Opera FOR DUMMIES

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Chapter 4

Opera Singers and Their Equipment

In This Chapter

- The opera singer's appetite (for food and otherwise)
- The range of opera voices
- The effort to train "the voice"
- The good, the bad, and the ugly: opera's inside story

When Hollywood moguls cast their latest extravaganza, they rely on certain casting conventions: The good guys have a particular look that's recognizably different from that of the bad guys. Although they *might* cast John Malkovich as the boy next door, he's probably not their first choice.

Opera has its own typecasting conventions — as you may have guessed if you've ever attended an opera in which a 50-year-old, 180-pound woman portrays the waiflike teenage heroine. But whereas movies generally rely on *physical* types, operas rely on *vocal* types. In opera, the important thing is that the good guys *sound* different from the bad guys. Although, in an ideal world, a Brad Pitt could sound like a Pavarotti, with a few rare exceptions, this isn't the case.

But if a singer's voice sends you into fits of ecstasy, why complain? Considering how rarely beauty and brains are allied in any one individual, it's no surprise that someone who sings like a god rarely looks like one. Orpheus or Adonis — take your pick.

But Do They Have to Be So Big?

Well, yes and no. Operatic roles are written for big voices capable of being heard, without microphones, over a full orchestra; and big voices often come in big packages. A German shepherd's bark is bigger than a

But get one thing straight: *Big* doesn't necessarily mean *fat.* Some great Wagnerian sopranos we can name, such as Birgit Nilsson, were built like tanks, but that body size came from other factors: big bones, toned muscles, and an absolutely enormous chest cavity — all the better for producing a prodigious sound.

Still, we must admit that a fair number of opera singers *are* fat. Why? Well, a professional opera voice often requires special care and feeding. People drawn to the singing profession tend to possess great appetites, both gustatory and otherwise.

On the subject of *otherwise:* The opera world is rife with stories of singers' immense sexual appetites, including one famous soprano who was said to require servicing between acts to sing her best. (This clause wasn't exactly in her contract, but opera houses of her day spared no expense in ensuring the best possible performances.) You can read some juicy stories in "Diva Tales" at the end of this chapter.

We can only guess why singers possess larger-than-usual, er, appetites; maybe it's because they spend their lives playing larger-than-life characters.

Sopranos, Tenors, and Other Freaks of Nature

In the opera world, human voices come in six basic varieties, from highest to lowest: *soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone,* and *bass.* Women and children are sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, and contraltos; most men are tenors, baritones, and basses.

Opera aficionados show off by using the German word *Fach* (pronounced "FAHkh," meaning compartment or pigeon-hole) to refer to these four voice types. If you want to look knowledgeable about opera, try to get a handle on the *Fach* concept. Don't worry, though — you're granted a wide margin of error. Opera fans' favorite topic of discussion seems to be whether Soprano X is really a soprano at all, or whether she's actually a mezzo trying to gain higher fees. Throw these terms around, and you'll see how quickly opera fans respect you.

All voices, regardless of their *Fach,* are further defined by their *color.* Opera voices come in two colors: *lyric* and *dramatic.* Lyric voices sound sweet and tend to be easier on the ears than their dramatic counterparts. Dramatic voices, however, have a steely edge that helps them cut through a large orchestra more easily than their sweet-voiced counterparts. You wouldn't hear an opera singer described as a "sweet-voiced dramatic tenor" or a

Opera composers use these two voice colors to their full advantage. When depicting a villain, a composer generally writes for a *dramatic* voice, saving the *lyric* voices for characters who are pure of spirit. The composer may not actually specify "lyric voice" or "dramatic voice" in the sheet music, but he doesn't have to; if the singer has to compete with a full orchestra, it's understood that the composer wants to hear a dramatic voice in the role. Any singer with a lyric voice who tries to tackle a dramatic voice role is tempting both vocal strain and audience disapproval, two things that any singer with a bank account hopes to avoid.

Just the Fachs, Ma'am

We hate to break this to you, but there are many more voice types than the six we just mentioned. Each category contains a bunch of *sub*categories. This section describes the most common ones, from highest voice to lowest.

