

We're taking opera on the road!

Each year the Canadian Opera Company produces two touring operas suitable for students in Grades K to 6, introducing over 15,000 young people to this all-encompassing art form. The operas are designed with the young student in mind: no more than one hour in length, sung in English, visually stimulating with creative props and sets, and concluding with an interactive Q&A session with the performers.

This Study Guide provides teachers with general information about opera, as well as specific information related to the production. This guide is an introductory resource to complement our full unit plans and lesson outlines found at coc.ca. This guide and the online lesson plans easily integrate our school tour into the Ontario Ministry of Education Curriculum.

The Most Curtain Calls! On February 24, 1988, Luciano Pavarotti received 165 curtain calls and was applauded for one hour and seven minutes after a performance of Donizetti's L'elisir d'amore at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin, Germany. The greatest recorded number of curtain calls ever received at a ballet is 89 by Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev after a performance of Swan Lake in Austria, in October 1964.

A history of opera in two minutes

Opera started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy, at the beginning of the Baroque period of music. Early opera composers took many of their ideas from the ancient Greeks, who combined music and drama to tell a story more effectively. The Greeks also used a chorus to further the plot and comment on the action of the story.

Early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, opera used many different stories: some serious (called *opera seria*) and some light-hearted (called *opéra comique* or *opera buffa*). These stories include topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), or the adaptation of children's stories (*The Little Prince*).

What is opera?

The term "opera" comes from the Italian meaning "work" or "piece," and it is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a story told through music, drama and design. Musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan at the Peking Opera and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling. The Canadian Opera Company presents works in the western European tradition.

***Musical theatre is similar to opera in many ways, but very different in two specific ways:
1) Opera rarely has dialogue
2) Opera singers don't use microphones***

Glossary

A capella	.....vocal music without instrumental accompaniment
Aria	.....a song for one singer, often reflective in nature
Arioso	.....aria-like, lyrical and expressive passage
Bawdy	.....humour that is obscene or gross
Bel canto	.....Italian for “beautiful singing” (also a style of music)
Chorus	.....a group of singers who act and sing together as a unit
Coloratura	.....ornamental vocal music where several notes are sung for each syllable of the text
Composer	.....the individual who writes music
Conductor	.....the musical director of the orchestra; sometimes referred to as “Maestro” (see below)
Dowry	.....Money or property brought by a bride to her husband at marriage
Duet	.....a musical piece written for two singers
Elopement	.....to suddenly and secretly run away to get married
Ensemble	.....connected singing by a number of performers
Finale	.....the final musical number of an opera
Genre	.....a category of art with distinct style or content
Gesture	.....A motion of the limbs or body made to express or help express thought or to emphasize speech.
Improvisation	.....a type of theatre where the acting and creating happens in the moment, there is not a formal script, often just some basic information like the setting or a prop.
Intoxicated	.....to have too much alcohol, to be drunk
Lazzi	.....pieces of well-rehearsed comic action commonly used in the Commedia dell'arte. During improvised performances, lazzi may be used to fill time or to ensure laughter in a show.
Legato	.....flowing transition from one note to another
Librettist	.....the individual who writes the libretto (story) of an opera
Libretto	.....the words and story of the opera set to the composer's music
Maestro	.....a great composer or master of music; a title of respect for the conductor
Notary	.....an official witness when there is a legal document to be signed
Octave	.....the distance between one tone of scale and the next higher or lower tone of similar pitch (e.g., middle C and the C above are an octave apart)
Opera Buffa	.....comic or funny operas
Opera Seria	.....heroic or tragic operas
Overture	.....the introductory musical passage played by the orchestra
Pitch	.....the highness or lowness of sound
Recitative	.....a type of singing unique to opera when words are delivered in a way that imitates speech
Scale	.....music arranged in order of rising and falling pitches
Score	.....music in written form with all the parts set down in relation to each other
Script	.....The text of a play, broadcast, or movie
Serenade	.....A love song, or music traditionally performed below a loved one's window in the evening
Tempo	.....the speed at which a piece of music moves
Timbre	.....the quality of tone (vocal or instrumental)

Voice types

Just as each person's speaking voice has a certain range and sound, each singer's voice falls within a certain range and possesses a unique tone or quality. In the same way that no two people are physically identical, no two voices sound the same. There is a tremendous variety within each vocal range.

FEMALE VOICES

Soprano: The soprano is the highest of the female voices. Some are able to sing very high notes and skip through rapid passages with ease (coloratura soprano). Others specialize in singing with great intensity and power (dramatic soprano). Still others have voices of exceptional beauty that can sustain long melodies (lyric soprano). Sopranos tend to play the heroines in opera.

Mezzo-soprano: These are the lower female voices. Mezzo-sopranos have a darker sound and can reach low notes beneath the range of the soprano. Mezzo-sopranos are often the mothers, the witches, the friend and the helper, or even young male characters.

Contralto: This is the lowest female voice in the range between soprano and tenor. Canadian Maureen Forrester is a famous contralto. This voice type is often written for a very strong character, such as a goddess.

