



Singer with Glove (c.1878)  
Edgar Degas  
Fogg Museum, Harvard University

## The Voices of Opera

*Art Axelrod*



## The Guild of Mercury Opera 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

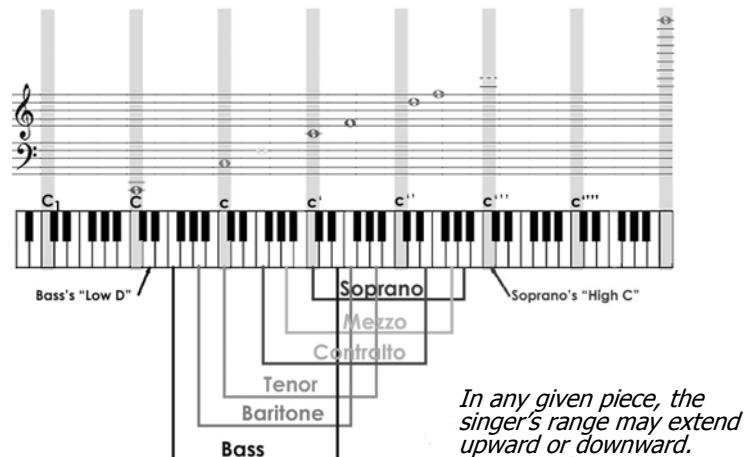
- ◆ Soprano
- ◆ Mezzo-Soprano (Mezzo)
- ◆ Contralto
  - Equivalent to Alto
- ◆ Tenor
- ◆ Baritone
- ◆ Bass

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## Principal Vocal Ranges



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## Some Vocabulary

### Characteristics of Sound:

Pitch, Volume, Timbre

Timbre, sometimes called "color", refers to the distribution of overtones that modify the basic pitch.

### Compass

The *compass* of a vocal piece is the complete range of pitches from lowest to highest, as opposed to:

### Tessitura (Italian, *texture*)

That portion of the piece's full compass that is consistently exploited and best characterizes that piece. Usually designated as high, low or moderate.

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## Fach or Category

- ◆ Fach (pl. Fächer), from German, *category, specialty, compartment, etc.*
- ◆ Of the operatic voice, a method of classifying singers and roles by the compass, weight, and color of the voice.
- ◆ Developed in Germany, used somewhat less strictly in the US.
- ◆ Some 25+ different *Fächer* are defined.
  - Examples: Dramatic Soprano, Lyric Soprano, Heldentenor, Buffo Baritone . . .
- ◆ In the US, the word *Category* is more frequently used in place of *Fach*.
- ◆ For an exhaustive listing of the system, see online Wikipedia entry, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fach>

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From  
Top



## The Voices



to  
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# The Soprano

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## Common Soprano Roles

- ◆ The heroine
- ◆ Young lady's maid
- ◆ Any young female character
- ◆ A supernatural character with feminine traits
- ◆ In 17<sup>th</sup> & early 18<sup>th</sup> century opera, a male character

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## Some Soprano Categories

- ◆ Lyric
  - Russalka in Dvořák's *Russalka*
- ◆ Dramatic
  - Floria Tosca in Puccini's *Tosca*
- ◆ Coloratura
  - The Forest Bird in Wagner's *Siegfried*
- ◆ Soubrette
  - Zerlina in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

## Lyric Soprano

**"Oh silver moon" from *Russalka***

(Video)

Renée Fleming (s) - 2002

Orchestra of the National Opera of Paris,  
James Conlon, cond.

# Russalka

Antonín Dvořák, 1841 – 1904

Libretto by Jaroslav Kapl, after de la Motte  
Fouqué, *Undine*, 1811

First Performance, 1901, Prague

Russalka, a beautiful Water Spirit, falls in love  
with a Handsome Prince, with the customary  
tragic outcome

“Oh silver moon”: Russalka asks the moon to  
send dreams of love to the sleeping Prince

# Dramatic Soprano

“*Vissi d’arte*” from *Tosca*

Renata Scotto (s), 1981

Philharmonia Orchestra, James Levine,  
cond.