Sopranos

Sopranos are the highest-paid female singers. Why? First, they get the most sympathetic roles. But second, and more important, they sing the highest notes — and those are the notes that audiences pay to hear.

- *Coloratura sopranos* are the tweety-birds of the musical aviary. Their voices sound like flutes: light, pure, and capable of great agility way up high. (In fact, coloratura *arias,* or songs, are often written as duets with a flute, where one imitates the other.) The most famous coloratura roles are Lucia di Lammermoor (in Donizetti's opera of the same name) and the Queen of the Night (from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*). Some of the most famous coloratura singers in recent decades were Lily Pons, Joan Sutherland, and Beverly Sills.
- *Lyric sopranos* are the white bread of sopranos; the majority of sopranos around the world, by far, fit into this category. Whenever a composer wants to write for a sweet goody-two-shoes — a virginal, pretty, young thing — she's likely to have a lyric soprano voice: not so high as to be grating, not so low as to be growly. Many of the best-loved operatic roles have been written for lyric sopranos, including Mimì (in *La Bohème*), Violetta (in *La Traviata*), and Marguerite (in Gounod's *Faust*), plus most of Mozart's leading ladies.

  In past decades, the most famous lyric sopranos included Eleanor Steber and Mirella Freni. One of the greatest lyric sopranos today is American: Renée Fleming. Catch her performances where you can.

- *Soubrettes* are either cutie-pies or streetwise servant girls. Mozart lavished great love on the latter characters in the roles of Susanna (*The Marriage of Figaro*), Despina (*Così fan tutte*), and Zerlina (*Don Giovanni*). Some current famous soubrettes are Dawn Upshaw and Kathleen Battle.

- *Spinto sopranos* are named after the Italian word *spingere,* meaning "to push." These voices aren't really pushed, but they do naturally possess more power than lyric sopranos. Spinto characters are generally long-suffering, victimized women in opera — the grand roles, the meat of the operatic repertoire, the province of the divas. The most famous spinto parts are Puccini's Madame Butterfly, Manon Lescaut, and Tosca (featured in Track 8 on the CD that comes with this book); Verdi's Aïda; and the two Leonoras (from *Il Trovatore* and *La Forza del Destino*).

  Among the legendary spinto sopranos of this century: Rosa Ponselle, Renata Tebaldi, and Leontyne Price. Ponselle, Callas, and Price were all U.S. born — must be something in the water.

- *German dramatic sopranos* are the horns-and-helmet ladies, the real heavy-hitters of the opera world. A German dramatic soprano doesn't actually have to *be* German, but she specializes in singing German *roles,* specifically those by Wagner and the title roles in Richard Strauss's two operas about female nut cases, *Elektra* and *Salome.* Her voice must be able to cut through a huge orchestra; therefore, it must be both warm and metallic in color and immensely powerful. Many a singer has ruined her voice trying to tackle roles like these.

  Surprisingly, the women who actually sing these roles are usually the most gentle of all the sopranos in real life, maybe because they know that nobody's going to mess with them. Two of the greatest German dramatic sopranos of the past century are Kirsten Flagstad and Birgit Nilsson — neither one of them was German, by the way.

Mezzo-sopranos

The word *mezzo* ("MET-soe") means "half" in Italian. Mezzo-sopranos are so named because they earn about half as much money as sopranos do. (Either that, or because their vocal range falls about halfway between soprano and contralto.) They earn less because they can't sing high notes as effortlessly — so much for political correctness. But mezzos get their revenge by playing some of the spiciest, juiciest roles ever dreamed up for the stage.

Mezzos come in two varieties: dramatic and lyric. These women's opera roles can be summarized as tramps, vamps, witches, and britches (the last of these referring to the odd opera practice of assigning the roles of adolescent boys to the voices of obviously post-adolescent women).

