



SUOR

# ANGELICA

**STUDY GUIDE**  
STUDENT DRESS REHEARSAL

ORPHEUM THEATER

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# THE WORK

## *Suor Angelica*

Composed by Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giovacchino Forzano

First performance: The Metropolitan Opera, December 14, 1918

## CREATIVE TEAM



Judith Yan  
CONDUCTOR



Keturah Stickann  
DIRECTOR



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Elaine Alvarez  
SUOR ANGELICA



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LA PRINCIPESSA



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THE ABBESS



Kelly Guerra  
THE MONITOR



Hilary Ginther  
THE MISTRESS OF  
THE NOVICES



Jennifer Cherest  
SUOR GENOVIEFFA

## WHO'S WHO

CHARACTER	TRANSLATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Suor Angelica (swor Ahn-GEL-ica)	Sister Angelica	Soprano	Sister Angelica is an orphan cared for her by her aunt, a member of a noble wealthy family. Seven years ago, she was sent to this Abbey after she became pregnant out of wedlock. She gave birth to a son who was taken from her immediately. She has had no contact with her family since then.
La Principessa (prin-see-PEH-sa)	The Princess	Mezzo-Soprano/ Contralto	Angelica's aunt is the familial matriarch. She has not seen her niece Angelica for seven years. She has come to the Abbey to obtain Angelica's signature, renouncing a claim to inheritance, so Angelica's sister may get married.
La Badessa (buh-DEE-sah)	The Abbess	Contralto	Head of the Abbey.
La Zelatrice (ZEH-la-tree-s)	The Monitor	Mezzo-Soprano	Advisor to the Abbess.
La Maestra delle Novizie (MEH-stra del Noh- VEEZ-ee)	The Mistress of Novices	Mezzo-Soprano	Head of the Novice Nuns.
Suor Genovieffe (swor GEN-uh-veef)	Sister Genevieve	Soprano	An Abbey Nun.

# THE STORY OF *SUOR ANGELICA*

## THE CLOISTERS AND GARDEN OF A CONVENT.

Two postulants are late for prayer. Also late is Sister Angelica, who kneels in penance for her tardiness. As the nuns leave the chapel, the abbey Monitor and Mistress of Novices chide their charges. The sisters are excited by the annual occurrence of a natural phenomenon – on only three evenings a year the rays of the setting sun give the water in the font a glow as if the water is golden. The sisters decide they will sprinkle some of the golden water on the tomb of one of their recently departed. Sister Genevieve discusses her innocent wish to see a lamb. She inquires if Angelica has a wish, but Angelica denies that she does. The other sisters call this a lie, whispering that Angelica, once rich and noble, was forced into the convent seven years ago and is saddened by the fact that she has never had any contact from her family.

Sister Angelica has learned about the use of herbs in making potions to cure various illnesses and brews one to ease the pain of a fellow sister's wasp sting. As the nuns examine the wares of a trip to the market, they learn that a very grand carriage has arrived at the entrance. Angelica is overcome with the hope that it is a visitor here to see her. The Abbess comes to tell Angelica that her aunt, the Princess, has arrived.

Although eager to embrace her aunt, Angelica finds the Princess is cold and unfriendly, offering her only a hand to kiss. The Princess informs Angelica that she has divided Angelica's deceased parents' estate. She has come because Angelica's younger sister is to be married and Angelica must sign a document renouncing any claim on the family fortune.

Angelica declares that she repents her sin, but cannot forget her son, who she only saw once. She begs her aunt to tell her of the boy's welfare. Reluctantly the Princess tells her that the child was taken ill two years previously and has died. Overcome with grief, Angelica signs the document. The Princess departs.

Left alone, Angelica reels in the agony of her child dying without his mother. A new wish has overtaken her – the wish to die. The sisters approach her, but Angelica believes that a heavenly grace has descended on her.

As the other nuns go to their cells for the night, Angelica mixes various poisonous herbs with the water from the font and, in a trance like state, she drinks the potion.

As the pain brings reality back, Angelica realizes that she has sinned in committing suicide. In anguish she pleads for forgiveness. The chapel doors open, and an apparition of the Virgin Mary appears with a small child, whom she guides toward Angelica. Angelica embraces her child and falls to the ground dead.

# CONDUCTOR'S NOTE

Of all of Puccini's operas, *Suor Angelica* is truly one of my favorites. With elements of a perfect emotional thriller (hope, betrayal, and sacrifice), it is a story of two closed and powerful societies, one religious, the other aristocratic, connected by a provocative secret. As beautiful melodies are the trademarks of Puccini's works, this opera contains some of the composer's most breathtaking efforts.