# Tosca

Giacomo Puccini, 1858 – 1924

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica,  
after Victorien Sardou, *La Tosca*, 1887

First Performance, 1900, Rome

The painter, Cavaradossi and his lover, the  
singer, Tosca, struggle against the evil Baron  
Scarpia during the Austrian occupation of  
Italy.

“Vissi d’arte”: Tosca’s poignant soliloquy as she  
is about to sacrifice herself to the evil Baron

## Vissi d’Arte

**Tosca:**

I lived for art. I lived for love; never did I harm a living  
creature! Whatever misfortunes I encountered I sought  
with secret hand to succour. Ever in pure faith, my  
prayers rose in the holy chapels. Ever in pure faith, I  
brought flowers to the altars.

In this hour of pain, why, why, oh Lord, why dost Thou  
repay me thus?

Jewels I brought for the Madonna's mantle, and songs  
for the stars in heaven that they shone forth with  
greater radiance.

In this hour of distress, why, why, oh Lord, why dost  
Thou repay me thus?



## Coloratura Soprano

### Voice of the Forest Bird from *Siegfried*

(Video)

Dawn Upshaw (s), Siegfried Jerusalem (t)  
– 1990

The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James  
Levine, cond.

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## Siegfried

Richard Wagner, 1813-1883

Libretto by the composer

First Performance, 1862, Vienna

Part 3 of *The Ring of the Nibelung* based on the  
13<sup>th</sup> century German epic *Nibelungenlied*.

Forest Bird: The hero Siegfried has slain a  
dragon and an evil dwarf and has learned to  
understand the speech of animals. A magic  
bird will lead him to the magic mountain to  
claim his promised bride, Brünnhilde

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## Soubrette (Soprano Leggiero)

**"Batti, batti, o bel Masseto" from  
*Don Giovanni***

(Video)

Hei-Kyung Hong (s) – 2000

The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James  
Levine, cond.

## Don Giovanni

W. A. Mozart, 1756-1791

Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, after morality  
play by Tirso de Molina, 1630

First Performance, 1787, Prague

The evil Don receives divine retribution after a  
career of seductions and rapes.

"Batti, batti, o bel Masseto": Pretty peasant girl,  
Zerlina, after nearly yielding to the lecherous  
Don, seeks forgiveness from her boyfriend,  
Masetto (and succeeds in wrapping him  
around her finger).

## Less Common Voices The Treble ("Boy" Soprano)

- ◆ Usually brief roles for young child
- ◆ Example: The Shepherd Boy in Puccini's *Tosca*
- ◆ Traditionally a boy; even today, boys more common than girls
- ◆ Roles frequently covered by an adult female soprano

## Treble (Child Soprano)

**"Io di sospiri" from *Tosca***

Dominick Martinez (trb) – 1981

Philharmonia Orchestra, James Levine,  
cond.

# Tosca

Giacomo Puccini, 1858-1924

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica,  
after Victorien Sardou, *La Tosca*, 1887

First Performance, 1900, Rome

The painter Cavaradossi and his lover, the singer Tosca, struggle against the evil Baron Scarpia during the Austrian occupation of Italy.

"Io di sospiri": Prelude to Act III. Dawn breaks over Rome as Cavaradossi awaits execution; a shepherd boy is heard singing offstage.

# Io di sospiri

*(Sunrise. Gradually darkness is dispelled by the grey, uncertain light of the hour before dawn. Church bells toll for matins. The voice of a shepherd passing with his flock can be heard.)*

## **Voice of shepherd boy**

I give you sighs. There are as many as  
there are leaves driven by the wind.

You may scorn me, and my heart is sick.  
Oh, lamp of gold, I die for you.