- *Dramatic* mezzos play the vamps and tramps (such as Delilah in Saint-Saëns' *Samson and Delilah,* and perhaps the greatest mezzo role of all, Bizet's Carmen), witches (such as Azucena from Verdi's *Il Trovatore,* who's really a withered old Gypsy rather than a bona-fide witch, but let's not quibble), and other wicked female roles (like Eboli in Verdi's *Don Carlo* and Amneris in *Aïda*). Most dramatic mezzo roles are the foils for the ever-pure sopranos — the evil characters that cause the sopranos all the suffering. These characters are often supposed to look like hags, fortunately for a few of the mezzos who play them (ahem).

  Interestingly, composers often ask a dramatic mezzo to sing just as high as a soprano does. But whereas these notes are effortless for the sweet, well-bred soprano, they cause the evil mezzo character to strain at the upper edges of her range — thereby sounding appropriately wild and out of control.

  In the 1950s, Ebe Stignani led the mezzo field, followed later by Giulietta Simionato, Fiorenza Cossoto, Grace Bumby, and in our time, Delorah Zajic.

- *Lyric* mezzo soprano singers, on the other hand, often tend to obsess about their waistlines, because they're supposed to play adolescent boys! In opera, these parts are known as *trouser roles,* and the two foremost examples are Cherubino in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and Octavian in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier.*

  Then there are the *female* lyric mezzo roles — and some of them are gorgeous. Rossini wrote two of his greatest roles, full of fast notes, for lyric mezzo: Rosina in *The Barber of Seville* and Angelina in *La Cenerentola* (Italian for *Cinderella,* "chen-e-REN-toe-la"). An American, Frederica von Stade, has been one of the world's leading lyric mezzo-sopranos since the early 1970s, and she shows no signs of slowing down.

Contraltos and assorted combos

Contraltos are the lowest (and by far the rarest) female voice category; on their lowest notes, they sound almost like guys. Although usually assigned to play maids, mothers, and grandmothers, contraltos occasionally get deliciously juicy roles: Ulrica in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (another witch), the Goddess Erda in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, and the ever-faithful wife Lucretia in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia.*

In addition, contraltos are often assigned the roles originally written for *castrati* — castrated boys (described in Chapter 5) — when they're not claimed by the countertenors (see the next section). The greatest contraltos of the past century have included Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Marian Anderson, and Kathleen Ferrier.

Quite a few singers defy categorization, by the way, and are therefore *Fach*less (though not feckless). Christa Ludwig, Régine Crespin, and Victoria de los Angeles are just a few great singers who performed both soprano and mezzo roles with great success in recent decades. Marilyn Horne has been equally successful in both mezzo and contralto roles. And in our own time, Jessye Norman wraps her glorious voice around whatever repertoire she deems appropriate.

But for breaking the rules and moving freely from one vocal category to another, no one compares with the late Maria Callas. Coloraturo soprano, dramatic, lyric, even mezzo-soprano (in her late years) — she sang 'em all. Many critics thought that she'd damage her voice by stretching it this way, and they were right. Although her emotional ups and downs, as well as her considerable and rapid weight loss, seem to have contributed to her long vocal decline (her prime lasted barely ten years), it's clear that her wish to take on roles for virtually every voice part also created major difficulties. At the end — in her ill-advised 1973 comeback — it was tragic to hear that she couldn't comfortably manage any of the music in which she'd once reigned supreme.

Tenors

Tenors compete with sopranos when it comes to fees and decibels. Nothing matches the visceral thrill of a tenor's full-throated high B-flat — and he knows it. That's what the audience shells out the big bucks for!

Tenors, too, come in different flavors:

- *Lyric tenors* sing some Mozart roles, as well as some choice picks from the French repertoire (such as the title characters in Gounod's *Faust* and Massenet's *Werther*) and many standard Italian opera roles (including Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor,* Alfredo in *La Traviata,* and Rodolfo in *La Bohème,* featured on Track 7 of this book's CD). These characters are generally likable, vulnerable men who love too much; if they didn't have an opera to sing in, they'd be showing up on the Oprah show.

  Luciano Pavarotti was truly — how shall we put this? — the biggest lyric tenor around. (His glorious voice has made him the most famous opera singer of *any* kind in the late twentieth century.) Others include John McCormack, Beniamino Gigli, and Fritz Wunderlich.