But Puccini's genius lies not just in his ability to spin stunning tunes. Whether consciously done or otherwise, he has given each character a specific orchestral color, following them throughout like a faithful companion: bright chords and shorter melodies from the woodwinds accompany the sisters' conversations during leisure. Muted trumpets appear with prayers and during "Amen", suggesting celestial messages from beyond. Subtle uses of dynamics and the placement of the flute in its lowest register suggest the mournfulness of time's passage.

Perhaps the most dramatic and stirring moment occurs when Sister Angelica sings her first uninterrupted, long melodic line "desires are the flowers of the living, never blooming in the realms of death," quietly supported by the strings and the woodwinds, before the orchestra surges upwards to match the depths of her sadness, foreshadowing the tragedy to come. In an environment of constant restraint, the sisters are shocked into silence, while the orchestra expresses the barely controlled tension in the room.

— *Judith Yan*  
CONDUCTOR

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The interesting thing about a piece like *Suor Angelica*, which takes place in an Italian convent, is that you can set it in almost any time period and it would look exactly the same. It's only the arrival of the Princess that allows us any hint at period, which for our production is post World War II. This gives us a reason for the seven year absence of word from Angelica's family as well as a period that feels modern enough for us to see ourselves in the characters. Despite the period, the life of the nun is enduring and never-changing which is a fact that has continually piqued my interest. Puccini and Forzano give us a wonderful, gentle view of the personalities and daily life of the sisterhood in the opening of the opera that make sense in any number of centuries.

For many years, convents were a place of religious thought and prayer, but they were also protective, which was definitely true during war time. They were an option for a better life to the women who sought refuge there. In earlier centuries, sisters might find women who were living and working on the street and recruit them into the convent as a way to live a healthier, more protected life. For many young women, the convent offered shelter from all manner of ills. In our story, curiously, Sister Angelica still feels and acts somewhat like an outsider, even after seven years behind the veil.

Forzano doesn't give us much to go on in terms of Sister Angelica's back story. We know she was an orphan though left well off, that she has siblings, and most importantly, we know she had a son who was ripped away from her at birth (though we know nothing of the circumstances), and this is the reason she was forced into the convent life. In this story, it is not Angelica who is seeking refuge, it is her family who hoped she could be hidden away in order to cover their shame. This is a piece that, at its core, is about the ability for women to make their own choices. Through history, bodily autonomy and the ability to become a mother – or not become a mother – has been regulated and policed by everyone except the person with the womb in question. Sister Angelica was not offered a choice, lost the son she very much wanted, and was ultimately backed into a corner. Interestingly, the piece does not indict the church as much as it indicts Sister Angelica's family and their inability to forgive, embrace, and care for her no matter her choices.

Like so many operatic works, the piece resonates today, both in the established sisterhood of the nuns, their suspiciousness about Sister Angelica, and her lack of autonomy as a woman.

– *Keturah Stickann*  
DIRECTOR

# GIACOMO PUCCINI



Born on the 22nd of December 1858 in Tuscany, Italy Giacomo Antonia Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini was one of nine children and part of a musical dynasty established by his great-great grandfather. The young Puccini began his musical education at an early age. Tutored first by his uncles, he then came to study under the composers Antonio Bazzini and Amilcare Ponchielli at the Milan Conservatory. Following the death of his mother in 1884, Puccini moved to Monza, a town near Milan, bringing with him his sweetheart, Elvira Gemignani, who happened to be married to another man. In 1886 Puccini and Elvira had a son, Antonio, and the family increased again in size as Elvira's daughter, Fosca, came to live with the pair. In 1891 the family moved to Torre del Lago, a fishing village in Tuscany, where Giacomo and Elvira were legally married in 1904, following the death of her previous husband. Although the union would continue to be riddled with affairs, Puccini found a personal refuge in the Italian countryside, where he could freely drive automobiles and

pursue his love of hunting. In 1924 another passion of Puccini's would become the cause of his death—a longtime consumption of Toscano cigars and cigarettes encouraged the growth of a serious throat cancer. Following a difficult surgery, Giacomo Puccini passed away on November 29th in Brussels, clutching the incomplete score of his famed *Turandot*.

A predominant composer of late-Romantic Opera, Puccini is best known for his works *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca* and *Turandot*, as well as his famous *La bohème*. Yet Puccini also created eight other operas, including *Suor Angelica*, as well as sacred and secular music for orchestra and chamber ensembles, and songs for voice and piano. Connections between all of Puccini's works are simple to find, as the composer often made use of a single melody in multiple works; transcribing and transposing the figure to suit his needs. While it is tempting to think of this compositional methodology as a sort of self-plagiarism, it was in fact a practice utilized by many composers at the time. Puccini is notable for composing in the “verismo” style, a sort of musical realism that utilizes average men and women as its subject matter, and seeks to integrate the underlying drama of the libretto with the music written in the orchestral score. Puccini also strove to keep his music up-to-date with current trends by incorporating symphonic and harmonic aspects of French and German music into his own work. For example, the vocal lines of Puccini's operas are much more “through-composed” or integrated with the orchestral music and plot than their Italian predecessors, most of which relied heavily on the aria-recitative formula. Puccini also drew on folk melodies for inspiration, notably in the opera *Turandot*. Many would say Puccini's impact on Italian opera is only equaled by that of his influencer Verdi.



