

## OPERA: AN INTRODUCTION

### WHAT IS OPERA?

Opera is an art form in which singers and musicians perform a dramatic work combining text (a libretto) and musical score, usually in a theatrical setting. Opera incorporates many of the elements of spoken theater, such as acting, scenery and costumes and sometimes includes dance. The performance is usually given in an opera house, accompanied by an orchestra or smaller musical ensemble. With the rise of technology, operas have been performed on, and written for, radio and television.

### OPERATIC BEGINNINGS

Opera is part of Western Classical music, and started in Italy at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, quickly spreading through the rest of Europe. Operas have been written in many different languages and have also been translated into different languages. Many changes have taken place regarding opera since its beginning, including the various types of opera, form and structure (including the music) and the place of performance.

### TERMINOLOGY

**Libretto:** “Little book” The words of an opera

**Number Opera:** Traditional opera

**Recitative:** A mode of singing in which the passages are sung in a style designed to imitate and emphasize the inflection of speech

**Secco** “dry”: A form of recitative accompanied only by continuo

**Accompagnato** “strumentato”: A form of recitative in which the orchestra provided accompaniment. The terms Secco and Accompagnato forms of recitative were only in use in the Baroque and Classical periods of music.

**Aria** “air or formal song:” A mode of singing in which the characters express their emotions in a more structured melodic style

**Arioso:** Melodic or semi-melodic passages occurring in the middle of, or instead of, a recitative

### TYPES OR FORMS OF OPERA

**Singspiel:** “song-play” A form of German language music drama, characterized by spoken dialogue, alternated with ensembles, songs, ballads and arias

**Opera Comique:** “Comic opera” A genre of French opera that contains spoken dialogue and arias. Comic operas are not always comic or light in nature.

**Operetta:** A genre of light opera in terms of both music and subject matter. Is closely related, in English language works, to musical theater.

**Semi-Opera:** A genre of opera which combined spoken plays with masque-like (court-like) episodes employing singing and dancing characters.

## **VOICE PARTS**

The voice parts used in opera are similar to those in other choral works. Men were classified as bass, baritone, tenor and countertenor; the only part added was one in between bass and baritone, the bass-baritone. Men who sang this part had the range of baritone extended at the lower end, meaning they could sing lower than a baritone (but not the very low notes sung by bass). Women were classified as contralto (or alto), mezzo-soprano and soprano. Of special consideration is the term castrati – men neutered at a young age specifically to give them a higher singing range.

## **VOICE TYPES**

Singers are not just classified according to their voice parts, they are also classified by their voice type. This term, although not fully describing a singing voice, associates the singer's voice with the roles most suitable to the singer's vocal characteristics. A particular singer's voice may change drastically over his or her lifetime, often not reaching vocal maturity until middle age.