



The Mezzo and Contralto Voice in Opera

Art Axelrod



The Opera Guild of Rochester

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Ranges of the Human Voice

The Fundamental Ranges:

- ◆ Soprano
- ◆ Alto
- ◆ Tenor
- ◆ Bass

In opera, solo voices are classified more finely:

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Principal Vocal Ranges in Opera

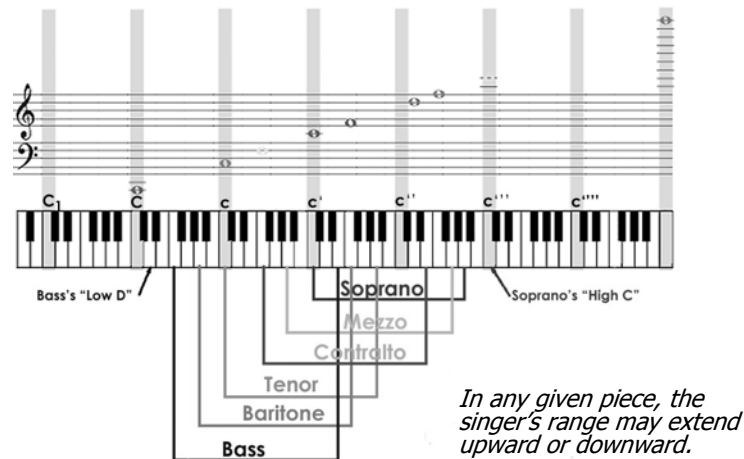
- ◆ Soprano
- ◆ Mezzo-Soprano (Mezzo)
- ◆ Contralto
- ◆ Tenor
- ◆ Baritone
- ◆ Bass

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Principal Vocal Ranges

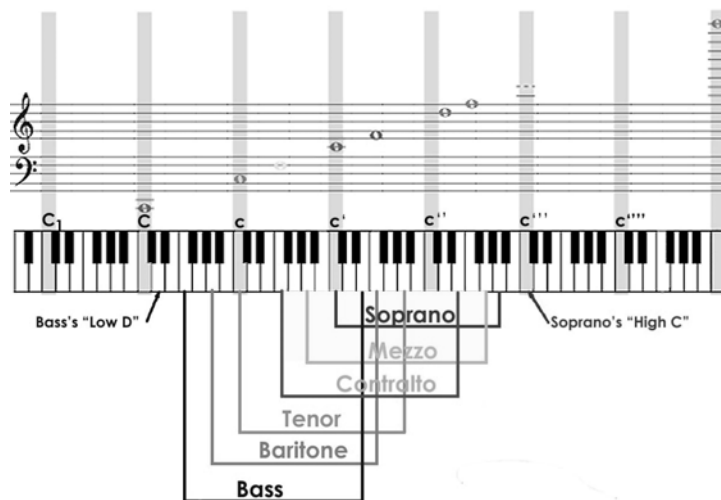


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Mezzo/Contralto Vocal Ranges



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Common Mezzo Roles

- ◆ The female “heavy” or villainess
- ◆ The heroine or female protagonist, to emphasize a stronger character (Carmen, Angelina in *Cenerentola*, Rosina in *Barber of Seville*)
- ◆ The mother or aunt
- ◆ Heroine’s older maid or nanny
- ◆ Witch or Gypsy woman
- ◆ Teenage boy (“trouser role”)
- ◆ In 17th and early 18th Century, any lead male
- ◆ “Witches, bitches and boys”

The Contralto

- ◆ Low-pitched, “dark” female voice
- ◆ Infrequently used in opera
- ◆ Some Examples:
 - Erda, the Earth Goddess in Wagner’s *Ring* Cycle
 - Olga, Tatyana’s younger(!) sister in Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*

Some Mezzo Categories

- ◆ Bel Canto / Coloratura
 - Rosina in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*
- ◆ Trouser Role
 - Cherubino in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*
- ◆ Dramatic Mezzo
 - Azucena in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*

Our Selections

1. Strong Heroine: Rosina
"Io sono docile" from *The Barber of Seville*
2. Dark Heroine: Carmen
Fortune Telling Song from *Carmen*
3. Flighty Young Girl: Olga
Olga's Aria from *Eugene Onegin*
4. Scheming Princess: Princess Marina
"Oh, how bored!" from *Boris Godunov*
5. The Heroine's Companion: Adalgisa
"Mira, O Norma" (duet) from *Norma*
6. Teenage Boy: Cherubino
"Voi che sapete" from *The Marriage of Figaro*
7. Baroque Trouser Role: King Xerxes
"Ombra mai fu" from *Xerxes*

Our Selections (cont.)

