



PIRATES OF PENZANCE

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THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

by

W. S. Gilbert
and
Arthur S. Sullivan

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THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

Premiere

The world premiere was on April 3, 1880, at the Opera Comique in London, England.

Cast of Characters

Major-General Stanley.....	Baritone
The Pirate King.....	Bass Baritone
Samuel, the Pirate King's lieutenant.....	Baritone
Frederic, a pirate apprentice.....	Tenor
Sergeant of Police.....	Bass
Mabel, Major-General Stanley's daughter.....	Soprano
Edith, another daughter.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Kate, another daughter.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Isabel, another daughter.....	Spoken
Ruth, pirate maid-of-all-work and former nurse to Frederic.....	Contralto
Pirates, police, and other daughters of General Stanley.....	Chorus

Brief Summary

Setting: On the Cornish coast of England during the 19th century

Act I. Frederic is about to celebrate his 21st birthday. When he attains legal age he will have completed his apprenticeship to a pirate band that was arranged in his youth by his nurse, Ruth. Frederic loathes pirate work but has remained because of his Strong Sense of Duty. On his birthday he tells the pirates he is leaving but counsels them to become lawful. They refuse. Ruth does not want him to leave without her and wishes that Frederic would marry her. After leaving the ship Frederic encounters a group of young ladies. He makes a plaintive request that one of the young ladies rescue him by marrying him. One young lady, Mabel, agrees. The pirates appear and seize the young ladies. The girls' father, Major-General Stanley, arrives and succeeds in gaining the sympathy of the pirates by telling them he is an orphan. The pirates take pity and release the girls.

Act II. Major-General Stanley cannot sleep. He is not an orphan and is bothered by his lie. His daughters console him. The local police arrive having been summoned by Frederic who intends to lead them against the pirates. Before this can be accomplished Ruth and the Pirate King appear and tell Frederic that he has not truly completed the terms of his apprenticeship. He was required to serve until his twenty-first birthday and since he was born on February 29 he has celebrated just five birthdays. Frederic feels obligated to return to the pirates because of his Strong Sense of Duty. He also feels obligated to tell the pirates about the General's lie. The pirates are outraged and attempt to kidnap the Major-General. There is a general melee between the police and the pirates which comes to an abrupt end when the police invoke the name of Queen Victoria. Ruth then reveals that the pirates are in actuality "noblemen who have gone wrong." The pirates are pardoned. Major-General Stanley gives his blessing to the marriages of Frederic and Mabel and his other daughters to the former Pirates of Penzance.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

ACT I

It is Frederic's twenty-first birthday and he is being congratulated for completing his apprenticeship with the local band of pirates. They have put ashore on the rocky coast of Cornwall and the all male chorus of pirates presents the rousing number, "Pour, O pour the pirate sherry." The pirates now expect him to join them as a full-fledged member of the group. Frederic, however, states that he does not wish to be a pirate, that he abhors pirate work and stayed on all these years only because he was a Slave of Duty and he had to honor his contract. He plans to leave the band without delay and devote himself to the elimination of the pirates from the region. His former nurse, Ruth, speaks up and explains in her entrance aria, "When Frederic was a Little Lad" that she misunderstood Frederic's father to train him as a "pilot" and apprenticed him to a "pirate" instead. The heavy quality of the punctuated orchestral accompaniment lends itself to the clumsy, stout character of Ruth. She continues to explain how she loyally remained with Frederic becoming a maid-of-all-work for the pirates. Now that Frederic wants to leave she hopes he will take her along and marry her.

The Pirate King makes his entrance with his solo aria, "I am the Pirate King." The bright and cheerful dance rhythm afforded by the 6/8 time signature and the "galloping horse" texture of the accompaniment is reminiscent of the "cabaletta" section of an Italian aria. Frederic implores the pirates to join him in renouncing piracy, but the Pirate King replies that would be impossible. He then reminds Frederic that since he will not be twenty-one until 12:00 noon, he must honor the interests of the pirates until then and answer why the pirate band cannot seem to make piracy pay. Frederic dutifully replies that it is because the pirates are too tenderhearted and word has gotten out that they never accost an orphan. It seems that every pirate in the group is an orphan and they always take pity on anyone of similar background. Unfortunately, the last three ships they raided were manned entirely by orphans, so they had to let them go.