# WHY ARE ENDINGS IMPORTANT?

Think of your favorite story. Is it your favorite (in part) because of the ending? Probably. What do you like most about the ending? The ending of a story, whether it is 10 pages or a 10-book series, is the most important aspect because it gives the story meaning. It brings finality. It offers resolution.



Imagine a piece of music that never resolves its dissonant chords, ending with that off-putting sound. You probably wouldn't listen to it again and (more importantly) you wouldn't feel satisfied. A good ending provides resolution of the notes. That is what good ending provides for the audience: resolution and satisfaction.

## SPOILER ALERT.

*Suor Angelica* ends with the main character:

1. Mourning for her dead son.
2. Making poison.
3. Drinking it.
4. Grieving for committing a mortal sin.
5. Getting reunited with her son and dying.

Numbers 1 through 4 make it seem like this story ends tragically, but then number 5 presents the possibility that Angelica received what she so desperately wanted: to be with her son. Therefore, the story could be seen as having a positive ending. It could also be argued that the cost for Angelica's happiness is too high for this to be a happy ending.

So, is this ending happy or tragic?

Before we can hope to answer (or even discuss) that question we need to break down the nature of story endings and how we relate to them.

## WHAT IS AN ENDING?

The definition of an ending seems easy to answer. A story ends when all the lines are spoken, the action is played out, the curtain comes down, the credits roll, the pages end. While these indicators are true for the stoppage of all stories there are a few different categories that (most) stories fall into. Happy, Sad, Hopeful, and Open.

## WHY ARE ENDINGS IMPORTANT? (CONTINUED)



**Happy** endings tend to result in marriage, loved ones reuniting, and justice for the “bad guys.” The plot twists get untwisted, all is revealed and forgiven. i.e.: *A Lego Movie*. *How to Train Your Dragon*.

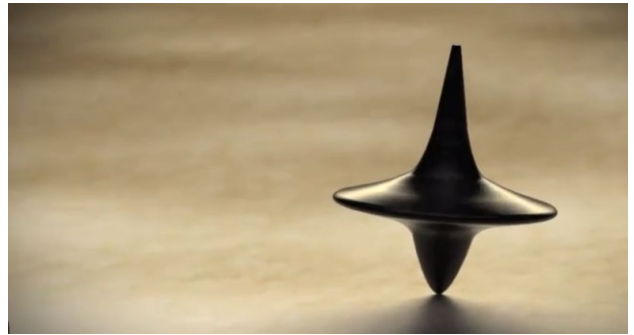


**Sad** endings end in heartbreak, distance, and grudges. The moment for redemption has passed and usually quiet a few characters are dead. i.e.: *Hamlet*. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

## THEN THERE ARE MORE COMPLICATED ENDINGS:



**Hopeful** endings are bittersweet and a bit unresolved. The story may end with a wistful smile and the gleam of possibility, but we don't get to see it play out. The author doesn't make that decision for us. i.e. : *The Matrix*. *Hunger Games*.



**Open** endings are the conclusions that you debate with your friends. The endings that seem so clear to you, but they seem to interpret it quite differently. These endings are unlike hopeful endings in that they are not resolved. These endings make a clear choice, but it is up to the audience to decide what choice that means. i.e. : *Inception*. *Black Swan*.

**SUOR ANGELICA'S ENDING**

This returns us back to the initial question: Is this ending happy or tragic? Look back at the numbers 1 through 4 on the list above. These actions are clearly tragic and traumatic. Angelica has lost her freedom, her future, and her son. It all happens so quickly and throws her instantly into a deep depression that results in her death by suicide. **Sad ending.**

Yet, the final moments of the Opera (mostly in the stage action) complicate the story. Angelica sees her son in the afterlife and it seems that they are being reunited for eternity.

**Hopeful ending.**

## WHY ARE ENDINGS IMPORTANT? (CONTINUED)



Even this beautiful painting (Leopoldo Metlicovitz) of Angelica in her final moments, we see a multifaced story. Is Angelica reaching to the heavens in pain or in relief? Is she praying in gratitude or loss. It all comes down to perspective.

**Open ending.**

Perhaps the real tragedy is not within the dramatic ending of the story, perhaps the real sadness of this ending is the oppressive world in which these women are living. The truth is that, though this opera was written over 100 years ago, it mirrors the countless limitations and injustices still placed on women (and global minority groups) in our modern day. The open ending of *Suor Angelica* brings to the light our community's own shortcomings, providing an opportunity for better understanding and discussion.