8. Tragic Gypsy Woman: Azucena (Mezzo) "Stride la vampa"
from *Il trovatore*
9. A Witch: Ulrica (Mezzo)
"Re dell'abisso" from *Un ballo in maschera*
10. Another Witch: Ježibaba (Mezzo)
"Hocus pocus . . ." from *Rusalka*
11. Mysterious Earth-Mother Goddess: Erda (Contralto)
"Weiche, Wotan, weiche!" from *Das Rheingold*
12. English Folk Song: Historic Performance (Contralto)
"Blow the winds southerly"
13. Eccentric Russian Prince Orlovsky (Mezzo)
"Chacun à son goût" from *Die Fledermaus*

Bel Canto / Coloratura Mezzo

"Io sonno docile" from *The Barber of Seville*

(Video)

Cecilia Bartoli (ms) – 1988

Radio Symphony Orchestra, Stuttgart,
Gabriele Ferro, cond.

The Barber of Seville

Giocchino Rossini, 1792-1868

Libretto by Cesare Sterbini, after the first play
of a trilogy by Beaumarchais, 1775

First Performance, 1816, Rome

Handsome Count Almaviva succeeds in winning
Rosina, foiling her avaricious guardian, Dr.
Bartolo, with the help of the clever barber,
Figaro

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"Io sonno Docile"

Barber of Seville

Rosina's guardian, the venal Dr. Bartolo, wants
to marry her, presumably for her inheritance.

With the help of the wily barber, Figaro,
handsome, dashing Count Almaviva. After
hearing his voice, Rosina has fallen in love
with him (this is opera!).

"Io sonno docile": Rosina announces that she is
meek, modest and docile – as long as she
gets her way!

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The Dark Heroine

The Fortune-telling Scene from *Carmen*

Marina Domashenko (ms), Carmen
2003

Orchestra and Chorus of the Arena di
Verona, Alain Lombard, cond.

Carmen

Georges Bizet – 1838-1875

Libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic
Halévy after a novella by Prosper
Mérimée (1845)

First Performance, 1875, Paris

The tempestuous affair between the
Gypsy woman, Carmen, and the simple
corporal of the Civil Guard, Don José

"Fortune-telling Scene"

Carmen

Carmen has seduced the naïve Don José into deserting from the Guard to join her as a smuggler.

However, her flirtatiousness and his jealousy has produced a dangerous rift between them. Carmen fears that the affair will end badly.

On a smuggling job, up in the mountains, Carmen's two friends playfully tell their fortunes with cards. Carmen does the same, but her results are ominous.

Flighty Young Girl

Lyric Contralto

Olga's Aria from *Eugene Onegin*

Yelena Novak (c), Olga;
Maria Gavrilova (s), Tatyana
2000

Orchestra of the Bolshoi Theater, Mark
Ermler, cond.

Eugene Onegin

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, 1840 – 1893

Libretto by the composer after the verse novel of Aleksandr Pushkin (1831)

First Performance, 1879, Moscow

Onegin, a disenchanted young sophisticate, rejects the love of the romantic country girl, Tatanya, and kills his best friend in a duel.

He receives his retribution when later he falls in love with her. She is now married and chooses to remain loyal to her husband.

Olga's Aria"

Eugene Onegin

In the opening scene of the opera, we are introduced to two of the principal characters. Our heroine, Tatyana is shy, dreamy and romantic, while her younger sister, Olga, is frivolous and funloving.

Frivolous Olga is sung by a contralto!
(Only a Russian composer could get away with that.)

The Scheming Princess

"Oh, How bored!" from

Boris Godunov

Olga Borodina, Marina (ms) – 1990

Kirov Opera, Valery Gergiev, cond.