- *Spinto tenors* sing the big, juicy roles (Manrico in *Il Trovatore,* Radames in *Aïda,* Cavaradossi in *Tosca,* Canio in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci,* and Don José in *Carmen*), plus some parts written for lyric tenors. A spinto tenor's characters tend to be more heroic than those of a lyric tenor,

while retaining their lack of moderation in the love department. Some legendary spinto tenors of the past century are Enrico Caruso, Franco Corelli, Richard Tucker, Carlo Bergonzi, and Plácido Domingo (see Figure 4-1). Their voices could make a stone weep.

Figure 4-1: *Carmen:* Plácido Domingo as Don José, Alicia Nafé in the title role, Lyric Opera of Chicago, 1984. (Photo: Tony Romano)

- The Germans have their own dramatic type. The *Heldentenor* (pronounced "HELL-den tay-NOR") is the male counterpart to the German dramatic soprano, singing primarily Wagnerian roles. This is the guy who has to woo the helmet-and-horns soprano; no mean feat, you'll admit. Lauritz Melchior and Jon Vickers dominated their eras in the Heldentenor department, and at this writing we're still waiting for a successor to show up.
- Hovering above all the rest are the *countertenors,* a different category altogether. Countertenors are men who train their *falsetto* voices rather than their lower range. If you're a guy, you know what falsetto is: It's when you sing way up high, above the point where your voice cracks, in that light, kind-of-girlish voice. The Monty Python comedians used their falsetto voice when they played women. But American David Daniels proves that countertenor voices can sound macho with the best of them!

  Countertenors specialize in parts originally written for *castrati* (see Chapter 5 for more on *that* fascinating topic) — when they can yank

Baritones

Baritones are men with voices in the medium range. If you sang in high school choir and had neither high nor low notes, you were probably called a baritone (among other things).

The CD that comes with this book has some marvelous examples of the baritone voice. Listen especially to the beautiful examples from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* (Track 4) and Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (Track 5).

The baritone voice has its own subcategories, too:

- The baritone has its own subcategories. One of these is the sweet-voiced *lyric baritone*. Lyric baritones tend to play the all-around fun-guy roles: the ringleader (Marcello in *La Bohème*), the guy who sticks his tongue out at the world (Mercutio in *Roméo et Juliette*), the wise-guy schemer (Malatesta in *Don Pasquale*, Figaro in *The Barber of Seville*, and Dandini in *La Cenerentola*), or the comic relief (Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte* and Papageno in *The Magic Flute*).
- *Italian dramatic baritones* are harder to find, and greatly prized by opera producers. Also known as *Verdi baritones*, they sing such great villainous Verdi parts as Di Luna in *Il Trovatore* and the title role in *Rigoletto*, as well as Tonio in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* and Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*, one of the greatest villains of all time. In the world of Italian dramatic baritones, the standard set by Titta Ruffo has never been surpassed.

  German dramatic baritones, sometimes called *Heldenbaritones*, are something else altogether. The defining role for this Fach is Wotan, King of the Gods, in Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Germany's Hans Hotter and, more recently, James Morris lead the field in godliness.
- *Bass-baritones* are the he-men of the opera world, combining the ringing quality of the baritone with the depth of the bass. Bass-baritone roles avoid the extremes of range, singing in the most beautiful central part of the voice. Mozart composed two of his most sublime creations for the bass-baritone: the guy with the greatest excess of testosterone known to man, Don Giovanni (in the opera named for him), and the guy you'd most like to have around the house, Figaro (in *The Marriage of Figaro*). A Welshman, Bryn Terfel, is the bass-baritone of choice today.

Basses

Basses are the lowest of them all. By definition, they sing the lowest notes that the human voice can reach. Their strong, booming voices seem to resonate from the depths of some enormous cavern.

Basses often play priests or fathers, but they occasionally get star turns as the Devil (in Boito's *Mefistofele* and Gounod's *Faust*) or reigning potentates (King Philip in Verdi's *Don Carlo* and the title role in *Boris Godunov*). The great Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin set the standard at the turn of the century, followed by Boris Christoff, Alexander Kipnis, and Nicolai Ghiaurov. There's also the Italian *basso profondo* (deep bass), as well as the *basso cantante* ("singing bass," suited for Verdi roles and bel canto operas), and what Germans call *schwarzer baß* ("black bass," for portraying old men and sometimes villains, singing in German or Russian).

