

OPERA America

Essential Skills and Training for Classical Singers (formerly Standards for Opera Singers)

Created in 2018 and revised in 2024 by OPERA America's Performer Development Network members, this document shares ideas for areas of study and practice essential for pursuing a career in operatic vocal performance, as agreed upon by professional artists, professional company administrators, artist managers, and faculty members at higher education institutions.

Introduction

OPERA America's Performer Development Network is composed of professionals in opera, including coaches, stage directors, singers, conductors, voice teachers, artist training program managers, opera company administrators and artist managers who are dedicated to the identification and development of aspiring singers.

The Performer Development Network convenes to address industry-wide concerns about identifying, training and nurturing talent in an ever-changing professional landscape. This document is intended to guide and assist singers and those involved in their training.

Each skill is examined in detail, and the various ways that a skill might be achieved are explored. We categorize these skills as follows:

Foundational - The preliminary training in essential skills for singers interested in pursuing careers in classical vocal performance and/or opera.

Developmental - Building upon the foundational base to gain more depth and breadth in the skills necessary for graduate study, professional artist training programs, or entry level professional engagements.

Advanced - The ongoing artistic development/lifelong learning for singers who have entered the field and who wish to achieve artistic excellence and identify and pursue areas of specialty.

There are many ways to measure success and have fulfilling careers. We have chosen to focus on what is required of singers, rather than how those results are achieved.

Questions may be directed to artistic@operaamerica.org.

2024 Minimum standards expected by the field for career readiness	Specific area of competency/skill	Suggested Courses and experiences to train it
<p>A solid, consistent, reliable vocal technique FND/DEV</p>	<p>Vocal technique includes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Aligned registration b. Consistent and efficient phonation at all dynamic levels throughout the vocal range. c. Accurate intonation d. Efficient breath management e. Optimal resonance f. Singing with one’s own voice, rather than a manufactured sound g. Access to complete vocal range h. Legato i. A vocabulary to effectively communicate with others about vocal technique j. Knowledge of physical anatomy and vocal mechanism k. Flexibility/dynamic control/ability to mark healthfully l. Agility m. Ability to adapt one’s vocal technique appropriately to various musical styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied voice lessons • Recording/self-analysis • Performance classes • Recitals/Concerts • Studio classes • Guided listening • Vocal coaching • Vocal pedagogy
<p>Language skills FND/DEV/ADV</p>	<p>Language skills, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Diction (Latin, Italian, German, French, English) b. Idiomatic understanding and appropriate verbal expression c. Grammar/usage d. Translation: going from word for word to colloquial usage. Understanding the rhythm and “flavor” of the language e. IPA f. Basic conversational ability g. Advanced language diction (Russian, Czech, Spanish, etc.) h. Fluency in one or more operatic languages other than English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocal coaching • Diction classes including IPA • Language classes and clubs • Immersive language experiences (travel) • Listening/observation • Online practice (e.g., regular use of apps such as Duolingo as a supplement)

	<p>i. Comparative language study (cognates, vowel sounds) and the ability to quickly assimilate additional languages</p>	
<p>Strong Musical Skills FND/DEV/ADV</p>	<p>Musicianship, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Solid music reading and developing sight-singing skills b. Sense of pulse and strong rhythmic skills c. Solid personal practice regimen d. The ability to learn music independently e. Efficient memorization strategies f. Knowledge and study of repertoire and an understanding of appropriate repertoire for one's voice (Fach) g. Superior music reading and strong sight-reading skills h. Vocabulary to communicate with a conductor/coach i. Capacity to perform in a variety of musical and vocal styles and knowledge of appropriate performance practice j. Ability to learn and perform contemporary music k. The knowledge to collaborate with instrumental soloists, small chamber ensembles and full orchestras, including being able to read a full orchestra score l. Musical skills that empower the singer to learn repertoire covering a wide range of styles and eras as thoroughly and effectively as possible. m. Vocabulary to communicate with composers and librettists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music theory • Harmony/aural skills • Music history (specifically encompassing solo vocal compositions and opera/music theater) • Vocal coaching • Literature classes (e.g., recitative, aria, score construction) • Work with coaches/conductors in productions and ensembles • Keyboard skills • Conducting study
<p>Dramatic Skills FND/DEV</p>	<p>Dramatic Skills, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Basic opera and musical theatrical stagecraft (e.g., an understanding of upstage/downstage/countering/cheating out) b. Basic concepts and tools of acting/improvisation and their application in stage experience c. Ability to effectively deliver text and spoken dialogue d. Character study and research including source material and historical/cultural context e. The ability to research and develop an understanding of a character's motivations, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting classes • Repertoire/Dramatic Coaching • Improvisation • Characterization • Opera workshop • Work with directors in productions/studio classes • Theater history and period Styles • Humanities studies • Literature classes