# The Mezzo

## 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 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, any lead male
- ◆ "Witches, bitches and boys"

## 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*

## 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

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

## **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.

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

## Dramatic Mezzo

**"Stride la vampa" from *Il Trovatore***

(Video)

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”: The Gypsy woman,  
purportedly Manrico’s mother, describes how  
her own mother was burned at the stake

# The Contralto

## 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*
- ◆ Our Example: a trouser role, the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, from Golijov’s *Ainadamar*

## The Contralto

**“Desde mi ventana” from *Ainadamar***

(Video)

Kelly O’Connor (c) - 2005

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Robert Spano, cond.

# Ainadamar

(The Fountain of Tears)  
Osvaldo Golijov, 1960 –

Libretto by David Henry Hwang

First Performance, 2005, Santa Fe (concert version  
2004, Tanglewood)

The death of the Spanish poet and playwright, Federico Garcia Lorca, killed by Spanish Fascists, as recalled by his friend, the actress Margarita Xirgu

"Desde mi ventana": Lorca describes how he would gaze from his bedroom window in Granada at the statue of the revolutionary heroine, Mariana Pineda

# Desde mi ventana

(Aria to the Statue of Mariana)

## LORCA

From my bedroom window I looked out at her statue. In Granada she was called the "Symbol of Revolutionary Purity," and yet, for me, she was never so cold, never so gray, not nearly so pure. To me, Mariana was light and warmth and, most of all, love.

## STATUES

My eyes are the stars in your deepest night.



*Federico Garcia Lorca* (Acrylic, 2005)  
Antonio Guijarro Morales, known as Aguijarro, Spain, 1943 -

## Less Common Voices The Counter-Tenor (Male Alto)

- ◆ Primarily in 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Century Opera
- ◆ Often, the hero or other leading male role
- ◆ Example: Jupiter in Handel's *Semele*
- ◆ Long neglected, considered "archaic" – since mid '90s has experienced a revival

## The Countertenor

**"Where'er you walk" from *Semele***

Andreas Scholl (ct) – 1999

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment,  
Sir Roger Norrington, cond.

## Semele

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Libretto based on one by William Congreve  
(1705)

First Performance, 1744, London

From classical mythology: Juno is angered by  
Jupiter's affair with the nymph, Semele

"Where'er you walk": Jupiter is attempting to  
seduce Semele with promises of eternal  
pleasure.

## Where'er you walk

### **Jupiter**

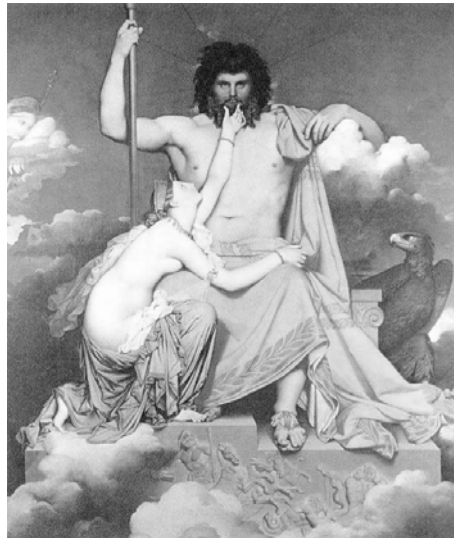
Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan  
the glade; trees, where you sit, shall  
crowd into a shade;

Where'er you tread, the blushing flow'rs  
shall rise; and all things flourish  
where'er you turn your eyes.

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*Jupiter and Thetis* (1811)

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, France, 1780-1867

# The Tenor

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## Common Tenor Roles

- ◆ The Hero
- ◆ Any younger male character
- ◆ A frail, very old man
- ◆ A supernatural male character
- ◆ An effete or devious villain

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## Some Tenor Categories

- ◆ Dramatic
  - Cavaradossi in Puccini's *Tosca*
- ◆ Bel Canto
  - Nemorino in Donizetti's *Elixir of Love*
- ◆ Heldentenor (Heroic Tenor)
  - Siegfried in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*
- ◆ High Tenor (Altino, Haute-contre)
  - The mysterious Astrologer in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel (Coq d'or)*

## Dramatic Tenor

**"E lucevan le stelle" from *Tosca***

Plácido Domingo (t) - 1981  
Philharmonia Orchestra, James Levine,  
cond.