The pirates leave Frederic alone with Ruth who is still trying to convince Frederic to marry her. Frederic is concerned that since he has not seen a female from the time he was eight, he has no way of knowing if Ruth is beautiful. She assures him she is and Frederic agrees to marry her. Just then he hears the sound of female voices and from his vantage point observes a group of young women arriving on the beach. He realizes at once what true female beauty is and renounces Ruth on the spot in a melodramatic duet. After Frederic conceals himself, a chorus of girls enters singing, "Climbing over rocky mountain," an animated tune highlighted with occasional harmony in thirds and sixths. The staccato chords of the accompaniment suggest the light, spirited outlook of the young girls in a quasi-mocking way. Frederic watches as the young women cavort on the beach and begin to take off their shoes and stockings. Frederic's Sense of Honor does not allow him to observe them unannounced in this state of undress. He comes out of hiding and announces his presence using recitative accompanied by tremolos and punctuated chords in the strings. He addresses the girls in a musical number that sets humorous text against a serious and tender melodic line and asks the young women if one of them would not take pity on him and marry him. One of the girls, Mabel, pipes up with a resounding "yes" as she launches into a cadenza remarkably similar to Violetta's cadenza that

precedes “Sempre Libera” at the end of *La Traviata*’s Act I. This is one of many examples of operatic parody in the operetta. Mabel continues, singing her aria, “Poor wand’ring one,” confirming her choice to wed Frederic, accompanied by a chorus of her sisters. Mabel and Frederic sing of their commitment in a duet, “Did ever maiden wake from dream of homely duty.” Their love duet is overlaid with the “Chattering Chorus,” as Mabel’s sisters, singing an independent melodic line, pretend not to notice and talk of the weather. This ensemble is one of the most ingenious musical devices in the score and demonstrates Sullivan’s contrapuntal skill. Additionally, the young couple sings in 3/4 time while the women’s chorus simultaneously sings in 2/4 time. Frederic cautions the sisters that there are pirates about and suggests they leave the area. However, before they can do so, the girls are surrounded by the band of pirates and seized!

Mabel steps forward and admonishes the pirates for their presumption and informs them that they are all daughters of Major-General Stanley. The pirates are momentarily subdued and before they can recover the Major-General strides into their midst! The long-awaited entrance of the Major-General provides the opportunity for the most famous of the Gilbert and Sullivan patter songs, “I am the very model of a modern Major-General.” The patter song has a rich history in comic opera and is characterized by tongue-twisting, rhyming lyrics at a tempo which increases to rapid speed. The Act I finale follows directly with the Major-General beseeching the pirates to release his daughters because he is an orphan. The pirates immediately take pity on him. The splendid number for double chorus and principals ensues, crafted in the tradition of comic opera finales in the nineteenth century. An *a capella* choral section, “Hail Poetry, thou heav’n born maid!” briefly interrupts the flow of the double chorus as the Pirate King is moved by the poetry of the General’s entreaty. The Pirate King then releases the girls and makes them all honorary members of the pirate band. There is general rejoicing and dancing to celebrate the impending marriage of Frederic and Mabel. Everyone is happy except Ruth who continues to implore Frederic not to leave her.

ACT II

Major-General Stanley is feeling great remorse because the story he told the pirates about being an orphan was a lie. He has come to the tombs of his ancestors to ask forgiveness for bringing dishonor on the family name. His daughters try to console him. Frederic reminds him that since he brought the property only a year ago, the ancestors in these tombs are not his. The Major-General replies that he is their descendent by purchase. He would like to tell the pirates the truth but is afraid of the consequences. He gains some solace from the fact that Frederic will be leading the local police against the pirates that very night to wipe them out for good. Then the marriage of Frederic and Mabel can take place because Frederic’s conscience will be clear.

The police arrive to deal with the pirates. The Police Sergeant opens with “When the foeman bares his steel,” and the chorus of police reply, “Tarantara, tarantara.” The number is turned into an impressive double chorus when Mabel and her sisters are added, urging the police to their task singing, “Go, ye heroes, go to glory, though ye die in combat gory.” The police seem less enthusiastic about their quest after hearing the young ladies put it in those terms, but they finally move out in search of the pirates. Frederic is about to join them when he is startled by the arrival of Ruth and the Pirate King. They have come to share with Frederic that they have uncovered an amazing situation – a paradox. In an amusing trio, “A paradox, a paradox, a most ingenious paradox,” they

relate that Frederic was born on February 29, 1856, which was twenty-one years ago. However, his actual birthday comes around only once every four years because he was born in a leap year. Therefore, he won't actually have twenty-one birthdays until 1940! So, now he has no choice but return to the pirates and fulfill his apprenticeship.

Frederic is taken aback and protests strongly until he is reminded of his Sense of Duty. He capitulates immediately. He also feels Duty-bound to reveal that Major-General Stanley is not an orphan. The Pirate King shouts that they will attack the estate that very night and exact a terrible retribution for this falsehood. He and Ruth leave to assemble the pirate band. In the most tender duet in the operetta Frederic bids farewell to Mabel, telling her that Duty calls him and he must obey. He promises to return for her in 1940.

The police return to the estate empty-handed and simultaneously the pirate band creeps silently (while making a great deal of noise) toward the slumbering household singing, "With cat-like tread, upon our prey we steal." This pirate chorus breaks out into a stirring refrain, "Come, friends, who plough the seas." The police hide as the pirates come into view. Meanwhile, Major-General Stanley is pacing about in his sleeping gown too tormented by his falsehood to rest easy. He is joined by his concerned daughters who have risen from their beds. Thus, they are all together when the pirates attack. The pirates are seizing their prey when the police jump out of their hiding places and begin to struggle with the pirates. The pirates are gaining the upper hand when the Sergeant of Police stops them in their tracks by invoking the name of Queen Victoria. The pirates immediately kneel down in submission. They are about to be lead away by the police when Ruth steps forward and reveals that these men are not ordinary pirates but "noblemen who have gone wrong." Major-General Stanley is suitably impressed. With a grand gesture he pardons them all and gives them his daughters in marriage. There is general rejoicing as the Major-General strides majestically among the newly-betrothed couples, giving his blessing, and feeling pride that in the task of marrying off his daughters he has been the very model of a modern major-general. The finale music is a reprise of the waltz, "Poor wand'ring one," sung by the entire company.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

Historical Background

In 1878, the collaboration of composer Arthur Sullivan, librettist W.S. Gilbert and impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte had created the operetta *H.M.S. Pinafore*. In accordance with the stipulations of Gilbert & Sullivan, D'Oyly Carte had collected a company of performers totally suited to the needs of their music and text. *H.M.S. Pinafore* was a phenomenal success. Newspaper headlines in London summarized the public's reaction, "Pinaforemania!" In 1880 Gilbert and Sullivan embarked on their next collaboration, THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE.

Gilbert's libretto was based on one of his earlier works, *Our Island Home*, written in 1870. However, there are references to a possible earlier origin relating to an incident in Gilbert's childhood when he was stolen from his nurse by a band of thieves in Naples, Italy. The usual Gilbert satire provides the basis for the story. In *H.M.S. Pinafore* the Royal Navy was skewered. In PIRATES the satire was directed towards the Victorian concept of Duty. This focus is clearly demonstrated in the operetta's full but little-used title, "THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE, OR THE SLAVE OF DUTY." Additionally, Gilbert's satiric pen spoofed the military, the police and mock patriotism.

Sullivan's music surpassed *H.M.S. Pinafore* in complexity and power although the two works are remarkably similar in overall structure. Original audiences viewing PIRATES were quick to label it "*Pinafore* on land." PIRATES is clearly more sophisticated and more operatic, containing some accompanied recitative and cadenza-like passages, as well as operatic parody.

Previously, *H.M.S. Pinafore* had been the subject of many unauthorized productions and pirated versions on both sides of the Atlantic. To avoid a similar situation with PIRATES, Gilbert and Sullivan concocted an elaborate method of securing the copyright. They scheduled THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE to be produced for the first time in New York City. No printed versions of the work would be published and no one outside the company would be permitted in the rehearsals. Even with the advanced planning, the production did run into a small glitch. Sullivan was still composing the music for the second act when he arrived by ship in New York. After unpacking he realized that he had left the libretto and musical settings for the first act in London. It was necessary for him to rehearse all day and compose all night during much of December to reconstruct Act I and complete Act II. By the premiere date his diary records that he was "utterly worn out" and "more dead than alive."

As part of the scheme to better secure their copyright, the New York premiere was scheduled for December 31, 1879. This premiere was preceded by one token performance of PIRATES at the Royal Bijou Theater in Paignton, Devonshire, on December 30, 1879. The performance at the Bijou was a hastily contrived affair using a touring cast of *H.M.S. Pinafore* who went onstage wearing their *Pinafore* costumes supplemented by colorful headscarves to symbolize pirates. Carrying their scripts in their hands they went through the motions of presenting PIRATES in a public forum for the purpose of securing the British copyright one day before the New York opening.

Feeling more secure about their copyright in both England and America, Gilbert and Sullivan proceeded with plans to hold the "world premiere" of THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE in London on April 3, 1880. The huge success of the operetta brought in

thousands of dollars per week on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition, Richard D'Oyly Carte was masterful in his marketing of authorized productions in other locations no matter how small or far-flung. Both Carte and the authors were concerned not only with profits but the integrity of the productions and whether high and accurate standards were being upheld. These elaborate efforts did not stem the tide of unauthorized productions completely. Their control over their creative property was truly effective only in England. In this vein, a bit of "piracy" may explain the mystery of how the sweeping PIRATES melody, "Come, friends who plough the seas," became the American song, "Hail, hail, the gang's all here."

