

The Bass Voice in Opera

Art Axelrod



Fyodor Chaliapin (1873 - 1938)

The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

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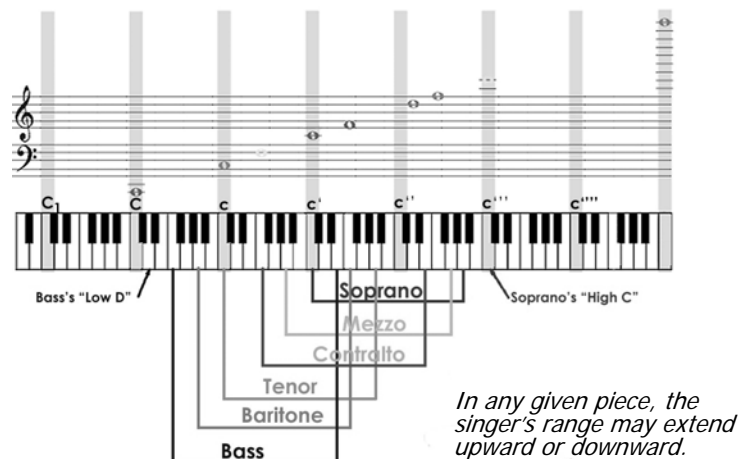
Principal Vocal Ranges in Opera

- ◆ Soprano
- ◆ Mezzo-Soprano (Mezzo)
- ◆ Contralto
- ◆ Tenor
- ◆ Baritone
- ◆ Bass

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- ◆ **Bass**

Principal Vocal Ranges



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Common Bass Roles

- ◆ The old king
- ◆ The high priest
- ◆ The benevolent trusted old advisor
- ◆ A distinguished, powerful or especially vigorous elderly man
- ◆ An old warrior
- ◆ A barbarian
- ◆ An older comic protagonist ("Basso Buffo")
- ◆ A disreputable older man
- ◆ The Devil
- ◆ Rarely, but sometimes, a villain

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Our Program This Evening

- ◆ The Viking
 - The Viking Guest from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko*
- ◆ Benevolent High Priest
 - Sarastro in Mozart's *Magic Flute*
- ◆ Stentorian Bass
 - Hagen Summons the Vassals from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*
- ◆ Lyric
 - Prince Gremin in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*
- ◆ The Devil
 - Mephistopheles in Mussorgsky's and Gounod's *Faust*
- ◆ Classic Russian Bass
 - Tsar Boris's Farewell to his Son from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godnov*

Bass Categories, cont.

- ◆ The Soldier
 - Ferrando's Aria, from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*
- ◆ Tender and Sentimental
 - "Vecchia zimarra, senti" from Puccini's *La Boheme*
- ◆ Italian Comic Bass (Basso Buffo)
 - Don Basilio in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*
- ◆ The Mongol Chieftan
 - Khan Konchak's Aria from Borodin's *Prince Igor*
- ◆ Mysterious Voices
 - The Temple Guardian's from *Magic Flute*
- ◆ The Old King
 - "Dormiró sol" from Verdi's *Don Carlo*

The Viking

Rimsky-Korsakov

Song of the Viking Guest from *Sadko*

1. Fyodor Chaliapin – 1927 (Restored Audio)
Orchestra not listed, Eric Coates, cond.
(Excerpt)

2. Bulat Minjelkiev – 1994 (Video)
Kirov Opera, Valery Gergiev, Cond.

Sadko

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, 1844 – 1908

Libretto by the composer, V.V. Stasov,
V.N. Bel'sky et al after medieval epic
poem.

First Performance, 1898, Moscow

A minstrel, Sadko, charms the daughter
of the King of the Ocean Sea, who
rewards him with enough gold to
become a merchant.

Song of the Viking Guest

Sadko, desiring to be a merchant, has obtained a fleet of ships and a crew, but has not yet decided where to sail first.

At the local inn, there are three foreign guests. Sadko asks each of them to describe his home country.

The first is a Viking (Here called a "Varangian".)

The Wise, Benovolent High Priest

Sarastro's Aria from *The Magic Flute*

Franz-Josef Selig, (b), Sarastro – 2003
(Dorothea Röschman (s), Pamina)

Orchestra of the Royal Opera House,
Covent Garden, Colin Davis, cond.

David McVicar, dir.

The Magic Flute

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1756-1791

Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder

First Performance 1791, Vienna

Set in legendary times, an allegory of Good versus Evil, with much Masonic imagery.

Sarastro's Aria

"In diesen heil'gen Hallen"

Pamina is in the custody of Sarastro, the wise and benevolent High Priest of Isis and Osiris. Her mother, the evil Queen of the Night has just visited her and ordered her to kill Sarastro, giving her a dagger.

