

# Intro to Opera



A practical guide for students new to opera



#operaclass



# *Kia ora, Welcome!*

Opera is an art form that turns a mirror on society, reflecting who we are, how we think and feel. It should not be a pursuit for the elite, but a chance for anyone to express themselves through music.

The aim of Project Prima Volta is to promote social inclusion through music. The medium is opera and opera is, by definition, staged, sung drama. The stories played out on an opera stage are universal, and transcend time and culture. Opera is essentially about people - their flaws, foibles, failures, misunderstandings, misrepresentations, triumphs and tragedies.

Exposure to performing and fine arts helps students develop critical analysis and problem solving skills, perseverance, and a drive for excellence. The creative skills students develop through the arts carry them toward new ideas, new experiences and new challenges.

Young people are incredibly well placed to understand and explore the dramatic ideas represented in opera, they are at a time in their lives where they experience life with incredible immediacy and intensity.

The human passions played out on the opera stage reflect life as it is lived both at its most sordid depths and at the peak of its excitement.

We hope to convey some of this excitement to you and your students through both the Project Prima Volta programme and our new initiative – #operaclass and the accompanying education resources.

This guide contains information about opera for students new to the genre. We hope the guide will assist you in making opera connections in your classroom fun and engaging.

Check out our website for more information  
<http://primavolta.co.nz/opera-class/>







# About Prima Volta

Project Prima Volta exists to give teenagers the opportunity to find their own voice, through song and in life. Hawke's Bay's Prima Volta Charitable Trust offers kids a positive path to **finding purpose and meaning**, using music and performance. Project Prima Volta opens up a whole new world of hope, opportunity and shared experience to young people who only have one thing in common – their **ability to sing in tune**.

Each year **30 teenagers** from entirely diverse backgrounds are accepted for a year-long programme of coaching and

mentoring culminating in their performance in a fully staged classical opera. Training together for up to eight hours a week, they work alongside international and homegrown industry professionals as well as local performers and volunteers. Their **hard work** culminates in the unique experience of creating supportive roles in a **major opera** production, during the Tremains Art Deco Festival.

If you would like to know more about **auditions** and to register your interest, please contact us at: Phone: 021 074 7070 email: [auditions@primavolta.co.nz](mailto:auditions@primavolta.co.nz)

# What is opera?

## TALKING POINTS

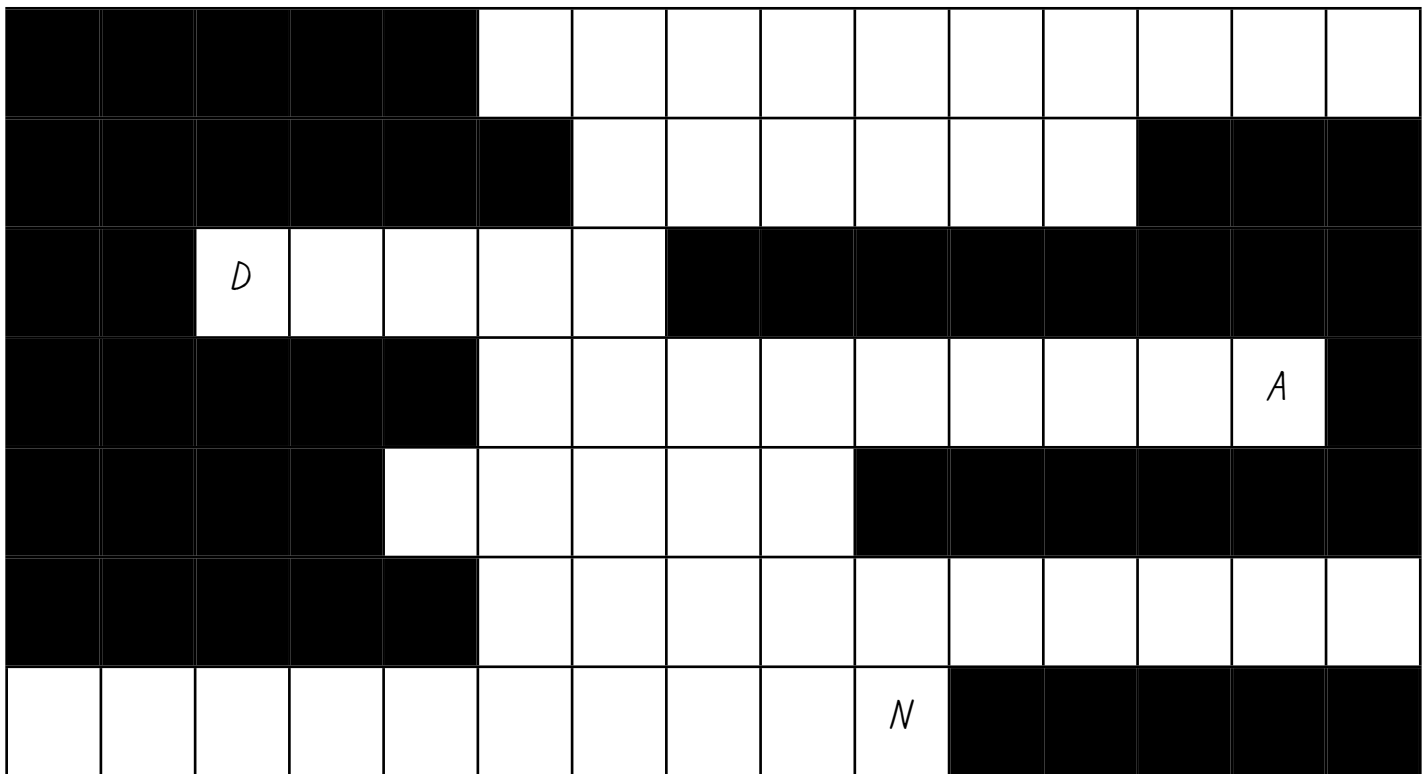
Before you start, discuss what you think opera is.  
What have you seen, heard, thought about opera?

