

# STANDARDS *for* OPERA SINGERS

*Created in 2018 by OPERA America's Performer Development Forum members, this document represents the most-current standards for pursuing a career in operatic vocal performance, as agreed upon by professional hiring agents in the field and teaching members of the academy.*



# INTRODUCTION

OPERA America's Performer Development Forum (formerly Singer Training Forum) is composed of stakeholders in the field of opera (including voice teachers, young artist program managers, opera company administrators and artist managers, among others) who are dedicated to the identification and development of aspiring singers. The objective of the forum is to strengthen mutual understanding, improve practices across the field and encourage collaboration among the network of professionals who share a devotion to the art form and to singers.

The Performer Development Forum was convened to address industry-wide concerns about identifying, training and nurturing talent in an ever-changing professional landscape. Multiple factors have contributed to the need for such a forum, including the decline of K–12 music programs, resulting in a lower baseline of musical knowledge among students entering college; unrealistic expectations of what it takes for a sustainable career in opera; and the difficulties faced by institutions of higher education in addressing the multi-tiered training required for an opera singer within their curricular structures.

Through a series of meetings with the leadership of the Performer Development Forum, including its Steering Committee, and its membership at large, as well as discussions with key players within the industry, we have attempted to quantify the essential skills required of an opera singer in today's market and determine how those skills might be attained. This document is intended as a reality check and guide for those who are involved with the training of singers. These are the skills that the industry deems essential. 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 minimum core of fully developed skills expected for a student leaving the academy with a degree in vocal performance and/or opera performance. These skills are specific to opera/music theater, including contemporary performance, but are not specific to musical theater in the Broadway genre.

**DEVELOPMENTAL** — going beyond the foundational base to get more depth and breadth in the skills necessary for higher-level graduate study, preliminary young artist programs (YAPs) or entry-level professional engagements.

**ADVANCED/MASTERY** — the skills that prepare the singer to fully compete in the professional arena. From this point forward, singers only require maintenance and/or specialized training to achieve a new, advanced skill.

Recognizing that there may be many paths to the same result, we have chosen to focus on what is required of singers, rather than how those results are achieved. Some undergraduate programs may provide the foundational skills a singer needs, but it is likely that many of these skills may not be realized

until graduate school or beyond. Singers also excel at different rates, so some may achieve mastery in one area, while still struggling with foundational skills in another.

Most importantly, this document is intended to be a guide for those of us who train singers, and a clear message to the administrators of training programs as to what is really important and how to achieve the results that serve the artists as well as the industry.

Performer Development Forum members are available to communicate and “translate” this information to those in leadership positions in higher education and professional training programs. Our intention with this document is to be clear, specific and helpful. We all want to help the next generation of singers on their way to fulfilling, sustainable careers in this industry, and to educate the educators that can make that possible.

Questions about Standards for Opera Singers may be directed to Laura Lee Everett, OPERA America’s director of artistic services, at [LEverett@operaamerica.org](mailto:LEverett@operaamerica.org).

# STANDARDS FOR OPERA SINGERS

Minimum standards expected by the field for career readiness	Specific areas of competency/skill	Suggested courses and experiences to train it
<b>A solid, consistent, reliable vocal technique</b> FND/DEV	Vocal technique includes: a. Aligned registration b. Consistent and efficient phonation 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. Vocabulary to discuss vocal technique j. Flexibility/dynamic control/ability to mark healthfully k. Agility l. Ability to adapt one's vocal technique appropriately to various musical styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applied voice lessons</li> <li>• Recording/self-analysis</li> <li>• Performance classes</li> <li>• Recitals/concerts</li> <li>• Studio classes</li> <li>• Guided listening</li> <li>• Vocal coaching</li> <li>• Vocal pedagogy</li> </ul>
<b>Language skills</b> FND/DEV/ADV	Language skills, including: a. Diction (Italian, German, French, English) b. Idiomatic understanding and 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 i. Comparative language study (cognates, vowel sounds) and the ability to quickly assimilate additional languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocal coaching</li> <li>• Diction classes including IPA</li> <li>• Language classes and clubs</li> <li>• Immersive language experiences (travel)</li> <li>• Listening/observation</li> <li>• Online practice (e.g., regular use of apps such as Duolingo as a supplement)</li> </ul>

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<b>Strong musical skills</b> FND/DEV/ADV	Musicianship, including: a. Superior music reading and sight-singing skills b. Sense of pulse and strong rhythmic skills c. Knowledge and study of repertoire and an understanding of appropriate repertoire for one's voice (Fach) d. Solid personal practice regimen e. The ability to learn music independently f. Efficient memorization strategies g. Vocabulary to communicate with a conductor/coach h. Capacity to perform in a variety of musical and vocal styles and knowledge of appropriate performance practice i. