Google **The Bernoulli Effect**), which brings the cords together and makes them vibrate. This vibration produces a buzz. The vocal chords can be lengthened or shortened by muscles in the larynx, or by changing the speed of air flow. This change in the length and thickness of the vocal cords is what allows singers to create different pitches. Higher pitches require long, thin cords, while low pitches require short, thick ones. Professional singers take great pains to protect the delicate anatomy of their vocal cords with hydration and rest, as the tiniest scarring or inflammation can have noticeable effects on the quality of sound produced.

RESONANCE:

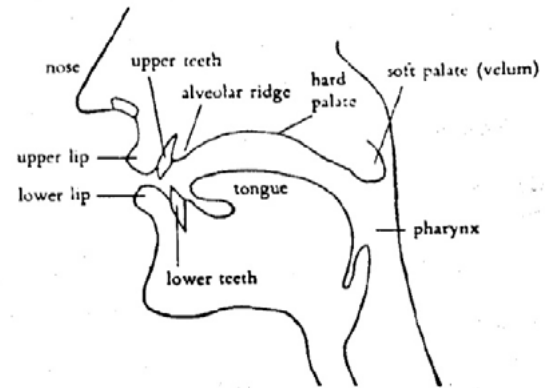


Without the resonating chambers in the head, the buzzing of the vocal cords would sound very unpleasant. The vocal tract, a term encompassing the mouth cavity, and the back of the throat, down to the larynx, shapes the buzzing of the vocal cords like a sculptor shapes clay. Shape your mouth in an *ee* vowel (as in *eat*), then sharply inhale a few times. The cool sensation you feel at the top and back of your mouth is your soft palate. The soft palate can raise or lower to change the shape of the vocal tract. Opera singers often sing with a raised soft palate, which allows for the greatest amplification of the sound produced by the vocal cords. Different vowel sounds are produced by raising or lowering the tongue, and changing the shape of the lips. Say the vowels: *ee*, *eh*, *ah*, *oh*, *oo* and notice how each vowel requires a slightly lower tongue placement and slightly rounder lips. This area of vocal training is particularly difficult because none of the anatomy is visible from the outside!

ARTICULATION:



The lips, teeth, and tongue are all used to create consonant sounds, which separate words into syllables and make language intelligible. Consonants must be clear and audible for the singer to be understood. Because opera singers do not sing with amplification, their articulation must be particularly good. The challenge lies in producing crisp, rapid consonants without interrupting the connection of the vowels (through the controlled exhale of breath) within the musical phrase.



Perfecting every element of this complex singing system requires years of training and is essential for the demands of the art form. An opera singer must be capable of singing for hours at a time, over the powerful volume of an orchestra, in large opera houses, while acting and delivering an artistic interpretation of the music. It is complete and total engagement of mental, physical, and emotional control and expression. Therefore, think of opera singers as the Olympic athletes of the stage, sit back, and marvel at what the human body is capable of!

Each of the voice types (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, bass) also tends to be sub-characterized by whether it is more **Lyric** or **Dramatic** in tone. Lyric singers tend toward smooth lines in their music, sensitively expressed interpretation, and flexible agility. Dramatic singers have qualities that are attributed to darker, fuller, richer note qualities expressed powerfully and robustly with strong emotion. While its easiest to understand operatic voice types through these designations and descriptions, one of the most exciting things about listening to a singer perform is that each individual's voice is essentially unique, thus each singer will interpret a role in an opera in a slightly different way.

Contralto:

The lowest of the higher treble voices have a low range that overlaps with the highest tenor's range. This voice type is less common.

Mezzo-Soprano:

Somewhat equivalent to an alto role in a chorus, mezzo-sopranos (*mezzo* translated as "middle") are known for their full and expressive qualities. While they don't sing frequencies quite as high as sopranos, their ranges do overlap, and it is a "darker" tone that sets them apart. One of the most famous mezzo-soprano lead roles is Carmen in Bizet's *Carmen*.

