

# OPERA 101

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## Opera is a dramatic story told through song.

Considered by many to be the most complete art form, it combines all of the elements of art, words, music, drama and dance. The earliest Italian operas were called by several names, such as “favola in musica” (fable in music) and “drama per musica” (drama by means of music). This last title is very close to the dictionary definition, and is the correct basis for any discussion about opera. The unique thing about opera is the use of music to convey an entire story/plot. This is based on the feeling that music can communicate people’s reactions and emotions better than words (read or spoken) or pictures. Opera takes any type of dramatic story and makes it more exciting and more believable with the help of music. Many famous stories have been made into operas, including *Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.



Photo by Tim Wilkerson

## A BRIEF HISTORY

The concept of opera was developing many years before the first opera was written. Its beginning can be traced to the ancient Greeks. They fused poetry and music, creating plays that incorporate song, spoken language and dance, accompanied by string or wind instruments. In the 1100s the early Christian church set religious stories to music, a style known as liturgical drama. The first true opera, *Daphne* (1597), was composed by Jacopo Peri. It told the story of a Greek myth. The first great composer of opera was Claudio Monteverdi. Some of his operas are still performed today. German composer Christoph Gluck’s most famous opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), marked a shift in importance from the performers to the drama. It also reduced the amount of recitative and laid the foundations for the progression of the art form. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was another prolific composer during this time and many of his operas like *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro* - 1786) and *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute* - 1791) are still frequently performed around the world.

# OPERA 101



## OPERA AROUND THE WORLD

Italy was the first country where opera became popular. It was the homeland of Jacopo Peri and Claudio Monteverdi. In time this exciting form of entertainment spread to the rest of Europe. France and Germany joined Italy as the principal opera producers. Eventually opera came to reflect the stories and musical styles of each of these countries. The Italians have always been famous for their love of singing, and so in Italian opera there has always been great emphasis placed on the singer and the beautiful sounds of the human voice. It wasn't until the late 19th century and early 20th century with the later works of Verdi and the operas of Puccini that a balance was achieved between the role of the orchestra and that of the singer. These two forces were combined to give a more effective presentation of the story. The French have favored the pictorial side of drama, and this has led to a continuing emphasis on the visual spectacle, especially with dancing. For example, the Paris opera audience in the 19th century would not accept a work for performance if it did not contain a major ballet. Verdi, an Italian composer, had to add ballets to all of his works to get them performed in Paris. The Germans have always sought to extract from both the Italian and French traditions, and go beyond both in an attempt to present more than just a story. In fact, one of the greatest German opera composers, Richard Wagner, chose legends or myths for most of his opera plots so that he could communicate ideas as well as just a story.

## DIFFERENT OPERA STYLES

**Opera Seria** – serious opera. These stories are often tragic, and typically involve heroes and kings or ancient myths and gods. *Julius Caesar* (1724) by George Frederic Handel is a classic example of opera seria.

**Opera Buffa** – comic opera, always sung in Italian. The jokesters in these operas are always the working class, such as maids, peasants, or servants, who keep busy getting the best of their employers. *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (1813) by Rossini is an amusing example of opera buffa.

**Singspiel, or “Sing Play,”** evolved in German speaking countries out of the comic opera tradition. It includes elements of comic opera, spoken dialogue interjected among the sung phrases, and often, an exotic or fanciful theme. Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791) is an example of this style.

**Bel Canto** – This Italian phrase means “beautiful singing”. These operas grew from a style of singing emphasizing long phrases, breath control and flexibility in singing both loudly and softly. *The Barber of Seville* (1816) by Gioachino Rossini is a popular example of bel canto.

**Grand Opera** – spectacular opera. It is performed with elaborate sets and costumes. Many people are needed to make it happen. Grand opera involves royalty, heroism, an elaborate ballet scene, and can often last for several hours. Charles Gounod's *Faust* (1869 version) is an example of grand opera.

**Music Drama** – is a style of opera that is created by a single artist who writes both the text and the music to advance the drama. This style fuses many art forms, and makes each one as important as the others. *Die Walküre (The Valkyries)* (1870) and other operas by Richard Wagner defined this style.



# OPERA IN ATLANTA

## HISTORY OF OPERA IN ATLANTA

Opera has been an integral part of Atlanta's cultural fabric since October 1866 when the Ghioni and Sussini Grand Italian Opera Company presented three operas in the city. The performances were well received and soon after, small touring companies began to bring more full-length operas to Atlanta.