# Tosca

Giacomo Puccini, 1858-1924

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica,  
after Victorien Sardou, *La Tosca*, 1887

First Performance, 1900, Rome

The painter Cavaradossi and his lover, the singer Tosca, struggle against the evil Baron Scarpia during the Austrian occupation of Italy.

"E lucevan le stelle": As Cavaradossi awaits execution, he passionately recalls a moment with his love, Tosca

## E lucevan le stelle

### Cavaradossi

*(begins to write, but after a few lines a flood of memories invades him.)*

And the stars shone and the earth was perfumed. The garden gate creaked and footsteps crunched on the gravel path. Fragrant, she entered and fell into my arms.

Oh soft kisses, oh sweet abandon, as trembling, I unloosed her veils and disclosed her beauty.

Oh vanished forever is that dream of love, fled is that hour, and I die in desperation.

And never before have I loved life so much!

*(Bursts into sobs)*

## Bel Canto Tenor

**"Una furtiva lagrima" from *L'Elisir d'Amore***

(Video)

Rolando Villazón (t) - 2005

Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera,  
Alfred Eschwé, cond.

## L'Elisir d'Amore

Gaetano Donizetti, 1797 – 1848

Libretto by Felice Romani after a libretto by  
Eugene Scribe (1831)

First Performance, 1832, Milan

Farm boy Nemorino tries to win the love of  
Adina with the aid of an elixir sold by the  
charlatan Dulcamara

"Una furtiva lagrima": Adina has announced  
that she will marry dashing Sgt. Belcore, but  
Nemorino, still very much in love with her,  
thinks he saw "one furtive tear" run down her  
cheek.

## High Tenor

### **The Astrologer's Prologue from *The Golden Cockerel***

(Video)

Barry Banks (t) - 2002

Orchestra of Paris, Kent Nagano, cond.

## The Golden Cockerel

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, 1844 – 1908

Libretto by Vladimir Belsky after a poem  
by Alexander Pushkin (1834)

First Performance, 1909, Moscow

An allegorical fairy tale about a kingdom  
guarded by a magic golden rooster.

Astrologer's Prologue: The mysterious,  
supernatural Astrologer uses his  
magical powers to create the scene.

## The Heldentenor (Heroic Tenor)

### “Nothung” from *Siegfried*

(Video)

Siegfried Jeruselem (t), Heinz Zednik (t) -  
1990

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James  
Levine, cond.

## Siegfried

Richard Wagner, 1813-1883

Libretto by the composer

First Performance, 1862, Vienna

Part 3 of *The Ring of the Nibelung* based on the  
13<sup>th</sup> century German epic *Nibelungenlied*.

“Nothung”: The hero Siegfried has discovered  
the fragments of his father’s shattered magic  
sword (named “Nothung” or “Needful”), and  
attempts to reforge it.

# The Baritone

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## Common Baritone Roles

- ◆ The villain
- ◆ An older male hero or protagonist
- ◆ The hero's companion
- ◆ The father or big brother
- ◆ Any vigorous middle-aged male

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## Some Baritone Categories

- ◆ Buffo
  - Figaro in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*
- ◆ Lyric
  - Big brother Valentin in Gounod's *Faust*
- ◆ Dramatic
  - King Nabucco in Verdi's *Nabucco*

## Buffo Baritone

**"Largo al factotum!" from *The Barber of Seville***

(Video)

Gino Quilico (br) – 1988

Radio Symphony Orchestra, Stuttgart,  
Gabriele Ferro, cond.

## **The Barber of Seville**

**Giocchino Rossini, 1792-1868**

Libretto by Cesare Sterbini, after the first play  
in the 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

"Largo al factotum": Figaro introduces himself  
and lets us know what a fine fellow he is.