Opera is a unique and exciting art form that combines many disciplines together.

Write the names of all the disciplines (right) in the puzzle to reveal the phrase "**OPERA IS**":

- DRAMA
- VOCAL MUSIC
- ART & DESIGN
- POETRY

- ORCHESTRA
- DANCE
- LITERATURE



Of all the disciplines above, one is the most important in opera. Which is it and why?

Which of these disciplines do you enjoy the most and why?

# A bit of History

An opera, like a play, is a form of theatre that includes scenery, props, and costumes etc. In opera, however, the actors are trained singers who sing their lines instead of speaking them. An orchestra accompanies the singers. A conductor coordinates both the singers on stage and the musicians in the orchestra pit.

Opera consists of many different disciplines all working together: vocal music, orchestral music, art and design (scenery, costumes, special effects, and lighting), literature and poetry (the story and lyrics), drama (tragedy or comedy), and sometimes dance.

The combining of these elements creates one incredible theatrical experience.

**Opera originated in Florence, Italy, in the late 1500's**, with a small group of men who were members of a Camerata (Italian for society). The intellectuals, poets and musicians of the Camerata decided they wanted words to be a featured aspect of music.

They used ancient Greek drama as their inspiration, including the use of a chorus to comment on the action.

**The Camerata** laid down three principles for their new art form:

1. The text must be understood, so the accompaniment must be very simple and should not distract from the words.
2. The words must be sung with correct and natural declamation, as if they were spoken
3. The melody must interpret the feeling of the text.

The first composer to fully develop the ideas of the Camerata was **Jacopo Peri** (1561- 1633), whose opera *Dafne*, based on a Greek myth, was performed in 1594 and is regarded as the first opera.

How can melodies (tunes) interpret the feeling of the text? eg. feelings of love or anger



"I get to meet so many amazing, talented artists! I love singing opera, as it uses more technique than say... a pop song where it's a lot easier to make it sound 100%. Opera's more challenging and way more fun!"

~Tiffany Drew, age 17



## Scene

Scenes are short sections within an act where the time, place and characters are fixed for a time. At the end of a scene, the scenery or props may change to show that the action has changed location.

## Act

An act is a long section of an opera that contains different types of vocal pieces, such as solos, duets, choruses etc. Operas often have several acts, which are further divided up into shorter scenes.

# Opera words

## Aria

An aria is a vocal solo that usually focuses on a character's emotions rather than actions. Arias have beautiful or dramatic melodies and are often sung outside of the opera, in concerts etc.

## Recitative

A recitative is sung dialogue or speech that occurs between arias and ensembles. It helps to further the action of the story and shape the relationships between the characters.

## Interval

A break between acts to reset the stage and give the musicians and audience a rest. Sometimes called an intermission.





## Score

Composers write the score or the music for the opera. There is a vocal score, used by the singers, showing a piano reduction of the orchestral music with the singer's parts, and an orchestral score, used by the conductor, showing all of the instruments.

## Ensembles

Where duets, trios, the chorus etc. sing together. Sometimes called group numbers.