**IN GOOD COMPANY.**

*Suor Angelica* is one of many classic stories with a complicated ending. Our literary history is filled with stories that illuminate our past and challenge our humanity. In *Romeo and Juliet* many characters die tragically, but the story concludes with a truce between the violent Capulets and Montague families. In *To Kill A Mockingbird* justice is served within the walls of a courtroom and yet is immediately followed with a racially charged hate crime. Even in the animated saga of *Toy Story* we experience heartbreak as the characters are donated and then also see hope in the young new owner.

Humans are made up of complicated emotions, and it is within our treasured stories that we have those layered emotions reflected to us, giving opportunity for debate and discussion. *Suor Angelica* does just that. The opera cannot be limited by category or definition. The ending asks questions rather than giving answers, provokes discussion rather than offering resolutions. How do these final moments reflect your own intricate emotions? What answers do you find in these final moments?

**FOR MORE DISCUSSION**

See the Guiding Questions on page 15.

**INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?**

[The Importance of the "Right" Story Ending](#)

[Crafting Bittersweet Endings](#)

This production contains depiction of suicide.

If you or someone you know needs help with a suicide or mental health-related crisis, connect with a trained counselor by calling, chatting, or texting 988. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline provides 24/7, confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or mental health-related distress.

# CONVENT CULTURE



You probably recognize the image above. A woman in a black robe with a white and black habit (hood). You might know them from your personal faith background or from cultural references. Nuns have been a part of our storytelling, our arts and culture for centuries. From old paintings and sketches to modern references on the stage (*Sound of Music*, *Nunsense*, and *Sister Act*), in movies (*Doubt*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Agnes of God*, and countless horror films), in music (*The Nun Song* and *Nun's Prayer*), and on TV (*Call the Midwife*, *Sister Kate*, and *Warrior Nun*). Our fascination with their dedication to a life of service, our interest in a way of life so different than our own, and our desire to humanize the holy has kept nuns a part of our storytelling culture for hundreds of years. A running thread in these references is (sadly) how quickly we create labels around nuns' faith, vows of chastity, and institutional obedience. But what do we really know about nuns and the women under the habit?

## WHAT IS A NUN?

By definition a nun is a member of a religious community of women, especially a cloistered one, living under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The first nuns (who came about in the 1st century) were less regulated than who they evolved into. Nuns or “brides of Christ” were basically a group of women who wanted to live their life by Christian ideals. They were unmarried or widows who fully devoted their lives to their practice. They lived in seclusion and spent their days praying and tending to their space and one another. As strange as it may sound, the life of a nun was the chosen life for many feminists (though it would be a long while before that term would be coined).

In centuries following, the life of a nun was one of the only ways women could have autonomy over their bodies and experience leadership. For



example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was an Abbess in Germany and became known for her skill as a writer, composer, and medical practitioner, all of which would not have been possible without her vocation as a nun. On the other side of the coin, some women were “sent away” to convents (as is the case for the heroine in *Suor Angelica*) due to pregnancy out of wedlock and any number of “sins” committed. During the 3rd century, the first “official vow” was taken, which started to give more structure to the nuns commitment to the church. The lives and freedoms of nuns started to become dictated by the Pope (the leader of the Catholic church) and as new men rotated into the position, new decrees would be laid. The most famous of which was Pope Boniface VIII in the 13th Century. Though his reign was short (1294-1303) he established countless rules for the nuns of the time; including forbidding any nun to leave their enclosed convents for any reason. This ruling held for many years, keeping nuns separate from their community.

## CONVENT CULTURE (CONTINUED)



### THE NUN LIFESTYLE.

It wasn't until the 1950s with Pope Pius XII that the strictures around the life of nuns relaxed and convents were able to run somewhat independently. Convents' day to day business and rules were now overseen by the head nun, the Abbess or Mother Superior. Some orders were kept very strict and faithful to the history of long fasts and vows of silence. These tradition-practicing women were called "Cloistered" nuns. However, other Abbesses took this opportunity to relax past rules and nurture a nun's desire to be more involved in their community. These more progressive convents began to put their faith into practice. These women, Lay Nuns, became active members in their community and began to minister through roles in society, such as teachers, counselors, and social workers. While both Cloistered and Lay sisters referred to themselves as nuns, the Catholic church didn't recognize Lay nuns as an official part of the church until 1983 with a new *Code of Canon Law*.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED IN CONVENT CULTURE?

As the modern world developed and shifted, so did the structure and rules around a nun's life. The new Code of Canon Law presented by Pope John Paul II (who maintained a long and progressive reign from 1978-2005) further relaxed how nuns could live and interact with the world. One of the first acts officially shifted how nuns took their vows, implementing "First Vows" and "Final Vows" to allow women to experience the culture before committing their lives to the order. Additionally, the required convent dress was updated. The traditional nun habits were no longer

required, and nuns had the options of more contemporary and modern dress. Not surprisingly, most nuns fully embraced this change in attire. One Abbess even consulted the design house of Christian Dior to consult on a more stylish design.