## **Lyrical Baritone**

**"Avant des quitter ces lieux" from  
Gounod's *Faust***

(Video)

Walton Grönroos (br) – 1985

Orchestra and Chorus of the Vienna State  
Opera, Erich Binder, cond.

# Faust

Charles Gounod, 1818 – 1893

Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré after  
Goethe's *Faust, Part I* (1808)

First Performance, 1859, Paris

A retelling of the ancient Faust legend. Faust,  
aided by Mephistopheles, seduces the innocent  
Marguerite. She is redeemed, he is damned.

"Avant de quitter ces lieux": Marguerite's big  
brother Valentin prays for her well-being  
before going off to war.

# Dramatic Baritone

**"Dio di Giuda" from *Nabucco***

(Video)

Renato Brusin (br) – 1998

Orchestra of the Teatro San Carlo, Paulo  
Carignani, cond.



# Nabucco

Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 - 1901

Libretto by Temistocle Solera, based on History  
of the Babylonian Captivity, Book of Daniel.

First Performance, 1842, Milan

Set in Jerusalem and Babylon, 587 BC

"Dio di Giuda": Babylonian King  
Nebuchadnezzar, struck with madness for his  
blasphemous claim of divinity, regains his  
sanity and pledges himself to the God of  
Judah

# The Bass

## Common Bass Roles

- ◆ The old king
- ◆ The high priest
- ◆ The benevolent trusted old advisor
- ◆ A distinguished, powerful or especially vigorous elderly man
- ◆ An older comic protagonist ("Primo Buffo")
- ◆ A disreputable older man
- ◆ The Devil
- ◆ Otherwise, very rarely a villain

## Some Bass Categories

- ◆ Lyric
  - Prince Gremin in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*
- ◆ Dramatic
  - Mephistophiles in Gounod's *Faust*
- ◆ Russian Comic/Dramatic
  - Varlaam in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*

## Lyric Bass

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

(Video)

Aik Martirosyan (b) – 2000

Orchestra of the Bolshoi Theater, Mark  
Ermler, 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 rejected.

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.

## Diabolical Bass

### Song of the Golden Calf from *Faust*

(Video)

Ruggero Raimondi (b) – 1985

Orchestra and Chorus of the Vienna State  
Opera, Erich Binder, cond.

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## Faust

Charles Gounod, 1818 – 1893

Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré after  
Goethe's *Faust, Part I* (1808)

First Performance, 1859, Paris

Retelling of ancient Faust legend. Faust, aided  
by Mephistopheles, seduces the innocent  
Marguerite.

Song of the Golden Calf: In the village square,  
Mephistopheles mocks the villagers for their  
venal avarice.

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## Russian Comic/Dramatic Bass

### "The Siege of Kazan" from *Boris Godunov*

Boris Christoff (b) – 1952  
Orchestre National de la Radiodiffusion  
Française, Issay Dobrowen, cond.

## 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

"The Siege of Kazan": At a country inn, the  
disreputable monk, Varlaam, drunkenly sings  
of his service in the army of Tsar Ivan IV.

## The Siege of Kazan

**Varlaam** (*Bottle in hand*)

While our troops were at the walls of Kazan, the terrible Tsar Ivan sat banqueting and making merry. He was merciless with the Tartars, because he wasn't used to walking from one end of Russia to the other.

Step by step the Tsar approached the city. Under the river at Kazan he stealthily placed his mines. Unconcerned, the Tartars went about their business, looking down at Tsar Ivan from time to time – those wicked Tartars!

Plunged in sorrow, the Tsar hung his dear head on his right shoulder. Like steel, he summons his gunners and gives the order to light the taper to set off the mine. The wax taper smoking in his hand, a young gunner now approaches the powder keg, and begins to roll it into place.

And what a roar when the mine went off! The wicked Tartars started to howl and scream at the top of their voices. Multitudes of Tartars fell that day – eighty thousand fell, plus three thousand and more.

That's how it was at the walls of Kazan. Ha ha!

## Thank You



And Good Night!