# Opera words

## Libretto

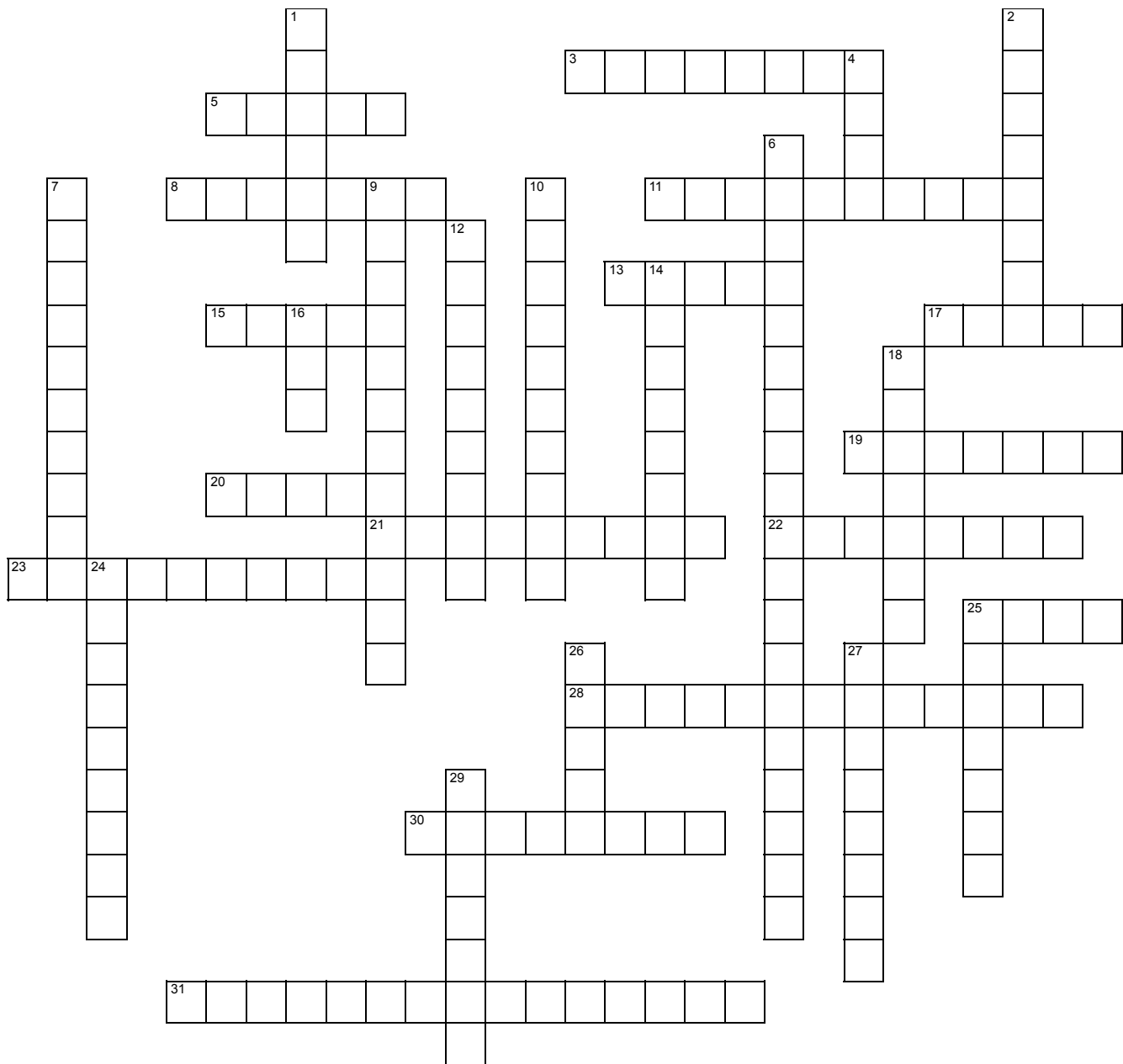
A librettist writes the story of the opera into what's known as a libretto, or the text that is set to music. Composers often add to or change parts of the libretto as they work. In the past, the libretto was also bound and sold to the audience.

## Surtitles

Today, the audience can easily follow the plot with the use of surtitles - the English translation of the libretto, which are projected onto a screen above the stage.

Here's one for you: What is a **sitzprobe**?





**Across:**

3. The originators of opera
5. Objects used by characters while acting
8. The text is sung with correct and \_\_\_\_\_ declamation
11. Sung dialogue or speech
13. The music of the opera
15. Tragedy and comedy
17. A smaller section of an opera, within an act
19. The melody must interpret the \_\_\_\_\_ of the text
20. Movement to music
21. The English translation of the text, projected above the stage
22. Several people singing together, in duets, chorus etc.
23. The first opera composer
25. The Camerata decided that the \_\_\_\_\_ must be understood
28. The Camerata laid down that \_\_\_\_\_ should not distract from the words
30. The text that is set to music
31. The accompaniment

**Down:**

1. A group of singers who comment on the action
2. City in Italy where opera originated
4. A beautiful or dramatic vocal solo
6. The story and lyrics
7. The inspiration for opera
9. The scenery, costumes, special effects, and lighting
10. Singing
12. This group of musicians accompanies the singers
14. The clothes worn by singers to establish their character
16. A large section of an opera
18. The background to the action on stage; helps set the scene
24. Leads the performance by coordinating the singers and the orchestra
25. An opera is a form of \_\_\_\_\_
26. The first opera, based on a Greek myth
27. A break between acts
29. The people who sing their lines



# The operatic Voice

Operatic singing technique has been around for over 400 years, and it is unlike any other type of singing.