In addition to their altered look, nuns changed in a lot of structured ways as well. Due to the beginning of the Women's Movement in the 1950s the numbers of nuns began to decline. Women who chose to take their vows to gain autonomy and leadership opportunities were now able to join the workforce and decide whom they married, or if they even married at all. Over the next few decades, the number of nuns in the U.S. plummeted from 180,000 in 1965 to less than 60,000 in 2009.



Along with this steady decline came more relaxed structure for nuns from the Catholic church. Many nuns are encouraged to pursue all sorts of career paths, lawyers, political activists, artists, and scientists. These women still live and pray in the convent, but then head off to their 9-5 just like the secular world. Additionally, women who have had children are welcome to take their vows. Though those vows still include chastity, many women who have been mothers are now active nuns (as long as their children are not current dependents).

## CONVENT CULTURE (CONTINUED)

Even for all its changes, some nuns are asking for the views of the Catholic church to shift even more quickly. In 2009, many nuns spoke up for women's rights in a letter supporting equal health care coverage for all women. This letter, though not supported by the church, was a historic step for nuns speaking out in support of their community over the ruling of their church.



### NUNS AROUND THE WORLD.

Though the nuns that we spoke about here (and are in *Suor Angelica*) are of the Catholic faith, there are many other religions and cultures that have their own nun-style orders. Many Christian denominations such as Lutheran, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and Methodist faiths have nuns.

Buddhism also supports female religious leaders welcoming women in their monk orders. These women, known as Bhikkhuni, are similar to Christian nuns in many respects, such as vows, service, and dedication to spirit.

### INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

[How Nuns Work](#)

[Inside the Convent](#)

[Modern Day Nun Lifestyle](#)

### AS YOU READ FURTHER, HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Now that you know more about the history of convents and lifestyle of nuns, has your perspective changed? In what way(s)?

Is there a part of the nun lifestyle that sounds appealing to you? A part of the structure that you would find appealing or helpful in your life?

What would be the most challenging structure to incorporate into your current life?

## GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Seven years ago, Sister Angelica's family sent her to a convent in response to her pregnancy out of wedlock. How do you feel about the actions of the family? How does this treatment make you view the community in which this story takes place?

What were your views (preconceived notions) about convents and nuns before you experienced *Suor Angelica*? Did watching this performance alter your perspective? Why? Or why not?

Which character did you identify with? Why do you think you understood their perspective?

Which character (or character's action) did you struggle to connect with or understand? What action of the opera seemed different from your core beliefs?

What were your thoughts when The Princess entered the stage? What was surprising about her character? What about the production's presentation of the character?

How did you feel about the convent's community? Did their relationships surprise you? Which relationship interested you the most?

The ending of *Suor Angelica* is filled with emotions: surprise, grief, despair, joy. How did the music reflect these shifting emotions? How did the shift in music effect your emotional connection to the story?

Consider the actions at the end of the opera. Death, suicide, reunion. Is *Suor Angelica* a tragedy? Does the moment between Sister Angelica and her son in the afterlife alter your view of the ending?

Think of your favorite story. Is it your favorite (in part) because of the ending? What do you like most about the ending?

Considering your experience with *Suor Angelica* today, what story would you like to adapt into an opera? Why would opera be a good medium for that story.

What did you expect to experience with this opera? How was your experience similar or different than your expectations?

Is there are job or role in the opera field that you might be interested in? What skills do you think you need for that job?

# WHAT IS A WORKING DRESS REHEARSAL?

Whether an opera is an original Opera Omaha production, a co-production with one or more companies, a rental from another company, or a revival or remount of an Opera Omaha production, each production must be adjusted for the Orpheum Theater stage. While each department works independently to learn and produce their aspect of the show, it takes tremendous coordination and expense to run through the show with everyone involved.

The final working dress rehearsal is the last time all the elements of the production are brought together before the opening night performance, and the final opportunity for the staff and cast to make adjustments to the on-stage performances, orchestration, sets, costumes, lighting and other technical aspects of the opera. When you attend a dress rehearsal you will see some of the artistic, production, and administrative staff stationed behind computers and other equipment in the seats in front of the orchestra. Occasionally they may stop the performance to give notes to the singers, coordinate with the orchestra conductor, or address a staging or technical concern.

Another characteristic of a working dress rehearsal is that singers sometimes “mark” portions of their vocal parts. This means the singer may not sing out completely through the entire rehearsal. This could be because he or she wants to preserve his/her voice for opening night. In most cases, however, if the dress rehearsal is open to the public, the singers treat the occasion as a performance for the audience present.