Boris Godunov (1874 version)

Modest Mussorgsky, 1839 – 1881

Libretto by the Composer after the historical drama by Alexander Pushkin and *The History of the Russian State* by Nikolai Karamzin

First Performance, 1874, St. Petersburg

Tsar Boris had gained the throne by murdering the true heir, Dimitry. He is consumed by his guilty conscience.

"Oh, How bored!"

Boris Godunov

Boris has attained the throne by murdering the true heir, Dimitry, (son of Ivan The Terrible).

The monk, Grigory, has escaped from his monastery and poses as Dimitry, vowing to take the throne.

In Poland, Princess Marina sees an opportunity to assume power in Russia by supporting the False Dimitry. Here, she sings about how bored she is in her court and desires adventure and glory.

Duet – The Heroine's Companion

"Mira, O Norma" from *Norma*

Daniela Barcellona (ms), Adalgisa, June
Anderson (s), Norma

2001

Teatro Reggio di Parma, Europa Galante
Orchestra, Fabio Biondi, cond.

Norma

Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835)

Libretto by Felice Romani, after the drama *Norma*, by Alexandre Soumet (1831)

First Performance 1831, La Scala, Milan

Gaul is occupied by Rome. Druid Priestess Norma is torn between her duty to her people and her love for a Roman general.

"Mira, O Norma"

Norma

The Druidic Gauls have been conquered by Rome and are now occupied by Roman Legions.

Druid Priestess Norma has fallen in love with a Roman General, Pollione, and has secretly borne him two children. She is torn between her love for Pollione and her duty to her people.

Now, she has learned that Pollione has been unfaithful to her. Devastated, she resolves to kill her children and then herself.

Her acolyte, Adalgisa, tries to dissuade her. (Norma does not yet realize that it is Adalgisa who is her rival.)

Mezzo – Trouser Role

“Voi che sapete” from *Marriage of Figaro*

(Video)

Pamela Helen Stephen (ms) – 1993
The English Baroque Soloists, John Eliot
Gardner, cond.

The Marriage of Figaro

W. A. Mozart, 1756-1791

Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte after the
second play of a trilogy by
Beaumarchais, 1784

First Performance, 1786, Vienna

Wily Figaro, with the help of the
Countess, outwits the lecherous Count
Almaviva and preserves the honor of his
fiancée, Susanna.

"Voi che sapete"

Marriage of Figaro

Rosina, (from part I of Beaumarchais, trilogy) is now Countess Almaviva. Figaro is now the Count's valet and his fiancée, Susanna, is Countess Rosina's maid.

Teenage Cherubino is serving as Page to the Count.

Cherubino, the archetypical horny teenager, laments to the Countess and Susanna of his romantic problems.

Baroque Trouser Role

"Ombra mai fu" from *Serse (Xerxes)*

Anita Terzian (ms) – 1989

Polish Radio Chamber Orchestra, Agnes Duczmal, cond.

Xerxes (Serse)

George Frederic Handel, 1685 – 1759

Libretto by Silvio Stampiglia, set by
Giovanni Bononcini (1694)

First Performance, 1738, London

Legendary King Xerxes seeks love.

(The protagonist of the opera, a comedy,
has nothing in particular to do with any
of the historical Persian kings named
Xerxes.)

“Ombra mai fu”

Xerxes

In the opening scene, King Xerxes, in love
with Love, sings a tender love song to
his plane tree.

Tragic Gypsy Dramatic Mezzo

"Stride la vampa" from *Il Trovatore*

Fiorenze Cossotto (ms) - 1978
Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera,
Herbert von Karajan, cond.

Il Trovatore

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 – 1901

Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano and
Leone Bardare, after the play by
Antonio Gutiérrez, 1836

First Performance, 1853, Rome

Manrico, the troubadour, struggles with
the evil Count di Luna

“Stride la vampa”
Il Trovatore

At the Gypsy encampment: The Gypsy woman Azucena, thought to be Manrico’s mother, describes how her own mother was burned at the stake. Azucena’s mother had been condemned as a witch, supposedly for putting a curse on Count di Luna’s infant brother.