Opera singers don't use microphones. Instead, they train for years to build up the skills and **resonance** needed to fill a whole theatre with sound and even be heard over a full orchestra.

They train a muscle called the **diaphragm**, found just beneath the lungs and above the stomach, to control their breath with great precision. It's the diaphragm that controls how much air passes through the vocal

cords, which vibrate and create the high and low pitches that we hear.

Faster vibrations = higher pitch.

Did you know there are spaces in the upper chest and in your head that resonate and amplify the sound as it moves through your mouth? Singers learn how to make the most of these spaces and how to use their mouth, tongue, and lips to change the tone and sound of the words.

Singers take **physical health** seriously. It used to be that opera singers were overweight as there was a school of thought that extra weight gave added volume and richness to the voice. However, today, many singers know that physical fitness can do the same thing.

---

Here are some of the operatic voice types:

## Soprano

The highest female voice features a pure tone and is famous for hitting the highest notes. They usually play the heroine in the opera since a high, bright sound suggests youth and innocence.

## Mezzo Soprano (like Carmen)

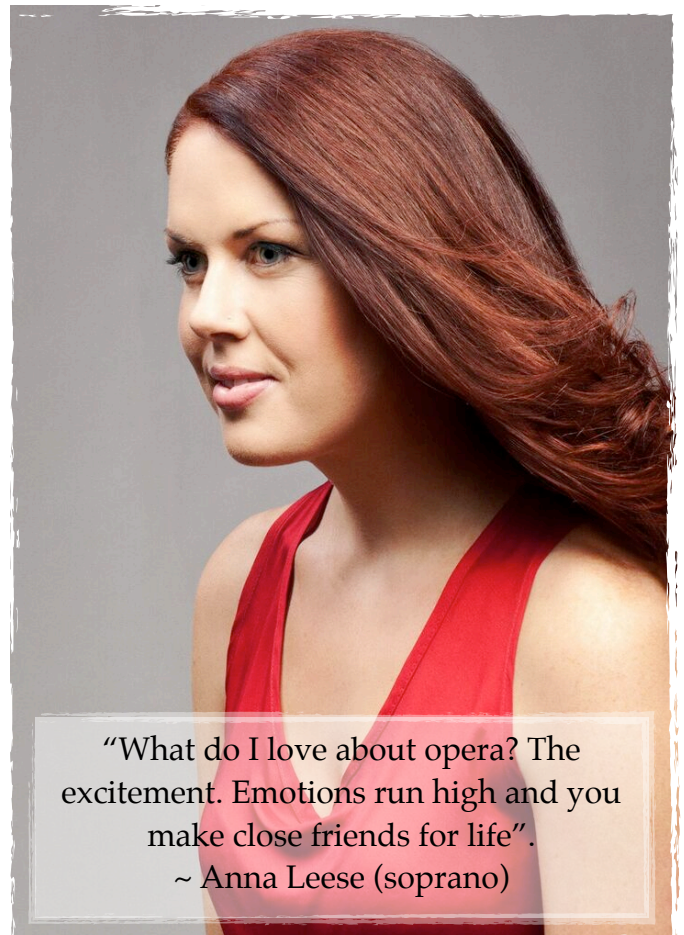
This mid-range voice has a warmer and more complex tone than a soprano. Mezzos usually play gypsies, wise or experienced women, or 'trouser roles' where they play the part of a young man. This voice is called an alto in choral music.

## Tenor

The highest male voice usually plays the hero or the romantic lead in the opera. He's usually popular with the ladies, but more often than not, ends up dead...

## Bass-Baritone

This lower range male voice is usually the bad guy in the opera, but sometimes he's the real hero, or the 'other guy' that doesn't get the girl, or the over protective father of the soprano.



"What do I love about opera? The excitement. Emotions run high and you make close friends for life".