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

The Dynamic Duo

W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan created an enduring legacy in the realm of comic opera during a collaboration that lasted almost twenty-five years. Between 1871 and 1896 they produced fourteen works in a style so distinctive that it created its own genre. They worked directly with an impresario, Richard D'Oyly Carte, who created a company of performers who met the exacting standards of the pair and eventually built a theater where the Gilbert and Sullivan operas were performed. The Savoy Theatre was built in 1881. The G&S operas performed there were also called the Savoy Operas. The partnership was not always a happy one. Their personalities were very different and each man felt a creative constraint imposed by the requirements of the other. They remained rather formal with one another throughout the years and always referred to each other as Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Sullivan.

Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan was born in London on May 13, 1842, to an Italian mother and Irish father who was a professor at the Royal Military School of Music. He showed early musical talent and became a chorister at the Chapel Royal when he was twelve. Scholarships allowed him to attend the Leipzig Conservatory in Germany where he wrote incidental music to *The Tempest*, which brought him immediate recognition when it was performed at the Crystal Palace in London in 1862. Continued success in the composition of choral and orchestral works placed him among the most prominent British composers at a relatively young age. His earliest surviving work, *Cox and Box*, originally conceived as a small-scale entertainment, was professionally produced in 1869. During the run of this opera Sullivan was introduced to the writer and dramatist William S. Gilbert.

Sir William Schwenk Gilbert was born in London in 1836. After the normal course of schooling he studied military science and trained as an artillery officer. He hoped to serve in the Crimean War but it ended before his training was completed. After graduation he served in the militia and eventually planned a career in the law. However it was writing and satire that was his first love. Early on he had displayed a flair for satiric irony and skewering witticisms and in 1861 he submitted some of his written work and humorous sketches to the British magazine *Fun*. He signed his cartoons with the name "Bab." Gilbert published a collection of his *Bab Ballads* in 1869. Some of the "Bab" characters eventually found new life in the later G&S operas. When Gilbert met Sullivan in 1869 he was on his way to becoming a hugely successful writer, dramatic critic and playwright. In 1871 Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated on a work called *Thespis* which was moderately successful. Afterwards, both men continued on with very successful independent careers until they were drawn together again in 1875 by Richard D'Oyly Carte who asked them to write a work for the Royalty Theatre. The one-act comic opera they produced was called *Trial by Jury*, a satire of the legal profession. It was based on one of Gilbert's *Bab Ballads* and was an immediate success. The popularity of this work helped establish a more permanent arrangement between D'Oyly Carte, Sullivan and Gilbert. D'Oyly Carte formed an ensemble company that met the exacting standards of Gilbert and Sullivan to perform their joint work at the Opera Comique Theater. Gilbert required the performers to memorize their lines with no deviations, insisted that the characters be presented in a normal, straightforward manner no matter how absurd or ludicrous the situation. He directed the staging with minute attention to detail and

oversaw the design of the sets and costumes. Musically, the actors had to be properly trained singers capable of operatic-level vocalizing. Sullivan himself supervised the musical rehearsals. Gilbert and Sullivan considered their works to be operas even though today they are classified as operettas.

Their first offering for D'Oyly Carte at the Opera Comique was *The Sorcerer* in 1877 followed by *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1878. The incredible success of *H.M.S. Pinafore* cemented the partnership and the demand for more Gilbert and Sullivan operas quickly increased. THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE was their next venture in 1880 followed by *Patience* in 1881. Their continuing successes paved the way for the building of the Savoy Theatre in 1881 by Richard D'Oyly Carte for the specific purpose of producing the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. The prolific pair continued on, creating *Iolanthe* in 1882, *Princess Ida* in 1884, *The Mikado* in 1885, *Ruddigore* in 1887, *The Yeoman of the Guard* in 1888, *The Gondoliers* in 1889, *Utopia, Limited* in 1893, and *The Grand Duke* in 1896.

In his composing Sullivan made use of both European and English music traditions, integrating church music, opera and ballad with ingenuity and imagination. Sullivan's technical mastery of composition clearly places his music in a special category of operetta. He was a marvelous orchestrator and had an adroit ability to elucidate the text, using rhythm in imaginative ways. The texts provided by Gilbert were from the pen of a talented dramatist, poet and librettist whose words were full of incisive wit and caustic satire wrapped up in the trappings of comic absurdity. He used the world of "topsy-turvy" to skewer various British institutions and mock elements of Victorian society. Gilbert's additional talent for stage direction, insisting on disciplined rehearsals and a coherent blending of all elements of the total production, added immeasurably to the popular success of all their works.