If you've read and understood this entire section (or if you're a good faker), you should be able to wow 'em at your next cocktail party. It must feel pretty good to know that you've got your *Fachs* straight.

Getting at "the Voice"

Suppose that you're just crazy enough to consider becoming an opera singer. How do you acquire a big voice in the first place?

Much of it comes from genes. It really helps if you're born with great pipes. Most of today's vocal superstars have great natural ability.

But potential isn't enough; to develop your voice, you have to *get at it* somehow. And that's where the real challenge lies. After all, a voice is the only musical instrument that can't be seen or touched. Maybe that's why some singers and voice teachers never speak of "my voice" or "your voice." It's always "*the* voice," as if it were an alien creature lurking within the body. "It's an unruly voice," a singer might say. "Untamed and wild." Or: "It's a mischievous voice. Just yesterday it stole my lip gloss and wouldn't give it back."

Because there's nothing to see or touch, singers need to be creative and resourceful in order to train their voices — and this is where teachers come in. Effective voice teachers know how to engage their students' imagination. To that end, they are always giving their students different concepts to think of. "Imagine that you're placing the voice in the mask," they might say. "Sing behind the teeth. Now float the voice up to the top of your range." Of course, these same words conjure up different images for different people (and freak others out completely), so voice teachers need to be able to explain the same thing in plenty of different ways.

One concept that all singers understand, however, is *breath control*. This is the technique — some may say the art — of using your breath efficiently as you sing a long melodic line (and not wasting it all at the beginning of the phrase) so that you don't run out of wind before the high E-flat.

For an example of breath control, try saying the whole last sentence in one breath. Now try *singing* it, at the top of your lungs, to the tune of "The Girl from Ipanema."

See what we mean? No wonder some singers say that breath control is 90 percent of singing technique.

Your two secret voices

Anyone who's ever taken voice lessons knows another important pair of opera-singer terms: *chest voice* and *head voice*. Want to hear the difference?

We know that you sing in the shower. (We've heard it, and frankly, it could use a little work.) Next time you head off to the shower, try this little experiment:

Open your mouth wide and get ready to yell "Hey!" Make sure that you don't get a mouthful of water. Now start to holler, like this:

He - e - e -

e - e - e - e-

e - e - e - e-

e - e - e - e-

-eyyyy!

As you do, put your hand over your chest. You'll feel it vibrating. You're now using your chest voice. Do the same thing staying on one pitch (or note), like this — "He-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-e-eyyy!!!!" — and you're *singing* with *chest voice,* which most people consider their normal voice. Pop and rock singers use chest voice all the time; they're basically shouting on pitch.

Broadway star Ethel Merman was one of the prime exponents of chest voice. When she belted out "There's No Business Like Show Business," she used 100 percent chest voice. Opera singers learn how to modulate the sound so that it's not quite so raucous, but the

Now to find your *head voice.* Back into the shower with you.

Put your hand over your chest and get ready to holler "Hey!" again. Now go ahead and yell; but this time, make your voice go up and up and up, like this:

eyyyy!

e - e - e - e-

e - e - e - e-

e - e - e - e-

He - e - e -

At a certain point, you'll probably feel or hear a "break" in your voice — a point where the quality changes, usually becoming lighter-sounding. Around the same time, the vibration in your chest disappears. Now you're using your *head voice.*

If your head voice sounds weaker than your chest voice, you're not alone. But opera singers are capable of incredible projection with their head voice. They use the bones and cavities of the head and face (really!) as speakers, giving great carrying power to the sound. As a result, an opera singer can send her high notes to the back of a 4,000-seat hall.

Because chest voice and head voice sound so different, moving smoothly between them is a singer's greatest challenge. Great singers can do it effortlessly — you don't even hear the shift. In fact, this ability is a requirement for all trained opera singers.