Soprano:

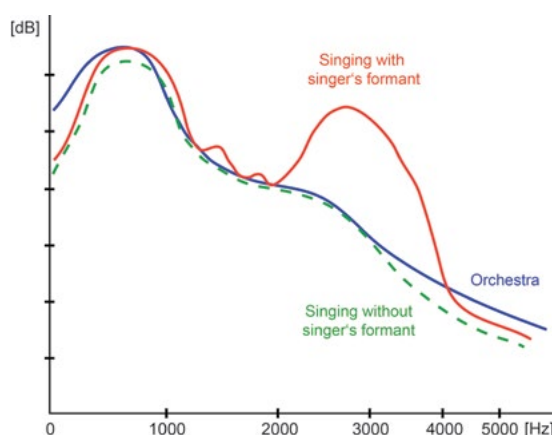
The highest voice. Some subtypes of the soprano voice include coloratura, lyric, and dramatic sopranos. Coloratura sopranos specialize in being able to sing fast-moving notes that are very high in frequency, often referred to as "color notes." One of the most famous coloratura roles is the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

The Physics of Opera Singers

What is it about opera singers that allows them to be heard above the orchestra? It's not that they simply sing louder. The qualities of sound have to do with the relationship between the **frequency** (pitch) of a sound, represented in a unit of measurement called hertz, and its **amplitude**, measured in decibels, which the ear perceives as loudness. Only artificially produced sounds, however, create a pure frequency and amplitude (these are the only kind that can break glass). The sound produced by a violin, a drum, a voice, or even smacking your hand on a table, produces a fundamental frequency as well as secondary, tertiary, etc. frequencies known as **overtones**, or as musicians call them, **harmonics**.

The orchestra tunes to a concert "A" pitch before a performance. Concert "A" has a frequency of about 440 hertz, but that is not the only pitch you will hear. Progressively softer pitches above that fundamental pitch are produced in multiples of 440 at 880hz, 1320hz, 1760hz, etc. Each different instrument in the orchestra, because of its shape, construction, and mode in which it produces sound, produces different harmonics. This is what makes a violin, for example, have a different color (or **timbre**) from a trumpet. Generally, the harmonics of the instruments in the orchestra fade around 2500hz. Overtones produced by a human voice—whether speaking, yelling, or singing—are referred to as **formants**.

As the demands of opera stars increased, vocal teachers discovered that by manipulating the empty space within the vocal tract, they could emphasize higher frequencies within the overtone series—frequencies above 2500hz. This technique allowed singers to perform without hurting their vocal cords, as they are not actually singing at a higher fundamental decibel level than the orchestra. Swedish voice scientist Johan Sundberg observed this phenomenon when he recorded the world-famous tenor Jussi Bjoerling in 1970. His research showed multiple peaks in decibel level, with the strongest frequency (overtone) falling between 2500 and 3000 hertz. This frequency, known as the **singer's formant**, is the "sweet spot" for singers so that we hear their voices soaring over the orchestra into the opera house night after night.



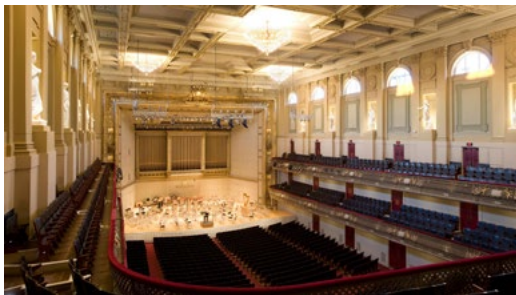
Prof. Tecumseh Fitch, evolutionary biologist and cognitive scientist at the University of Vienna, explains the difference between a fundamental frequency and formant frequency in the human voice. For an opera singer, the lower two formants (peaks on a graph) determine the specific vowel sound. The third formant and above add overtones that are specific to each particular singer's voice, like a fingerprint. When two people sing the same note simultaneously, the high overtones allow your ear to distinguish two voices.

A Resonant Place

The final piece of the puzzle in creating the perfect operatic sound is the opera house or theater itself. Designing the perfect acoustical space can be an almost impossible task, one which requires tremendous knowledge of science, engineering, and architecture, as well as an artistic sensibility. The goal of the acoustician is to make sure that everyone in the audience can clearly understand the music being produced onstage, no matter where they are sitting. A perfectly designed opera house or concert hall (for non-amplified sound) functions almost like gigantic musical instrument.



Boston Opera House, Photo by John Wolf



Boston Symphony Hall, opened in 1900, with acoustical design by Harvard physicist Wallace Clement Sabine, was the first concert hall to be designed with acoustic principles in mind. Each seat was mathematically designed and placed for acoustical perfection. .

