

# Eight Operas That Changed the World

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“Opera is all around us — hundreds of hours’ worth on YouTube alone — and there is no excuse not to take part in it. It still requires some commitment to knowledge and it rarely has a beat, but there’s just so much of Lady Gaga a human being can enjoy/tolerate without needing to be touched in a slightly deeper place.” – Robert Levine in *Weep, Shudder, Die: A Guide to Loving Opera*

Books for New Opera Fans	
Author/Editor	Title
David Pogue and Scott Peck (Yep, that’s the David Pogue who covers personal technology for the New York Times. He’s a Yale-trained composer.)	<i>Opera for Dummies</i>
Fred Plotkin	<i>Opera 101 – A complete guide to learning and loving opera</i>
Robert Levine	<i>Weep, Shudder, Die: A Guide to Loving Opera</i>
Tim Smith	<i>The NPR Curious Listener’s Guide to Classical Music</i>
Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker	<i>A History of Opera</i>
Nikolaus Harnoncourt	<i>The Musical Dialogue</i>
Robert Donington	<i>Opera and Its Symbol</i>
Richard Taruskin	<i>Music in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries</i>

Week	Featured Opera	Honorable Mentions
1	Claudio Monteverdi, <i>L’incoronazione di Poppea</i> ( <i>The Coronation of Poppea</i> – 1642)	The operas of Gluck
2	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, <i>Le nozze di Figaro</i> , <i>ossia la folle giornata</i> ( <i>The Marriage of Figaro</i> , or <i>The Day of Madness</i> – 1786)	Mozart’s other operas, especially <i>The Magic Flute</i> and <i>Don Giovanni</i>
3	Giuseppe Verdi, <i>Rigoletto</i> (1851)	Verdi’s <i>La Traviata</i> and <i>Otello</i>
4	Richard Wagner, <i>Tristan und Isolde</i> (1865)	Wagner’s <i>Der Ring des Nibelungen</i>
5	Modest Mussorgsky, <i>Boris Godunov</i> (1874)	Piotr Ilych Tchaikovsky’s <i>Eugene Onegin</i> and <i>The Queen of Spades</i>
6	Georges Bizet, <i>Carmen</i> (1875)	
7	Richard Strauss, <i>Salome</i> (1905)	Debussy’s <i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i> ( <i>Pelléas and Mélisande</i> )
8	Alban Berg, <i>Wozzeck</i> (1925)	Berg’s <i>Lulu</i> Philip Glass, <i>Einstein on the Beach</i> (which really deserved to be tied for week 8)

## Voice Types in Brief

It can get *much* more granular than this (check Wikipedia), and the style designations are subject to interpretation. With the exception of German-speaking countries, where the *fach* system can peg singers into a limited set of roles, most singers move back and forth across styles and ranges. And many roles are doable by singers with different ranges – baritones, bass baritones and basses have sung Don Giovanni with distinction, and dramatic sopranos sometimes encroach on the mezzo turf that is Carmen. (Dramatic mezzos simply respond “Ach, ja?” and sing Isolde, a quintessential dramatic soprano role.) What people can sing is highly individual. The taxonomy you see here features singers who serve as particularly clear examples of a given style, but most are more versatile than this grid suggests.

### Fun Fact: It’s not just boys who have to worry about their voices changing!

Many singers change over time – light voices can become richer, mezzos become sopranos, and it’s practically a requirement for Wagnerian tenors to start as baritones.

**A note on “Coloraturas:”** Coloratura is really a technical distinction – the ability sing with great agility. A singer with any voice type or range can have coloratura ability. However, it is mostly associated with the highest sopranos and tenors for physiological reasons. We have below indicated singers, such as Kathleen Battle and Joan Sutherland, who are celebrated mainly for their coloratura talent. Many other singers, such as Renee Fleming and (the late) Luciano Pavarotti, handle some coloratura roles without breaking a sweat, but it’s not what they’re mainly known for.

Female Voices			
Range	Weight/Style/Fach	Roles	Singers
Sopranos	Soubrette	Susanna, Zerbinetta, Sophie, Adele	Kathleen Battle (coloratura), Natalie Dessay (coloratura), Anna Christie, Kathleen Kim (coloratura)
	Lyric	Mimi, Violetta, Countess Almaviva, Misc. Verdi	Renee Fleming, Anna Netrebkho, Kiri Te Kanawa
	Spinto (“pushed”)	Any lyric or dramatic role she can handle	Jessye Norman, Sonda Radvanovsky, Violetta Urmana
	Dramatic	Wagner roles, Queen of the Night (coloratura)	Irene Theorin, Nina Stemme, Birgit Nilsson, Joan Sutherland (coloratura), Deborah Voight
Mezzo Sopranos	Lyric	Carmen & Dalila, Cherubino, Octavian (trouser roles), Misc. castrato roles	Susan Graham, Joyce DiDonato, (coloratura), Frederica Von Stade, Cecilia Bartoli (coloratura)
	Dramatic	Carmen & Dalila, Many Wagner and Verdi roles	Olga Borodina, Elina Garanča, Waltraud Meier, Christa Ludwig, Grace Bumbry
Virtual contraltos* who like to keep options open	Usually dramatic	Any mezzo or contralto role she wants	Stephanie Blythe Jill Grove
Contraltos	Any style possible	Erda, Ulrica	Maureen Forrester, Meredith Arwady

\*The female equivalent of bass baritones, but for some reason it’s “not a thing” for the ladies

Male Voices			
Range	Weight/Style/Fach	Roles	Singers
Sopranos	Treble (boy soprano)	Amahl and other shepherds, Ynold	Robert Sapolsky
	Castrato (extinct)	Hero in opera seria (baroque opera) by Handel et al, Akhnaten	Today these roles are taken by male sopranos, countertenors, and mezzo sopranos
	Male Soprano – sings soprano in full voice		Michael Maniaci, Radu Marian
	Sopranista (falsetto - high countertenor)		Simone Bartolini, Aris Christofellis
Altos	Countertenor (falsetto)		David Daniels, Andreas Scholl, Iestyn Davies
Tenors	Lyric (bel canto)	Misc. Rossini and Donizetti roles	Juan Diego Florez (coloratura), Piotr Beczala, Nicolai Gedda
	Full Lyric	Rodolfo, Don Jose, Werther	Marcello Alavarez, Yonghoon Lee, Luciano Pavorotti, Jussi Bjoerling
	Character tenor	Mime, Monostatos, Beppe, Goro	Graham Clark, Heinz Zednik, David Cangelosi
	Spinto	Calaf, Don Carlo, Andrea Chenier	Placido Domingo, Jonas Kaufmann
	Dramatic (Heldentenor)	Siegfried, Tristan, Florestan, Paul	Johann Botha, Siegfried Jerusalem, Ben Heppner, Robert Dean Smith
Baritones/Basses	Lyric Baritone	Eugene Onegin, Count Almaviva, Marcello – rarely do they get the girl	Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Marius Kwiecin, Thomas Hampson, Simon Keenleyside, Thomas Allen
	Verdi Baritone	Falstaff, Count di Luna, Rigoletto, Rodrigo	Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Robert Merrill, Sherill Milnes
	Bass Baritone	Wotan, Philip II, Boris Godunov, Hans Sachs	James Morris, Bryn Terfel, Thomas Quasthof
	Buffa (comic) bass	Leporello, Baron Ochs, Don Pasquale	John Del Carlo
	Lyric Bass	Colline, Sarastro	Rene Pape
	Dramatic (basso profundo)	Hagen, Claggert, The Grand Inquisitor	Samual Ramey, Matti Salminen