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The Witch
Dramatic Mezzo

“Re dell’abisso” from
Un ballo in maschera

Florence Quivar (ms), Ulrica; Luciano Pavarotti (t), King Gustav
1992

Orchestra and Chorus of the Metropolitan Opera, James Levine, cond.

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Un ballo in maschera

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 – 1901

Libretto by Antonio Somma after Gustavo III by Eugène Scribe (1833)

First Performance, 1859, Rome

King Gustav of Sweden has to deal with a palace conspiracy and his illicit love of his best friend's wife (requited but unconsummated).

"Re dell'abisso"

Un ballo in maschera

King Gustav decides to visit incognito the seeress and witch, Ulrica.

She will soon deliver an ominous prediction to him. But first, here she welcomes the King of the Abyss.

Ježibaba, The Witch

Dramatic Mezzo

"Hocus, pocus . . ."

from *Rusalka*

Larissa Diadkova (ms), Ježibaba; (Renée
Fleming (s), Rusalka)

2002

Orchestra of the Opéra National de Paris,
James Conlon, cond .

Rusalka

Antonín Dvořák, 1841 – 1904

Libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil after the tale
Undine by de la Motte Fouqué, 1811

First Performance, 1901, Prague

Rusalka, a incorporeal water nymph falls
in love with a human prince. She asks
Ježibaba, a witch, to give her a body.

The love affair ends tragically.

"Hocus Pocus . . ."

Rusalka

Rusalka, an incorporeal water nymph, has fallen in love with the Prince. She asks Ježibaba, a powerful witch, to give her a body.

Ježibaba agrees, however there are two conditions: Rusalka will be unable to speak; and if the Prince is untrue, both shall perish.

Here, we see Ježibaba's spell.

(Rest assured, no good will come of this!)

The Mysterious Earth-Mother

"Weiche, Wotan, weiche!"

from *Das Rheingold*

Patrica Bardon (c), Erde; Bryn Terfel
(bbr), Wotan

2010

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James
Levine, cond.

Robert Lepage, Director

Das Rheingold

Richard Wagner, 1813 – 1883

Prologue to *Der Ring des Nibelung*

Libretto by the composer, after several
mediaeval Germanic epics

First Performance, 1876, Bayreuth

An epic four-part music drama chronicling
the story of a cursed Ring, a Hero and
the end of the Old Gods.

“Weiche, Wotan, weiche!”

Das Rheingold

Wotan has promised the goddess Freia to the
Giants, Fafner and Fasolt, in return for them
building Valhalla. But he convinces them to
accept the magic Ring instead.

However, Wotan has fallen under the spell of
the Ring and resolves to get it back.

Just then, Erda, the mysterious Earth Goddess
appears and warns him to give it up.

"Blow the Winds Southerly"

Northumbrian Folk Song

Kathleen Ferrier, 1912-1953

Distinctive lyric contralto. Well-known in Britain, less so in US

This folk song audio was recorded in 1949. A collage of still photos were assembled and put on YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjvHg9cBriw>

The Eccentric Russian Prince

Trouser Role

"Chacun à son goût"

from *Die Fledermaus*

Doris Soffel (ms), Prince Orlofsky; Benjamin Luxon(br), Dr. Falke; Herrman Prey (t), Eisenstein

1984

Orchestra of The Royal Opera Covent Garden, Plácido Domingo, cond

Die Fledermaus

Johann Strauss II (1825-1899)

Libretto by Carl Haffner and Richard Genée
after the vaudeville *Le réveillon* by Meilhac
and Halévy, 1872

First Performance, 1874, Vienna

A sitcom in the form of a Viennese operetta
wherein Dr. Falke takes revenge upon Herr
von Eisenstein for in return for a previous
practical joke that Eisenstein played upon
him.

("Feldermaus" means "bat".)

"Chacun à son goût"

Die Fledermaus

Before the curtain rose, Eisenstein had played a
practical joke on Dr. Falke. In return, Falke
arranges an elaborate revenge upon
Eisenstein.

Falke arranges to have his friend, the Russian
Prince Orlofsky arrange a ball. All of the
principals have been invited.

Here, at his ball, the eccentric Prince introduces
himself.

Thank You



And Good Evening!