~ Anna Leese (soprano)

find out more at <http://www.theopera101.com/operaabc/voices/>

"I think aspiring to SOUND more operatic endangers a singer's natural sound and encourages a singer to push prematurely beyond their current technique. Technique takes times, patience, understanding and physical development because operatic technique is gymnastic. But as opera is about communicating a story, I would suggest that committing to text and putting across the story in the singing would mean that a beginner singer was BEING more operatic".  
~ Carleen Ebbs (Soprano)



# Advice to young singers

"Breathe from the tummy, and practise keeping your ribs out as you exhale".  
~ Anna Leese

"Relax! Young singers want to jump right into a sound associated with a thirty year old opera diva, a sound that occurs through age and maturity. Young singers should not force their voices to sound more operatic, they should sing with their own natural voice and develop their operatic sound gradually with their teacher".  
~ Pasquale Orchard (Soprano)



"To improve your singing, listen to different types of music, not just what's on the radio".  
~ Moses Mackay (Bass-baritone)





# Behind the Scenes

If you've ever been involved in a stage production you'll know that backstage at the theatre is a hive of activity starting at least an hour and a half before a performance.

Here is a typical scenario:

Stagehands set the scenery for the first act of the production.

Principals or artists begin to arrive at the theater to be put into elaborate costumes by dressers, then are wigged (if required) by the wigmaster and made up with theatrical makeup.

Opera patrons (that's you) enter the auditorium and are seated by ushers. The house manager oversees all the goings-on in the front of house, including the ushers and programme sales. The box office manager takes care of any last minute ticket purchases. Patrons mingle in the lobby or attend a pre-concert talk led by the Opera's music staff. At the same time, the choristers put on their costumes and makeup.

After the stage director gives any last minute instructions to the cast, the principals and supporting roles warm up in their dressing rooms, the chorus warms up with the chorusmaster, and the orchestra warms up in the orchestra pit.



# *Behind the Scenes*

The production stage manager “calls” the show, announcing entrance and lighting cues. Two other stage managers assist in getting the cast and chorus on and off the stage. At this point the production stage manager calls ‘places’.

The principal oboe gives a concert “a” to which the orchestra tunes. The surtitle prompter cues the English translation from the control box. The conductor shakes the concertmaster’s (lead violinist’s) hand and mounts the podium to applause from the audience.

A hush descends, the house lights go out, the flyman raises the curtain and the show begins.

During the interval (usually about 20 mins) the audience returns to the lobby for refreshments while the stagehands reset the stage for the next act.

When the performance ends the company get to take a bow for all their hard work. This is called the curtain call.

There are many ways to get involved in the theatre. Have you had any experience back stage? What role did you play? What would you like to do in the future, and why?





# The Opera Survival Guide

Here are 10 tips to help you get the most out of your first opera:

1. Research the story before you get to the theatre. It helps to have an idea of the basic story at least.

*"Make sure to do your research before you go watch! Chances are it won't be in English, so knowing the backstory/plot of the opera will make it so much more enjoyable!" ~ Tiffany Drew*

2. Arrive early. If you're late you'll have to wait until the interval to get in.
3. Use the restroom before the show and at the interval. It can be a long wait for the next break...
4. Feel free to chat before the show, and at the interval, but when the conductor arrives, that's your cue to settle in and listen silently.
5. Turn off your devices before the opera starts. You know you can!
6. Let's talk clapping:
  - 6.1. People usually clap when the conductor arrives and gives the audience a nod or a wave
  - 6.2. We clap after any amazing solos and at the end of an act

- 6.3. And we clap at the very end, where if you want to sound fancy, you can also call out "bravo!" (well done!) or "bravo maestro!" (well done conductor!)
7. Concert-goers get good at coughing in the loud bits, not the silences. It's an art.
8. Try reading the surtitles (English translation projected above the stage) in your peripheral vision while you enjoy the on-stage action.
9. If you get lost, chances are lots of other people are too, so don't worry, try some of these tips:
  - 9.1. During the interval, read up on the next act using the synopsis in the programme
  - 9.2. Move your attention from the singers to the orchestra for a while. Try to follow a particular instrument or group for a time. Try to work out what the instruments are telling you about what's happening on stage
  - 9.3. Just enjoy the spectacle of it all
10. If you close your eyes, you are a gonner. When your head jerks up again, try not to snort loudly or look confused.

*"I fell asleep in my first opera, and it wasn't my last!" ~ Moses Mackay*

"If you don't like one opera don't assume that you won't like them all. Keep an open mind. The world of opera is so vast, there is bound to be something from an operatic work over the last 400 years that hits the spot, resonates, holds meaning and musical appeal for everyone. It's definitely understandable to find opera overwhelming the first time, but to aid viewing an opera, it's definitely useful to understand the story, so read the synopsis before each act and let it wash over you. Director's notes in the programme can also be useful to explain a wacky interpretation".