Reverberation is one key aspect in making a singer's words intelligible or an orchestra's melodies clear. Imagine the sound your voice would make in the shower or a cave. The echo you hear is reverberation caused by the large, hard, smooth surfaces. Too much reverberation (bouncing sound waves) can make words difficult to understand. Resonant vowel sounds overlap as they bounce off hard surfaces and cover up quieter consonant sounds. In these environments, sound carries a long way but becomes unclear or, as it is sometimes called, **wet**, as if the sound were underwater. Acousticians can mitigate these effects by covering smooth surfaces with textured materials like fabric, perforated metal, or diffusers, which absorb and disperse sound. These tools, however, must be used carefully, as too much absorption can make a space **dry** – meaning the sound onstage will not carry at all and the performers may have trouble even hearing themselves as they

perform. Imagine singing into a pillow or under a blanket.

The shape of the room itself also contributes to the way the audience perceives the music. Most large performance spaces are shaped like a bell – small where the stage is and growing larger and more spread out in every dimension as one moves farther away. This shape helps to create a clear path for the sound to every seat. In designing concert halls or opera houses, big decisions must be made about the construction of the building based on acoustical needs. Even with the best planning, the perfect acoustic is not guaranteed, but professionals are constantly learning and adapting new scientific knowledge to enhance the audience's experience.

NOTES TO PREPARE FOR THE

You will see a full dress rehearsal – an insider’s look into the final moments of preparation before an opera premieres. The singers will be in full costume and makeup, the opera will be fully staged, and an orchestra will accompany the singers, who may choose to “mark,” or not sing in full voice, to save their voices for the performances. A final dress rehearsal is often a complete run-through, but there is a chance the director or conductor will ask to repeat a scene or section of music. This is the last opportunity the performers have to rehearse with the orchestra before opening night, and they therefore need this valuable time to work. The following will help you better enjoy your experience of a night at the opera:

THE PERFORMANCE:

- Arrive on time! Latecomers will be seated only at suitable breaks in the performance and often not until intermission.
- Dress in what you are comfortable in so that you may enjoy the performance. For some, that may mean dressing up in a suit or gown, for others, jeans and a t-shirt is fine. Generally “dressy-casual” is what people wear. Live theatre is usually a little more formal than a movie theater.
- At the very beginning of the opera, the concertmaster of the orchestra will ask the oboist to play the note “A.” You will hear all the other musicians in the orchestra tune their instruments to match the oboe’s “A.”
- After all the instruments are tuned, the conductor will arrive. You can applaud to welcome them!
- Feel free to applaud or shout *Bravo* at the end of an aria or chorus piece if you really liked it. The end of a piece can be identified by a pause in the music. Singers love an appreciative audience!
- It’s OK to laugh when something is funny or gasp at something shocking!
- When translating songs, and poetry in particular, much can be lost due to a change in rhythm, inflection, and rhyme of words. For this reason, opera is usually performed in its original language. In order to help audiences enjoy the music and follow every twist and turn of the plot, English supertitles are projected. Even when the opera is in English, there are still supertitles.
- Listen for subtleties in the music. The tempo, volume, and complexity of the music and singing depict the feelings or actions of the characters. Also, notice repeated words or phrases; they are usually significant.

E OPERA

THE PERFORMERS:

The singers, orchestra, dancers, and stage crew are all hard at work to create an amazing performance for you! Here's how you can help them.

- Lit screens are very distracting to the singers, so please keep your phone out of sight and off until the house lights come up.
- Due to how distracting electronics can be for performers, taking photos or making audio or video recordings is strictly forbidden.

EACH OTHER:

The theater is a shared space, so please be courteous to your neighbors!

- Please do not take off your shoes or put your feet on the seat in front of you.
- Respect your fellow opera lovers by not leaning forward in your seat so as to block the person's view behind you.
- Do not chew gum, eat, or drink while the rehearsal is in session. Not only can it pull focus from the performance, but the ushers are not there to clean up after you.
- If you must visit the restroom during the performance, please exit quickly and quietly.

Otherwise, sit back, relax, and let the action onstage pull you in. As an audience member, you are essential to the art form of opera — without you, there is no show!

Have Fun and Enjoy the Opera!

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