

THE OPERATIC VOICE

Being an opera singer is hard work! Singers need to be physically strong and have superb technique in order to sustain long phrases (musical thoughts): this means they have excellent control of both the inhalation and the exhalation of their breath. Likewise, their voices must maintain a resonance (using cavities in the face to increase the audibility of the voice, even when singing quietly) in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and the chest cavities. All of this resonance is necessary to achieve the volume required to be heard above the orchestra that accompanies the singers. Opera singers do not usually use microphones, so they must project their voices throughout a whole theatre using only their muscles and technique! All voices are defined by both the actual voice "type" and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited. The range, pitch, and tone of a singer's voice will determine what kind of role they will play in the opera. Below are a list of voice types (and ranges) commonly found in operas:

Female Voice Types

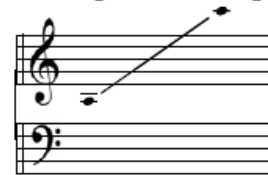
- **Soprano** ("sopra" = "over")

The highest pitched female voice. Soprano voices vary by sound type: there are **coloratura sopranos**, who can sing very high notes and rapid passages with ease, **dramatic sopranos**, whose voices have great power, and **lyric sopranos**, whose voices have exceptional beauty and can sustain long passages. Composers often (but not always) write the female lead role in an opera for a soprano.



- **Mezzo-Soprano** ("mezzo" = "medium")

Lower than the soprano and higher than contralto. Usually plays either the character of a young boy (this is called a **trouser role**) or a complex character with energy and awareness of life, or an evil character. Bizet's *Carmen* is one of the most famous mezzo roles in opera, and is a rare lead role for a mezzo.



- **Contralto** ("contra" = "against" & "alto" = "high")

The lowest pitched female voice, these singers have a deep, well rounded sound. Contraltos more rare than sopranos or mezzos, and they are usually given the role of a maid, mother, or grandmother. Olga in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* is one such role.

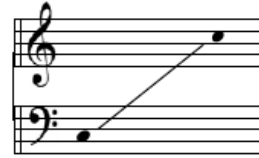


Marriage of Figaro - Austin Opera

Male Voice Types

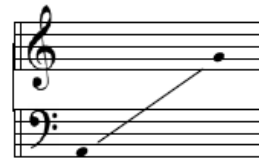
- **Tenor** (“*tenere*”= “to hold” - central notes of harmony)

The highest sounding male voice: often the leading role. Tenors, like sopranos, can have **lyric** or **dramatic** sound quality. Luciano Pavarotti was one of the world’s most famous **lyric tenors**. Tenors typically play characters that fall in love with Sopranos, such as Alfredo in Verdi’s *La Traviata*.



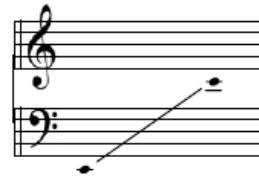
- **Baritone** (from the Greek term for “deep sounding”)

These voices are more mellow-sounding and slightly lower than tenors. The roles sung by baritones are usually father figures or counts and other nobles, and these are often important roles in the story (like Rigoletto in Verdi’s *Rigoletto*).



- **Bass** (“low”)

Basses are the lowest sounding human voices, and they often play roles of wise and older characters in opera, like kings, emperors, or gods. They can also play profoundly evil characters, like Satan in *Mephistopheles* or *Faust*. The **basso profundo** is the lowest voice in singing, and is commonly heard in Russian opera. One of the most recognizable bass roles in opera is Leporello in W.A. Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.



Don Carlo - Austin Opera