

TERMINOLOGY SHEET FOR OPERA LOVERS

Agility - the ability to sing many notes in quick succession, sometimes up to 8 or more notes per second!

Appoggiatura - dissonant note often not notated by composers but added by singers to support the stressed syllable in the poetry. In the bel canto era all singers were taught the rules of the appoggiatura. In more recent times it has fallen out of the curriculum. BCBC is helping to bring it back!

Aria - Italian for *air*, what we now call *song*. A piece for solo voice, whether in an opera or as a stand-alone.

Cadenza - the moment, usually at the end of an aria or a section thereof, when the orchestra pauses or stops when the singer or singers improvise a passage to display their musical and vocal prowess.

Coloratura/fioratura - what we call the patterns singers have to execute in displaying their agility. We also call some sopranos "coloraturas" when they sing repertoire that demands a lot of agility. See *agility*.

Diction/enunciation - the ability to transmit the text clearly to the audience, and also the mastery of rules of pronunciation in foreign languages. This can be difficult in the higher parts of the voice which is why it is often more tricky to understand sopranos than baritones!

Dynamics - how loud or soft an instrument plays or a singer sings. These are described worldwide in Italian ranging from *pianissimo* (very soft) to *fortissimo* (very loud). In the middle you find *mezzo piano* (moderately soft) and *mezzo forte* (moderately loud).

Fach - a vocal category determined by the range, color, and weight of a singer's voice, as well as what part of the range they are most comfortable singing (see *tessitura*). The Fach system originated in Germany where opera houses employ an ensemble of singers assigned roles from the same Fach in many operas. Names of fachs you may have heard are *coloratura soprano*, *lyric mezzo*, *Heldentenor*, *dramatic/Verdi baritone*, and *basso cantante*. BCBC believes that overuse of this system keeps singers from singing a wider range of roles. The old singers we listen to did not know of "Fach" and thus sang and recorded many roles we would not have had the privilege to hear if they were put in these boxes!

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Interpolated high notes - singers adding high notes where the composer did not write them, but more importantly, where the composer never imagined them. Vocal finesse and agility were the name of the game for centuries, but as orchestras and opera houses grew in size and the operas became more romantically composed, singers were championed for singing high, long, and loud. When classical and bel canto operas came back into the repertory, it did not take long for singers to bring this high/long/loud excitement where it didn't necessarily belong. Singers routinely as part of what we call "style" sang notes the composers did not write, but they weren't just random high notes to make you applaud!

Larynx - "the voice box", see *vocal folds*.

Legato - Italian for connected, bound - a musical style in which each pitch is smoothly connected to the next in terms of dynamic, timbre, and resonance. Different instruments accomplish this differently. Wind instruments continue the breath as they change pitch with valves or keys. String instruments continue the bow across the string as they change fingering or slide. Keyboard instruments hold down one key or chord until just after the next key or chord is played. Pianists also have the sustain pedal to aid them. Singers sing legato by connecting the pitches with the breath. Since they don't have valves, keys or fingers this connection is audible to the discerning ear. We call this audible connection portamento (see *portamento*)

Messa di voce - Italian for putting-forth of the voice. A technical exercise and musical skill where a singer makes a gradual *crescendo* (increase in volume) and *diminuendo* (decrease in volume) on one note, where the only variable is volume. The vibrato, timbre, and resonance of the voice remain constant during the messa di voce. Messa di voce is considered the supreme skill of the bel canto tradition.

Onset/offset - The beginning of phonation and the end of phonation. Singers work hard to coordinate the beginning of the sound on the correct pitch, vowel/consonant, and at the right dynamic (volume) with their breath support and to begin and end the sound without extra air or noise. Clean onset and offset is the cornerstone of elegant singing.

Ornamentation - The historical practice of giving grace to slow melodies by embellishing it with additional notes not written by the composer. Singers crafted their ornaments to show not only their vocal skill, but also to show off their musical imagination. Imagine the ornamentation on the basic structures of baroque and rococo churches.

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Ping/squillo - A vocal quality indicative of activity in the high overtones. We often attribute this quality to voices we call "bright." Squillo is essential for the human voice to carry over an orchestra in a large space unaided by electronic amplification.