~ Carleen Ebbs

"I have always been involved with performing, starting ballet at the age of three, piano at the age of four and voice lessons at the age of five. I became obsessed with anything related to performing, learning as much as I could about the stage. My first love was Musical Theatre, combining my love of dance and voice. My favourite musicals were a part of the legit genre, encouraging me to seek out the appropriate sound. The sound associated with the legit voice is rather classical. As my classical sound developed I immediately fell in love with opera".

~ Pasquale Orchard

# Getting Started in Opera

Many singers start with **voice lessons** at school and then go on to operatic training at university. Famous New Zealand singer, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, became quite famous as a pop singer before moving to opera. Opera students study singing, music history, theory, composition and voice teaching. They also study diction and several **foreign languages**. About this time, singers begin to get work in the 'real world'. They often start with small parts, but if they work hard and are determined and reliable, they will eventually land lead or 'principal' roles.

Professional singers have a **portfolio** of roles that they know well, and since principal artists are expected to have their parts **memorized** before rehearsals begin, this takes a lot of work and a keen memory! Singers continue to take lessons for many years, working with teachers who help them refine their singing technique. Many also employ an **acting coach** as great singers are not automatically great actors.

"In year 2 of my university singing course in Otago I started singing opera arias. I originally wanted to sing early music".

~ Anna Leese

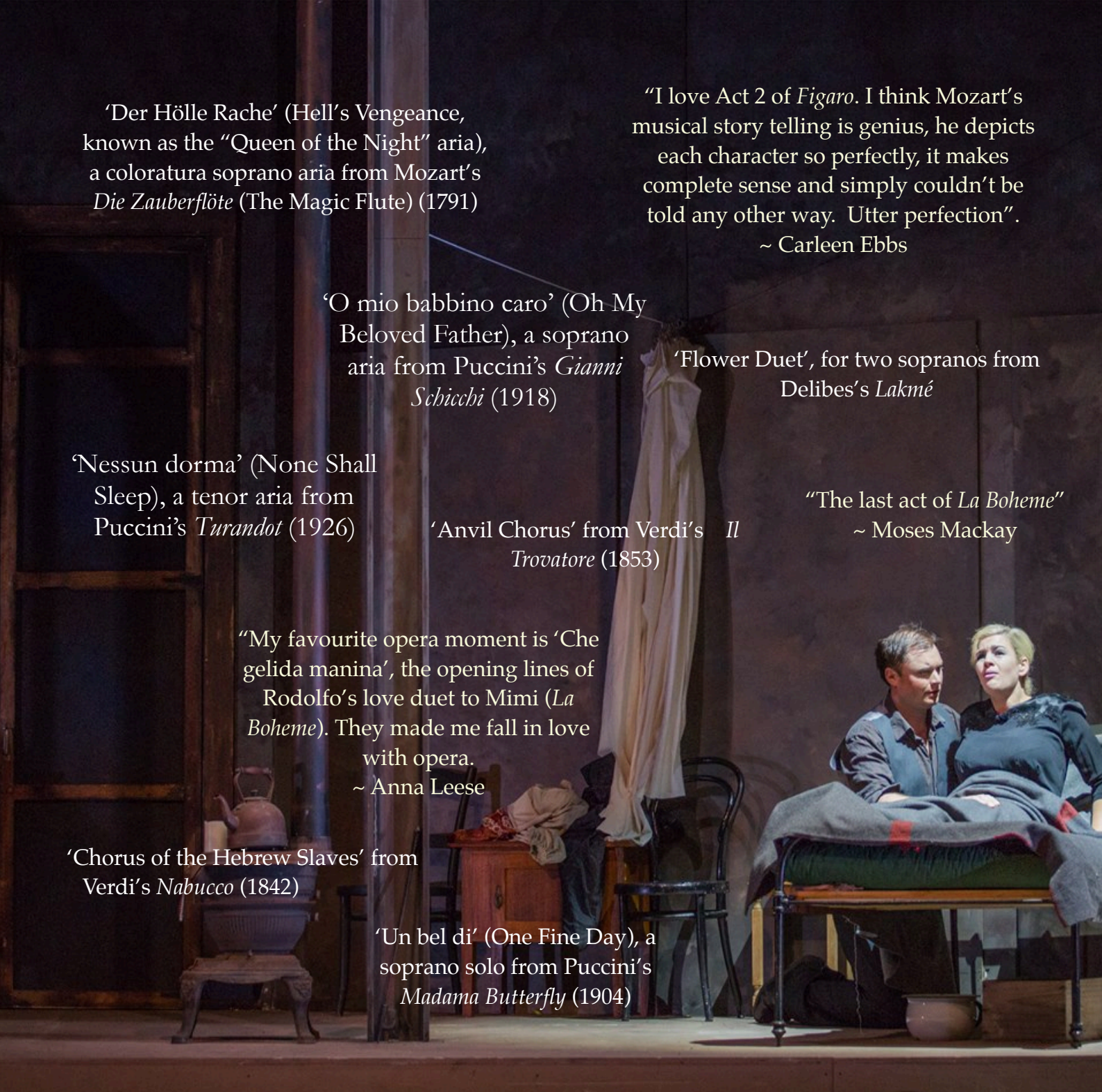
In high school my teacher forced me to sing an aria from *Le Nozze di Figaro* in order to pass! That's how I got started in opera".