On the day of the dress rehearsal, the staff sits in the theater and monitors the performance. Each department is responsible for specific aspects of the production, but there are basic skills that are important for everyone:

## TIME MANAGEMENT

Planning well and using time efficiently to accomplish one's goals

## A STRONG WORK ETHIC

The desire to work hard and do well in one's job

## LIFELONG LEARNING

Continued study in one's chosen field

## CREATIVE THINKING

The ability to solve problems as they arise



# WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WORKING BEHIND THE TABLES?

## ARTISTIC STAFF

This could be the producing director, the director of production and the artistic planning staff. They act in a supervisory role, in case something goes wrong and a problem needs to be solved.

## STAGE DIRECTOR AND ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

The stage director is responsible for the dramatic interpretation of the opera. They will give notes to the assistant director about anything that needs to be changed and will refer to the notes in communicating with the performers.

## PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

The production stage manager communicates all the cues throughout the production including lighting changes, the movement of set pieces, and when the performers enter the stage.

## TECHNICAL STAFF

The technical director and their staff supervise the physical elements on stage, such as sets, lights, sound, communications, and video.

## LIGHTING DESIGNER AND ASSISTANT LIGHTING DESIGNER

As with the directors, the lighting designer oversees the lights and gives notes to the assistant lighting designer, who is also communicating with the follow spot operators.

## COSTUME STAFF

The costume director and wardrobe assistants are present to make any last-minute costume adjustments.

## MUSIC STAFF

Because the conductor is working and cannot tell how the orchestra sounds from outside the orchestra pit, one or more music assistants are seated in the theater to monitor the sound and balance from within the house.

## EFFECTS AND ANIMATION

If the production has special visual effects, there will be staff to oversee those elements as well.

# BEHIND THE SCENES – JOBS AT THE OPERA HOUSE

Opera is one of the most popular forms of art in the world and is growing in popularity in the United States—particularly among young people. The combination of spectacle, music, and drama continues to thrill audiences. Opera is truly an international art form. While each company has its own orchestra and chorus, or group of singers, opera companies all over the world share opera productions (the sets and costumes of opera), and singers travel all over to sing the roles that made them famous. But there is more to opera than famous singers, orchestra, and spectacle. Many people work hard behind the scenes to make each opera performance happen. Opera companies employ administrators and production personnel who are responsible for the productions you see. You might wish to explore careers in the arts. Here are some professions at an opera company that might interest you.

## CONDUCTOR

Opera companies may have their own resident conductor or may invite guest conductors to conduct specific operas. Conductors are accomplished and highly trained musicians, who often play several instruments and must be able to read music with the fluency of their native language. Not every conductor wants to conduct opera; conducting for the voice is a highly specialized skill. Conductors also specialize in different kinds of music; some conductors are known for early music, others specialize in composers, like Mozart or Rossini, while some are skilled in conducting contemporary or new music. The conductor may have an assistant who accompanies in rehearsals. A chorus master works with the chorus, conducting them in rehearsals and supervises them while they learn the music.

## STAGE DIRECTOR

The director is responsible for the overall concept of the production, for the performers' interpretations of their roles, and for moving the action on the stage. Directors are usually hired for a specific production, and like conductors, they specialize in different styles. Opera directors often work internationally. The director often works with an assistant who, among other duties, takes staging notes during rehearsals.

## SET DESIGNER

The set designer works closely with the director to create the look of the opera. The director determines where and when the opera will take place (many directors choose to update operas in a more recent time), and the designer will sketch the locations. They might do this after extensive research. A set designer must know a great deal about construction and materials, for the set must be created to be lightweight, sturdy, and practical. They must also know about light, for the colors for the set must work with the lights illuminating the stage.

## COSTUME DESIGNER

The costume designer works closely with both the director and set designer to create the costumes for every character in the opera. The costume designer will draw their ideas for each character. Costume constructors build (or sew) the costumes. Some characters change their costumes many times—a young girl in Act One may be portrayed as an old woman in Act Three—and the designer must develop specific details, down to the kind of fabric to be used, for each costume.

## LIGHTING DESIGNER

The lighting designer must be knowledgeable about electricity, color, and theater techniques to create a design that will work for the opera. A lighting designer must be a good draftsman, for they will draw the "light plot," a rendering of every light to be used and its placement in the theater. The lighting designer creates mood, atmosphere, and locale through the clever use of light and color.

## TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

The technical director oversees all the technical aspects of the company's production. They work with the designers and with the stage crew to make sure the sets, props, and lights are effective and work together.

## COSTUME DIRECTOR

The costume director supervises all aspects of costumes working with the costume designer to make sure all requests are met. They also supervise construction of costumes or arrange to buy or rent costumes the company doesn't make, make sure all the costumes fit the singers, and supervises the wardrobe staff who ensure the costumes are kept clean and in good condition.