	<p>emotional/dramatic arc, and their worldview in role preparation.</p> <p>f. Ability to create effective performances (energized/compelling/focused)</p> <p>g. The ability to connect honestly and deeply to text, in whatever language is being sung</p> <p>h. Familiarity with opera directing styles (regie, traditional, modern, concert)</p> <p>i. Substantial understanding of theatrical periods and styles</p> <p>j. An understanding of how to sing/perform successfully in digital content</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation and cultural exploration (go to museums, theater, dance, operas, musicals)
<p>Physical Skills FND/DEV</p>	<p>Physical Skills, including:</p> <p>a. Physical self-awareness</p> <p>b. Physical agility, coordination, and stamina as it relates to singing and moving on stage and in rehearsal</p> <p>c. Assimilation of physical vocal technique and stage comporment</p> <p>d. Basic stage combat/violence</p> <p>e. Ability to incorporate character –based physicality (E.g., pants roles, age, athletic, etc.)</p> <p>f. Ability to perform in a wide range of dance and movement styles</p> <p>g. Expanded understanding of stage combat, including weaponry</p> <p>h. Expressive use of body language</p> <p>i. An understanding of rehabilitative, self-release, warmup and cool down physical work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement classes • Stage Combat/fencing • Dance Classes • Other modalities (e.g., Alexander Technique, yoga, body mapping) • Opera workshop • Work with directors and choreographers in productions • Lifestyle coaching (nutritionist/trainer) • Improvisation • Mime/mask work
<p>Interdisciplinary Knowledge and awareness FND/DEV/ADV</p>	<p>a. Self-motivated research and study of arts and humanities</p> <p>b. Intellectual curiosity</p> <p>c. Motivation to explore and innovate</p> <p>d. Connecting opera to other genres and interdisciplinary influences</p> <p>e. Broadening world view and awareness</p> <p>f. Understanding of social stereotypes inherent to the repertoire/field and how those may be addressed with 21st -century performers and audiences</p> <p>g. Develop and Express Autonomous ideas</p> <p>h. Developed identity as an artist citizen</p> <p>i. Exploration of the art of marginalized groups (or groups with different cultural and historical contexts)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History Classes (e.g., opera history) • Characterization • Classes to build context in a particular period/place • Classes to increase intellectual understanding (literature, political science, philosophy) • Reading and listening lists • Internships • Travel • Attending performances