~ Moses Mackay

"I started getting into opera soon after I joined PPV at the end of 2015. I never really thought operatic music would be something I would ever listen to, but we were starting to learn the music for *La Boheme* and it was actually quite cool, the music would cover so many emotions in just one song, I loved it. I actually went home and downloaded the soundtrack. Now I quite often listen to opera!".

~ Tiffany Drew





'Der Hölle Rache' (Hell's Vengeance, known as the "Queen of the Night" aria), a coloratura soprano aria from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute) (1791)

"I love Act 2 of *Figaro*. I think Mozart's musical story telling is genius, he depicts each character so perfectly, it makes complete sense and simply couldn't be told any other way. Utter perfection".  
~ Carleen Ebbs

'O mio babbino caro' (Oh My Beloved Father), a soprano aria from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (1918)

'Flower Duet', for two sopranos from Delibes's *Lakmé*

'Nessun dorma' (None Shall Sleep), a tenor aria from Puccini's *Turandot* (1926)

'Anvil Chorus' from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (1853)

"The last act of *La Boheme*"  
~ Moses Mackay

"My favourite opera moment is 'Che gelida manina', the opening lines of Rodolfo's love duet to Mimi (*La Boheme*). They made me fall in love with opera.  
~ Anna Leese

'Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves' from Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842)

'Un bel di' (One Fine Day), a soprano solo from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904)

# Favourite Opera Moments

Listen to some of these favourite moments to see what all the fuss is about. They will all be in your local library or online.

# Write a Review

Here are some tips for how to write a great review of the opera:

## 1. Give some background

One of the main purposes of a concert review is to make people feel like they were actually sitting next to you. Let the reader know a bit about you. Why are you at the opera? Your past experience of opera or classical music? etc. If this is your first time ever in a concert hall, you'll want to **keep it simple** for now: describe the venue, its location, comfort, acoustic, atmosphere, how big the audience was etc.

## 2. Keep it real

Now for the **music**, which is at the heart of the review and this is where some of you will start to wonder if you know enough about opera to have an opinion. Good news! **All opinions are important**, and what you write now depends on your level of knowledge of classical music:

- If you're a newbie - which is absolutely fine: how did it make you feel? Did you like the sound of the orchestra, or were you impressed by the power of a particular family of instruments, such as the brass section? What was happening in your head when you were watching or listening to the opening moments? Fascination? Incomprehension? A bit of both? How did you find the costumes and set? Did you like the staging and were the singers actually good actors? Say a few things about the story too!

## 3. Don't be afraid to have strong opinions

It's quite natural not to feel confident in your opinions, but the best reviews **sound sure of themselves**. Don't be afraid to take a strong stand! Plus there's nothing more boring than a wishy-washy review with sentences like "I sort of enjoyed this" instead of stating your views in no uncertain terms. What moments stood out for you and why? What was the highlight? What would have improved the experience for you?

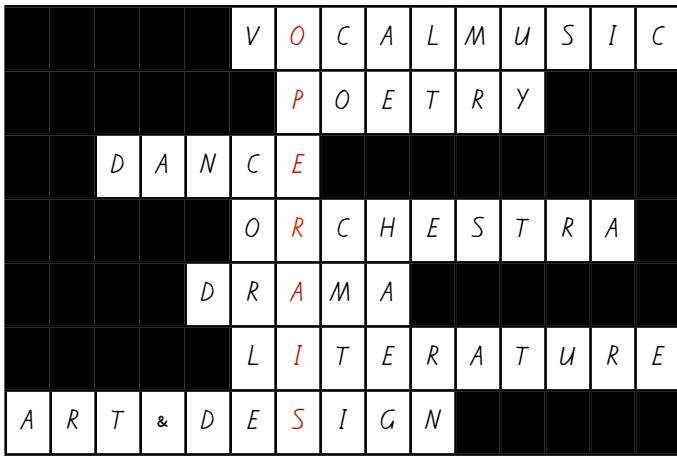
## 4. Be creative (and fun!)

A review is great opportunity to show off your sense of humour. So, besides being informative and constructively critical, your review should also be entertaining to read! Treat it like telling a story.