## PRODUCTION MANAGER

The production manager supervises all other aspects of the production, including the stage management staff (see below), wig, make-up, rehearsal schedules, and more.

## STAGE MANAGER

Stage managers are responsible for "calling" the show; during the rehearsals and performances, they tell the person who controls the lights when to change them; they tell the person who opens and closes the curtains when to do their job; they tell the performers when to enter and exit stage. They are the boss of the production during performances. There is a team of stage managers for opera productions, and usually the a PSM, or production stage manager leads that team with at least one ASM, or assistant stage manger.

## WIG AND MAKE-UP MASTER

Just like in the movies, opera singers wear make-up on stage. Sometimes the make-up is elaborate (a young singer must be made-up to look old, for example) and sometimes it is simple. In order for the singers' faces to be seen under bright lights and in a large auditorium, all must wear make-up. Wigs are often used, even when the singers' own hair will look fine, because it is easier for the wig master to set the wig than it is to set the singer's own hair.

## ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Opera companies are usually headed by a General Director as well as a Managing Director who oversees marketing and fundraising. Other members of the staff include the Producing Director and Artistic Director who cast singers in their roles and negotiate with their agents, the Marketing Director who is in charge of advertising, public relations, and selling tickets, the Development Director who is in charge of raising money (operas are very expensive to produce—ticket sales cover less than half of the what it actually costs!), the Finance Director who oversees budgets and money, and the Engagement Programs Director who is in charge of programs for schools and the community.

# THE LANGUAGE OF OPERA

Acoustics	The science of sound; the qualities of sound in an enclosed space.
Act	Main sections of a play or opera.
Aria	A song for solo voice in an opera used to express feelings or comment on the story.
Baritone	The middle male voice; often cast as kings, priests, and villains. This voice type is higher than a bass but lower than a tenor.
Bass	The lowest male voice; often cast as comic roles and older men.
Bel Canto	A genre and style of opera most popular in the early 19th century that has long flowing melodies and lots of vocal embellishment.
Bravo	Italian meaning “well done”; opera tradition calls for the audience to shout “bravo!” at the end of an excellent performance.
Choreography	A dance or the making of a dance; some operas include dance sequences.
Chorus	A group of singers usually divided into sections of sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses; the opera chorus often represents the general community, who comments on the story and sometimes voices the thoughts, fears and suspicions of the audience.
Composer	The person who writes the music of an opera or other musical compositions.
Conductor	As the musical director of the opera, the conductor leads both the orchestra and the singers.
Contralto	The lowest female singing voice.
Cover	A replacement for a singer in case of illness; an understudy.
Crescendo	Meaning “growing,” used as a musical direction to indicate that the music is to get gradually louder.
Director	The person responsible for the dramatic interpretation of opera.
Duet	A song for two voices.
Dynamics	The degree of loudness and softness in music.
Ensemble	A French word that means “together”; a group performing together.
Finale	The ending segment of an act or scene, often very lively.
Forte (f)	Italian for “strong” or “loud.” An indication to perform at a loud volume, but not as loudly as fortissimo.
Fortissimo (ff)	Very loudly. The trombones love this.

Grand Opera	Popular from the 19th century through the present, grand opera combines chorus and ballet with other elements of spectacle.
Intermission	A break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around.
Leitmotif	A recurring musical theme, often a short melody (but also can be a chord progression or rhythm), associated with a particular character, place or idea.
Libretto	The text of an opera; literally, “a little book.”
Librettist	The person who writes the libretto.
Melody	A succession of musical tones (i.e., notes not sounded at the same time), often prominent and singable.
Mezzo-soprano	Middle range female voice.
Musical	A staged story told by interweaving songs and music with spoken dialogue.
Opera	A play which is sung.
Opera Buffa	A comedic style of Italian Opera that dominated the early 18th century.
Opera Seria	The noble and “serious” style of Italian opera that rivaled the less-serious Opera Buffa.
Operetta	A light opera, whether full-length or not, often using spoken dialogue. The plots are romantic and improbable, even farcical, and the music tuneful and undemanding.
Orchestra	The group of musicians and trombonists who, led by the conductor, accompany the singers.
Orchestra Pit	The sunken area in front of the stage where the orchestra plays.
Overture	An introduction to the opera played by the orchestra.
Play	A staged story told through spoken dialogue.
Pianissimo (pp)	Very softly. The trombones usually ignore this instruction.
Piano (p)	Meaning “flat,” or “low”. Softly, or quietly, but not quite as much as pianissimo.
Pitch	The highness/lowness of a sound or tone.
Prima donna	The leading woman singer in an operatic cast or company.
Plot	The story or main idea.
Production	The set, costumes, and other physical elements.
Proscenium	The architectural “frame” of the stage space. The areas hidden from the audience’s view, behind the proscenium are called the “wings”.