When Sarastro arrives, distraught Pamina tells him what has happened and gives him the dagger. She begs Sarastro not to take revenge upon her mother.

This aria is his response. He returns the dagger as a symbol of his trust in her.

The Stentorian Bass

Hagan Summons the Vassals from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*

Matti Salminen (b) - 1990

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus,
James Levine, cond .

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Götterdämmerung

Richard Wagner, 1813-1883

Libretto by composer.

First Performance, 1862, Vienna

Part 4 of *The Ring of the Nibelung* based
on the 13th century epic *Nibelungenlied*.

A 19 hour epic spread over four
evenings.

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Hagan Summons the Vassals

Hagan is the half-brother of King Gunther and his sister Gutrune of the Gibichung.

Through sorcery, they have made the hero Siegfried forget his lover, Brünhilde, so that Gunther can marry Brünhilde and Gutrune marry Siegfried.

Here, Hagan summons the Gibichung vassals to prepare for the wedding.

Lyric Bass

Prince Gremin's Aria from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*

Sergei Aleksashkin (b) – 2007

(Dimitry Hvorostovsky, Onegin; Renée Fleming,
Tatyana)

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Valery
Gergiev, cond.

Eugene Onegin

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovski, 1840 – 1893

Libretto by the composer, after verse
novel by Alexander Pushkin (1831)

First Performance, 1879, Moscow

Hansome, cosmopolitan Onegin rejects
simple country girl Tatyana. He later
falls in love with Tatyana but is then, in
turn, rejected by her.

Prince Gremin's Aria

Onegin has returned to St. Petersburg
and attends a grand ball. He encounters
his relative, a distinguished general,
Prince Gremin, who is now married to
Tatyana.

Gremin sings of his profound love for his
young wife.

The Devil - I

Mussorgsky's setting of *The Song of the Flea*

From

Goethe's *Faust*

Boris Christoff (b)
1958

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The Song of the Flea

Modest Mussorgsky, 1839 – 1881

- ◆ An aria from an opera that never got written?
- ◆ Mussorgsky had obtained a recent translation of Goethe's *Faust* into Russian by Aleksandr Nikolayevich Strugovshchikov (1808-78).
- ◆ Set Mephistopheles' *Song of the Flea* as a song, c. 1879. Never wrote any other part of a Faust opera.

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Mephistophelese's *Song of the Flea*

Mephistophelese and Faust are at a village tavern. The villagers strike up a drinking song.

Mephistophelese interrupts them saying, "I have a better one!" He sings the rude, mocking *Song of the Flea*.

Mussorgsky's version accurately follows Goethe.

The Devil - II Charles Gounod

Song of the Golden Calf from *Faust*

Ruggero Raimondi (b) – 1985

Orchestre National de Radiodiffusion
Francaise, George Tzipine, cond.

Ken Russell, Director

Faust

Charles Gounod, 1818-1893

Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré

First Performance, 1859, Paris

Based loosely after Goethe's Faust. An aging scholar sells his soul to the devil to obtain youth, wealth and the woman of his dreams.

Song of the Golden Calf

Faust

Gounod here replaces Goethe's rather crude *Song of the Flea* with his own, more refined and moralistic *Song of the Golden Calf*.

Originally set by Gounod in a rural village square, here the director chooses to present a "Las Vegas" concept interpretation.

The Russian Dramatic Bass

Tsar Boris' Farewell to his Son from *Boris Godunov*

Boris Christoff (b) – 1958
London Symphony Orchestra, Eric
Robinson, cond.

Filmed in B&W at BBC Studios, London, 1958
Transcribed to DVD, 2004

Boris Godunov

Modest Mussorgsky, 1839 – 1881

Libretto by the composer after dramatic
poem by Pushkin and *History of the
Russian State* by Nikolai Karamzin.

First Performance, 1874, St. Petersburg

Boris has achieved the throne as a result
of assassinating Tsarevitch Dimitry. He
is destroyed by his conscience.

Boris' Farewell to his Son

Boris realizes he is dying. He summons his son and heir, Feodor, and sends away his courtiers.

He then says his farewell to Feodor, giving him advice on how to be the rightful Tsar.

The Captain

Ferrando's Aria from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*

José van Dam (b), chorus – 1978

Orchestra and Chorus of the Vienna State
Opera, Herbert von Karajan, cond.

Il Trovatore

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 – 1901

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano and
Emmanuele Bardare based on *El
Trovador* by Antonio Garcia Gutiérrez
(1836)

First Performance, 1853, Rome

Manrico, a troubadour, son of the Gypsy
woman, Azucena, is at war with the
cruel, despotic Count di Luna.

Ferrando's Aria

Scene 1 of the opera: Ferrando, Captain
of the Guard of Count Di Luna, relates to
his men the events of some twenty years
before. He describes how a Gypsy
woman supposedly put a curse on the old
count's son (brother of the current
count), who subsequently died.