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social impact and outreach experiences through the arts • Volunteerism
<p>Self-knowledge/self-care</p> <p>FND/DEV/ADV</p>	<p>Self-knowledge/self-care, including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Care of the instrument/body b. Self-awareness and balance c. Resilience and perspective d. A well-defined sense of one's individual strengths, weaknesses and limits e. cultivation of a lifestyle that promotes physical, mental, and emotional well-being and readiness f. Ongoing self-actualization and development of emotional resilience g. Creation and maintenance of one's personal mission statement and goals h. Time management skill i. Fortitude in career highs and lows j. Understanding the demands of the lifestyle (travel/sleep/vocal health) k. An understanding of the parameters of one's instrument in order to make informed decisions re: singing or performing when not feeling well. Also, an understanding of when cancelling is advisable. l. Knowledge of medical resources and vocal sustainability for career longevity m. Understanding of differences in communication and cultural styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied Voice • Therapy • Yoga, meditation, Alexander Technique, and other modalities • Regular physical exercise/gym workouts • Inner game of music-type studies • Spiritual or centering practice • Nutrition • Visiting artist talks • Advisement from career professionals • Vocal hygiene/pedagogy • Auditory health • ENT clinics (annual screenings) • Partnerships with local hospitals/ENT clinics
<p>Professionalism</p> <p>FND/DEV/ADV</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Commitment to thorough preparation b. Strong work ethic c. Collegiality d. Flexibility: openness to direction from conductors, coaches, stage directors e. Being an effective collaborator f. Ability to effectively give and receive feedback g. Self-motivation as a career-long skill h. Developing your own professional style in the industry i. Managing the desire to be your own self in the industry and the need to fit in. j. Good communication, interpersonal and social skills at various business levels (company leadership, patrons, artist administrators, company and backstage staff) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audition techniques • Participation in productions • Attire consultations • Business etiquette classes • One-on-one mentoring • Master classes and talks with respected professionals • Entrepreneurial experiences • Internships • Volunteerism • Networking

	<p>k. Good communication, interpersonal and social skills at various levels (colleagues, composers/librettists, conductors, coaches, artist managers)</p> <p>l. Developing good personal presentation skills (for auditions, rehearsals, public events)</p> <p>m. An understanding of personal learning needs and styles, and the ability to communicate this professionally</p> <p>n. Developing auditions skills (role possibilities, fach considerations, artist materials, aria lists, presentation, coaching, audition preparation)</p> <p>o. Good preparation of audition binder for accompanists and ability to save and send pdf of repertoire for accompanists using devices.</p> <p>p. Knowledge of the field and industry (companies, opportunities, company leaders, news, and trends)</p> <p>q. An understanding of differing communication styles and cultural differences while working in this international field</p>	
<p>Business Skills FND/DEV/ADV</p>	<p>a. Understanding the classical music industry (e.g. opera companies, symphonies, festivals, concerts, different performance venues)</p> <p>b. Ability to prepare professional artist materials: resume, biography, headshots, audition videos, digital media presence, professional website, email, and other written communication</p> <p>c. Ability to understand and assess employment opportunities such as resident artist, emerging artist, principal and secondary artist, ensemble and chorus, etc.</p> <p>d. Understanding the importance of personal financial management/financial literacy</p> <p>e. Connecting with singer associations and social media groups</p> <p>f. Basic knowledge of how to manage one's own career</p> <p>g. An understanding of the working structure of opera companies (who does what) how to communicate with company administration</p> <p>h. Understanding self-employment issues - tax laws, social security, health insurance, employment insurance</p> <p>i. Understanding unions and union membership and its pros and cons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business classes • Entrepreneurial experiences • Financial Planning • Budget Training • Visiting Artist Talks • One-on-one mentoring • Internships • Writing Classes • Marketing/social media classes • Books/how-to manuals • Music business • Professional associations

	<p>j. Understanding the role of teachers and coaches in ongoing vocal, dramatic, and career development</p> <p>k. Understanding the terms of a performance/engagement contract and possessing negotiation skills</p> <p>l. Understanding the role of an artist manager in the industry and in one’s career opportunities and development</p> <p>m. Ability to understand artist management contracts and performance/engagement contracts.</p> <p>n. Understanding that business practices vary from country to country and being able to find resources to learn more as needed.</p>	
Initiative	<p>Having an awareness of and staying open to opportunities resulting from connections in the industry</p> <p>Staying open to the possibilities for inspiration</p> <p>“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity” - Seneca</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction with active performing artists and professionals in the field • Q & A Sessions