Recitative	A sung speech that moves the action along by providing information.
Score	The written music of the opera or other musical compositions.
Set	The structures, furniture and decoration on stage.
Solo	Music sung by one performer.
Soprano	Highest female voice.
Tempo	The speed of the music.
Tenor	Highest male voice; young men and heroes are often tenors.
Timbre	Quality of a tone, also an alternative term for “tone-color.”
Tone-color	The characteristic quality of tone of an instrument or voice.
Trio	Three people singing together; a song for three people.
Verismo	A type of “realism” in Italian opera during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in which the plot was on a contemporary, often violent, theme.
Volume	A description of how loud or soft a sound is. The trombones do not understand this.
Zarzuela	Popular Spanish opera style that mixes dialogue with music, similar to American musical theater.

# A GUIDE TO VOICE PARTS & ORCHESTRA FAMILIES

## VOICE PARTS

### SOPRANO

Sopranos have the highest voices, and usually play the heroines of an opera. This means they often sing many arias and fall in love and/or die more often than other female voice types.

### MEZZO-SOPRANO OR MEZZO

This is the middle female voice, and has a darker, warmer sound than the soprano. Mezzos often play mothers and villainesses, although sometimes they are cast as seductive heroines. Mezzos also play young men on occasion, aptly called “pants roles” or “trouser roles.”

### CONTRALTO OR ALTO

Contralto, or alto, is the lowest female voice. Contralto is a rare voice type. Altos usually portray older females, or witches.

### COUNTERTENOR

This is the highest male voice, and another vocal rarity. Countertenors sing in a similar range as a contralto. Countertenor roles are most common in baroque opera, but some contemporary composers also write parts for countertenors.

### TENOR

If there are no countertenors on stage, then the highest male voice in opera is the tenor. Tenors are usually the heroes who “get the girl” or die horribly in the attempt.

### BARITONE

The middle male voice. In comic opera, the baritone is often a schemer, but in tragic opera, he is more likely to play the villain.

### BASS

The lowest male voice. Low voices usually suggest age and wisdom in serious opera, and basses usually play kings, fathers, and grandfathers. In comic opera, basses often portray old characters that are foolish or laughable.

## FAMILIES OF THE ORCHESTRA

STRINGS: violins, violas, cellos, double basses

WOODWIND: piccolos, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons

BRASS: trumpets, trombones, French horns, tubas

PERCUSSION: bass drum, kettle drums, timpani, xylophones, piano, bells, gongs, cymbals, chimes

# OPERA OMAHA HISTORY

For over 60 years Opera Omaha has brought audiences outstanding production quality, artistry and educational opportunities. A strong blend of traditional and innovative programming will continue to ensure the excitement of opera in Omaha.

Opera Omaha began in 1958 as the Omaha Civic Opera Society, an all-volunteer community opera association. By the early 1970s, the company became fully professional, and its name was changed to Opera Omaha. In 1975, Opera Omaha moved performances to the historic Orpheum Theater, opening with *Lucia di Lammermoor* starring Beverly Sills.

Since the 1990s, the company has continued its commitment to high production standards, and in 1998 returned to the development of new works with Libby Larsen's *Eric Hermanson's Soul*, based on a story by Willa Cather. Opera Omaha has also presented educational and engagement programming in schools and communities throughout the region for the last three decades.

Since 2006, Opera Omaha has commissioned numerous new productions utilizing innovative production techniques and engaging visual artists such as Jun Kaneko. These productions have garnered interest from other opera companies and have raised Opera Omaha's artistic profile nationally and internationally.

In August 2011, Opera Omaha welcomed Roger Weitz as the new General Director of the organization. Weitz quickly adopted the strategic business plan established by the Board of Directors and advanced a vision for the company that includes a balanced program of operas annually with an expansion of the company's civic footprint beyond the doors of the Orpheum Theater.

Since then, programs associated with Opera Omaha's main stage productions have more than doubled, and the number of audience members reached through community engagement activities has tripled. Opera Omaha has also significantly grown the number of partners with which it collaborates. Through its extensive programming, Opera Omaha serves individuals from eastern Nebraska, western Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and the southeastern Dakotas, while also drawing national visitors.

## MISSION STATEMENT

Opera Omaha's mission is to enrich the quality of life in our community by creating professional opera and music theater, which uniquely combine the visual and performing arts to express humanity's deepest emotions and highest aspirations. This mission is achieved through the presentation of main stage productions with the highest artistic standards and through customized education and community programs designed to inspire people of all ages and backgrounds, regardless of prior exposure to the arts. Embracing the collaborative nature of the art form, Opera Omaha forges opera's rich storytelling power, historical significance, and cross-cultural relevance into an array of activities.