MALE VOICES

Tenor: The tenors are the highest male voices, and like the soprano, cover a wide variety of vocal colours. Luciano Pavarotti was an example of a “lyric tenor” with his ability to soar through melodies, while Plácido Domingo exemplifies the darker-hued intensity of the “dramatic tenor.” They often play the hero, and compete with the baritone for the soprano.

Countertenor: These male singers sing in a very high register, so much so, that at first hearing they can sound similar to a female voice.

Baritone: These are the middle male voices. Composers only began to write for this range in the 19th century. As with all the ranges, there are a number of vocal types of baritones. Many have extremely flexible wide-ranging voices. They play the villains or fools, the friends, the fathers and character parts.

Bass: The lowest of all voice types, the bass has a rich sound particularly suited to the wise, older characters in opera. Composers often challenge basses by writing notes at the extreme low end of their range.

The Story of *The Barber of Seville*

Act I: A Street in Seville, Spain

While Count Almaviva and a hired band of musicians are serenading the beautiful Rosina, Figaro the barber enters, boasting of his many talents.

Pretending to be a poor man, and assuming the pseudonym "Lindoro", Almaviva sings another melody, in which he tells Rosina that he has no wealth and can offer her only love. The Count, who is actually quite wealthy, offers Figaro a generous reward if the barber were to arrange for him a meeting with Rosina. Figaro confidently agrees, and describes a plan to Count Almaviva: the Count must disguise himself as a soldier in order to gain entry to the home of Dr. Bartolo, Rosina's guardian.

Later, at Dr. Bartolo's house, Rosina reads a love letter from "Lindoro." Figaro overhears the elderly Bartolo muttering that he intends to marry his Rosina.

Figaro tells Rosina that "Lindoro" is in love with her and that he will arrange a meeting between the pair. When Figaro has departed, Bartolo re-enters and accuses Rosina of trying to deceive him. When Bartolo has finished his lecture, Count Almaviva enters Bartolo's house disguised as an intoxicated army doctor. Bartolo angrily protests the presence of the army doctor in his house and has Count Almaviva arrested. When Count Almaviva secretly reveals his true name to the arresting officer, he is immediately released.

Act II: The home of Dr. Bartolo

Count Almaviva appears once again, now in the disguise of a music teacher. During the singing lesson the Count and Rosina succeed in exchanging words of endearment. While Figaro is cutting Bartolo's hair, the lovers plan their elopement. They are overheard by Bartolo, who at last recognizes that Rosina is deceiving him. He throws Figaro and Count Almaviva out of his house and sends for a notary (lawyer) in order to marry Rosina himself without delay.

That night, Count Almaviva and Figaro return with a ladder. Count Almaviva enters Rosina's second-storey room, where he reveals his true identity to the delighted girl. The notary arrives with the marriage contract. At Figaro's instruction, the notary enters the name of Count Almaviva in the contract instead of Bartolo. Bartolo arrives only to find that Rosina is now Almaviva's wife. He is consoled when Almaviva allows him to keep her dowry. And they all live happily ever after.

N.B. This performance is an adapted version of the complete opera

**The Barber of Seville
is one of the top
10 most performed
operas in the world.**

Meet the Composer

Rossini was the composer of *The Barber of Seville*. He composed his first opera at the age of 18. He was born in Italy and began playing in a band at age six. Rossini produced 20 operas between 1815 and 1823. *The Barber of Seville* is his most famous opera and was written in only two weeks. It was first presented in Rome in 1816.



This same year the world was very concerned about "Global Cooling." 1816 is known as The Year Without A Summer. The cause was excessive volcanic eruptions throughout Europe. In Italy the snow had a reddish tinge and fell all year.

Commedia dell'Arte

The characters in *The Barber of Seville* are based on traditional characters from an early style for Italian theatre called *commedia dell'arte*. Commedia began in the 16th century and was a form of early improvisational theatre. The troupe of actors – usually 10 – had a cast of characters that they put in a variety of loose plots. The actors developed specific comic business called *lazzi* that they would improvise around. The humour was often bawdy and coarse. The stock characters were performed in half masks and included: two old men who are foolish, greedy know-it-alls (Pantalone and Il Dottore); a comic servant who is lazy, intelligent and a trickster (Arlecchino); and two young lovers called the Innamorati. In *The Barber of Seville*, Count Almaviva and Rosina are the Innamorati, Dr. Bartolo is based on Pantalone and Don Basilio is developed from Il Dottore. More information is available on Commedia dell'Arte online in our Teacher Resource section at www.coc.ca.

Barbers in the 13th to 18th centuries had to do more than just cut hair – they were the “jack-of-all-trades” of their day: they delivered messages, extracted teeth, and performed blood-letting surgeries. Visit <http://www.maryrose.org/lcity/barber/barber.htm> to learn more about the history of barbering through the ages!

The character of Figaro was a hit – partially because he provided the basis for a commentary on the social structure of Pre-revolutionary France. Much of the humour in *The Barber of Seville* comes from the servant class pulling one over on the aristocracy.