Poetic forms (versi lirici/versi sciolti) - The classic Italian libretto (through Verdi) is written alternating between *versi lirici*, Italian for lyric verse, and *versi sciolti*, Italian for free or loose verse. *Versi lirici* are rhyming lines of equal length, and are used for arias and ensembles. *Versi sciolti* are non-rhyming lines of 7 or 11 syllables, and are used for what the librettist imagined as recitative. The English equivalent of *versi sciolti* is blank verse.

Portamento - Italian for carrying, carriage - the carrying of the voice between pitches upon a free-flowing breath. This results in the infinite number of pitches between them being rendered audible to the discerning ear. Listen up! The voice can do this, as can strings. A keyed instrument cannot make portamento, because it can only play the pitches pre-defined by the valves or keys. Portamento is the tool the singer uses to achieve legato (see *legato*). It is considered the most basic of skills in the bel canto tradition since legato is the most basic goal of all music making.

Recitative - The part of opera devoted to story-telling. *Recitare* in Italian means "to act." Recitatives have many possibly overlapping characteristics: conversational (a dialogue between characters), presentational (a soliloquy or perhaps part of the opera where a character defines the time, place, and sets up the action). *Secco recitative* is accompanied by keyboard (historically always keyboard and low strings), whilst *accompagnato recitative* is accompanied by the orchestra (often just strings, but sometimes the whole band), usually attached to an aria.

Registration (head voice/chest voice) - all people (not just singers) have "two voices": head voice and chest voice. These days we mostly speak in chest voice - though a "feminine" voice 70 years ago probably spoke entirely in head voice. Unless you are Julia Child and you speak in both! Sopranos and mezzo-sopranos use chest voice for the lower tones in their range. Audiences love it! It is the "earthy sound" that carries emotion in the most universally experienced way. It also helps them to be audible in that range. (The voice sounds louder the higher it gets so the low tones can easily disappear in the orchestral texture). Modern tenors and baritones sing mostly in chest voice and use their head voice to color the pitches softer. The old tenors and baritones we listen to used head voice more abundantly. We love it! This is the other side of the coin: the "sweet sounding head voice" especially in tenors carries the emotion of the romantic lead like nothing else can when he is in love!

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Resonance - what singers rely upon to enrich and amplify the sound made at the vocal folds. It is determined by the shape of the vocal tract (the mouth, nose, sinuses and other cavities, as well as the bones). Singers learn to shape the vocal tract to provide optimum amplification within their own bodies. When vocal resonance is used efficiently, it naturally makes some of the highest overtones the loudest, which allows singers to be heard over an entire orchestra. (See *ping/squillo*)

Rubato - Italian for stolen - the musical practice of give-and-take in regards to rhythm and timing.

Tessitura - the part of the voice most called upon in a particular aria, song, or role. Is it mostly high? Is it often low? Some voices like to "live up there" while some voices just want to visit those high pitches from time to time.

Vocal folds/cords - the vibrating mechanism of the voice, housed within the larynx. They lie parallel to the floor and attach to each other in the front where you would see an Adam's apple. If you're really interested: the 'meat' of the vocal fold is the thyroarytenoid muscle, aptly named as it connects the thyroid cartilage to the arytenoid cartilage. The other important muscle in the larynx is the cricothyroid which stretches the vocal folds to change pitch. The vocal folds are brought together and apart (onset/offset) by lateral and posterior cricoarytenoids, respectively.

Vibrato - Vibrato is a natural phenomenon of the human voice as used in Western music. A healthy vibrato is the slight fluctuation in pitch that occurs when a voice efficiently sings on free-flowing breath. It should optimally draw very little, if any, attention to itself. We discuss vibrato in terms of extent (how much the pitch fluctuates from the center) and rate (how often it cycles, nowadays trending around 5-7 cycles per second). *Straight tone* describes a perceived lack of vibrato, so very little fluctuation, if any. *Wobble* denotes a wide extent of pitch fluctuation and a slow vibrato rate. *Tremolo* or *trilling vibrato* refers to a wide extent of pitch fluctuation combined with a fast vibrato rate.