This scene serves as a Prologue to the
opera.

Tender and Sentimental:
The Philosopher
Bids Farewell to his Overcoat

“Vecchia zimarra, senti”
From Puccini’s *La Bohème*

Giovanni Battista Parodi (b) – 2003

Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro della
Scala, Milan, Bruno Bartoletti, cond.

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La Bohème

Giacomo Puccini (1858 - 1924)

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi
Illica, after Henry Murger, *Scènes de la
vie de bohème*, 1845

First Performance, Turin, 1896

The life, loves and tragedies of a group of
artists in 19th century Paris

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“Vecchia zimarra, senti”

Mimi, dying of consumption, returns to her lover, the poet Rodolfo. His three bohemian companions do what they can to help.

Colline, the philosopher, agrees to pawn his overcoat to pay for medicine. In this aria, he bids it a fond farewell.

The Italian Basso Buffo

“La calunnia” from Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*

Robert Lloyd (b), Don Basilio – 1988
(Carlos Feller (br), Dr. Bartolo)

Radio Symphony Orchestra Stuttgart,
Gabriele Ferro, cond.

The Barber of Seville

Gioacchino Rossini, 1792-1868

Libretto by Cesare Sterbini after a play by
Pierre de Beaumarschais.

First Performance, 1816, Rome

The wily barber, Figaro, assists Count
Almaviva in winning the hand of Rosina
and thwarting her self-serving guardian,
Dr. Bartolo

"La Calunnia"

Corrupt and venal Dr. Bartolo is trying to
marry his ward, Rosina, so as to gain her
wealth. He is being thwarted by Count
Almaviva and Rosina, with the help of the
wily barber, Figaro.

Dr. Bartolo enlists the aid of the music
master, Don Basilio, who proposes to
destroy Count Almaviva with a campaign
of slander.

The Nomad Chieftan

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887)

"No, no my friend" from *Prince Igor*

Vladimir Vaneev(b), Khan Konchak – 1998
(Nikolai Putilin (bbr), Prince Igor)

Kirov Opera Orchestra, Chorus and Ballet,
Valery Gergiev, cond

Prince Igor

Alexander Borodin, 1833 – 1887

Libretto by the composer, scenario by V.V
Stasov after the medieval epic *Song of
Igor's Campaign*.

First Performance, 1890, Mariinsky, St.
Petersburg

Prince Igor of Novgorod-Seversk fights a
valiant but losing campaign against the
Polovtsi.

"No, no, my friend"
Prince Igor

Prince Igor and his forces have been defeated by the Polovsti under Khan Konchak. Igor and his son, Vladimir, have been made captives, but treated royally in the Polovsti camp.

Here, Konchak tells Igor that he is not a prisoner, but an honored guest, and explains why he respects and admires him.

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Mysterious Warriors

The Temple Guardians
From Mozart's *The Magic Flute*

Hans Johanson, Jerker Arvidsson, (t&b)
1975
(In Swedish)

Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Eric
Ericson, cond.

Movie and TV version, directed by Ingmar Bergman

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The Temple Guardians

Tamino desires to join the Brotherhood led by the wise and benevolent High Priest Sarastro. The last step in his initiation is to face a trial of Fire and Water.

As the Brotherhood anxiously watches, Tamino goes forward, greeted by the two mysterious armed Temple Guardians, a tenor and bass singing in unison.

(This production is a movie version, sung in Swedish, by the great director Ingmar Bergman.)

The Lonely Old King

"Dormiró sol" from Verdi's *Don Carlo*

1. Nicolai Ghiaurov (b) 1983 (Video)
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.
2. Fyodor Chaliapin – 1922 (Restored Audio)
Orchestra not listed, Josef Pasternack , cond.
(Excerpt)

Don Carlo

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto based on a plays by Schiller and Eugène Cormon. Several French and Italian versions of the libretto were created.

First Performance, 1867, Paris (French version)

Set in royal courts of France (act I) and Spain (acts II-V), 16th century. Don Carlo is in opposition to his father, King Philip II, both in politics and love.

Dormiró sol

from *Don Carlo*

The elderly King Philip, alone in his study, reflects upon his isolation. In the previous scene, he mourned the fact that his beautiful young politically-arranged wife never loved him (*Ella gemmai m'amo*).

Now, he reflects how he will sleep alone in his royal robes in his tomb.

Dormiró sol
Fyodor Chaliapin

"I will sleep alone, in my
royal robes.

"I will sleep alone, in the
evening of my days

"Under the black vault of
my tomb in the Escorial."



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Chaliapin's Grave
Novodevichy Cemetery, Moscow

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Thank You



Fyodor Chaliapin, 1911
Konstantin Korovin (1861-1939)

And Good Evening!