Atlantans became avid fans of opera and in 1910 The Metropolitan Opera of New York toured Atlanta for the first time. Once a year, for a full week during spring, people flocked to the city to see the Met's wonderful performances and enjoy the many parties that were hosted throughout the city.

The opera was the place to be seen, with people crowding the lobbies and balconies of the various performance venues. The Met tour returned to Atlanta every spring until 1986, with the exception of 1931-1939 due to financial complications of the Great Depression.



Leontyne Price was one of the first African American featured singers with The Metropolitan Opera Company. This photo appeared in the program for the 1964 tour of *Don Giovanni*, in which she sang the role of Donna Anna. (photo: The Metropolitan Opera Company, *Carmen*, 1964 touring season program book / The Atlanta Opera archives)



The Metropolitan Opera Company's 1968 production of *Tosca* with Gabriella Tucci as Tosca, singing "Vissi d'arte." (photo: The Metropolitan Opera Company, *Tosca*, 1968 touring season program book / The Atlanta Opera archives)

With the success and popularity of the Met's annual tour came a desire for Atlanta to have its own opera company. Soon, several smaller, local opera companies began to operate in the area. In 1980, The Atlanta Civic Opera Association was created through the merging of two smaller companies, The Atlanta Lyric Opera and the Georgia Opera. In 1987 the company changed its name to The Atlanta Opera, Inc. Since its early beginnings, the company has grown and changed tremendously.

The Atlanta Opera was the first resident company in the new Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre in the fall of 2007. The Atlanta Opera season runs similarly to an academic calendar, opening in the fall and closing in the spring. It presents mainstage productions at the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, with a minimum of four performances each. The Discoveries series offers two additional productions at smaller venues, often of special productions or contemporary works best staged in smaller, more intimate settings.

# IMPORTANT JOBS

## WHO KEEPS THE OPERA RUNNING?

In addition to the singers and musicians you see on stage and in the orchestra pit, there are many other folks who help bring the show to life!

**MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR** is responsible for the musical excellence of an opera. They ensure the singers understand the music, sing in the appropriate style, and work with the orchestra to make sure everyone is playing correctly together.

**STAGE DIRECTOR** is responsible for the action on the stage. They work with the designers to create the concept for the production. He or she helps the singers understand why their characters would act in certain ways, and how the characters communicate with each other.

**CHOREOGRAPHER** creates movement or dancing for operas. They study dance, movement and do research on different historical periods.

**PRODUCTION MANAGER** helps make the director's and designers' vision a reality by working with the shops that build the scenery and costumes.

**TECHNICAL DIRECTOR** makes sure that the lighting, scenery, costumes and props are coordinated and that the crews who handle those elements know what needs to be done during the performance.

**STAGE MANAGER** manages the rehearsal schedule and takes detailed notes about the stage directions, lighting cues and scenery changes. During the performance, they are backstage calling all the technical cues and making sure the show runs smoothly.

**SET DESIGNER** creates the concept for the physical environment of the opera and works with the director to create the scenery that helps tell the story. They research history, color, space, architecture, and furniture.

**LIGHTING DESIGNER** helps create the mood of each scene with light, shadow, and color. They also study the music and work with the set designer and the director to decide how light will be used to help tell the story.

**COSTUME DESIGNER** creates the look of the characters with clothing. They choose the fabrics and supervise the construction of the costumes, or selection of pre-made costumes.



Photo by Jeff Roffman

The Stage Manager calls cues by watching monitors of a performance of *Turandot* in 2017.

**WIG & MAKE-UP DESIGNER** creates the hair and make-up styling for the show in tandem with the costumes and the production design. They are also responsible for any special effects make-up like scars, wounds or blood.

**WARDROBE MANAGER** makes sure all the costumes are clean and pressed and coordinates all the costume changes. Dressers help the singers put on their complicated costumes and change their costumes during the performance.

**PROPERTIES (PROPS) MASTER** is responsible for all the objects that the singers touch or move that are not part of their costumes. They do a lot of research to find the perfect period newspaper, set of glasses, bouquet of flowers, or book. They make artificial things look real on stage, like food or drink.

**CREW & STAGEHANDS** includes carpenters and electricians. They assist with the installation of the set on stage once it has been built. During the performance they are responsible for set and lighting changes