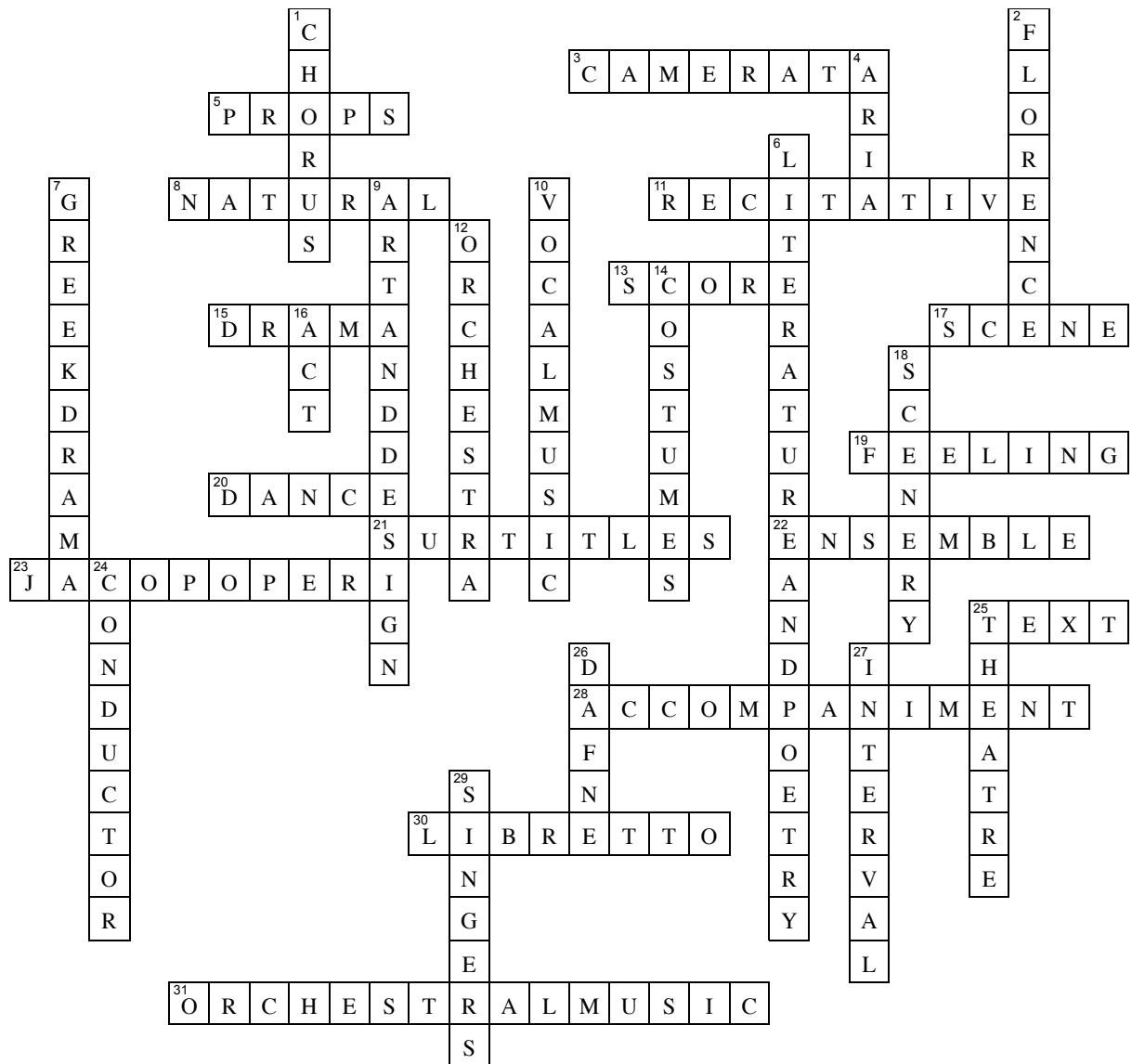
Send us your review!  
We'd love to hear your thoughts.  
email [info@primavolta.co.nz](mailto:info@primavolta.co.nz)

**Address:**  
Prima Volta Charitable Trust  
PO Box 12 223  
Ahuriri, Napier 4143





Singing, or vocal music, is the most important part of opera, because singing is the only discipline that stops it being opera if it's taken away. Opera without props...possible, opera without singing...drama.



Melodies can match the feelings in the text many different ways, but here are a few examples: Someone in love can sing a gentle, lyrical melody with smooth contour and soaring climaxes, while an angry character can be given ominous repeated notes, a loud dynamic and a minor key to express their frustration.

A **Sitzprobe** (pronounced ZITS-probe) is a German term used in opera and musical theatre to describe a seated rehearsal. It is often the first rehearsal where the orchestra and singers rehearse together.

*#operaclass*

<http://primavolta.co.nz/opera-class/>