William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan had periodic disputes over the course of their partnership, which they were able to work out, usually through the efforts of Richard D'Oyly Carte. Over the years, however, their disagreements became increasingly difficult to resolve and eventually they reached an impasse. They ended their collaboration in 1896. Arthur Sullivan continued to compose even while his health was deteriorating. He died in London on November 22, 1900. Gilbert continued to write and authored four more plays before his death on May 29, 1911.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

The Operetta

A Short History

While the term “operetta” is sometimes described simply as “light” opera, in reality it is a genre of musical theater with a developmental history that traces its roots to eighteenth-century comic opera. During the seventeenth-century, the opera world was dominated by Italian *opera seria*. Within the opera seria, comedic episodes were frequently interspersed within the serious subject matter. Early in the eighteenth-century this practice was discontinued when comic scenes in serious opera were determined to be inappropriate and not relevant to the plot. However, comic scenes and plots still survived in the opera house. They were presented in between the acts of the serious opera and were called *intermezzi*. Eventually the plots of the two individual *intermezzi* performed during the intermissions of a three-act serious opera were linked together to form one continuous plot. One example of the merging of two *intermezzi* in this manner is Pergolesi’s *La Serva Padrona*, written in 1733 and still performed today. This new concept resulted in the development of a distinctly separate operatic form called the *opera buffa*.

Opera buffa was the comic opera of Italy. This form of opera was a reflection of national popular culture and as such it manifested itself in distinct ways when it crossed national borders. The French developed *opéra comique*, the English created the ballad opera. In Germany comic opera developed as the *Singspiel* and in Spain the form was called the *zarzuela* and the *tonadilla*. For all their national differences they shared many common features: plots that featured the common people, a less complicated musical style, spoken dialogue rather than sung recitatives (with the exception of Italian *opera buffa*). By the end of the eighteenth-century comic opera had become more sophisticated and refined in its subject matter and more complex musically. Eventually musical innovations found in comic opera, such as use of the bass voice, multi-character ensembles and ensemble finales were incorporated into serious opera.

In the nineteenth-century French composers experimented with a more light-hearted version of the *opéra comique*, which stressed parody and wit to amuse its audience. This variation of the comic opera became known as the operetta. Composer Jacques Offenbach burst on the Paris scene in 1858 with his acclaimed operetta *Orphée aux Enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld). This, and his hugely popular subsequent works, firmly established the operetta as a separate genre of musical theater. Offenbach’s works had a wide-ranging impact that influenced composers of many other countries. Operetta flourished in Vienna from about 1870 under such composers as Von Suppé and Strauss, and the era of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in England commenced in 1871.

Operetta crossed the Atlantic and found a welcoming home. American composers of European ancestry such as Rudolf Friml, Victor Herbert and Sigmund Romberg continued the operetta tradition in American, which prospered for many years. Operetta as an art form eventually gave rise to the Broadway musical, which continues today as a unique American contribution to the world of musical theater.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

Discussion Questions

1. The Gilbert and Sullivan operettas are known for their satire. What examples of satire did you observe in **THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE**?
2. **THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE** is also known for its operatic parody. Can you identify instances in the music when you suspected opera itself was being spoofed?
3. **THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE** is considered an operetta. Can you identify a characteristic of **PIRATES** that would classify it as an operetta?
4. What other elements of content and form help distinguish opera from operetta?
5. One of the most famous numbers in **THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE** is called a patter song. Which character sings this song and how would you define it?
6. Composer Arthur Sullivan makes great use of the double chorus in **PIRATES**. Can you describe how Sullivan created his double choruses?
7. Many describe the main element in the comic impact of **PIRATES** is the concept of incongruity. How would you define “incongruity” and describe its application to **THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE**.
8. Did you recognize the melody in the choral refrain, “Come, friends, who plough the seas?” Name the American song that was “pirated” from this **PIRATES** melody.
9. What is the paradox that is the subject of the “Paradox Trio?”
10. As a general rule operas and operettas are identified primarily with their composers. This is not the case with the creators of **THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE**. Both composer and librettist get equal billing and credit. Why do you think this is the case with the works of Gilbert and Sullivan?



A Short History of Opera

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias* which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English *ballad opera*, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *opерetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment, which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form, which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) that help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice, which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.



As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.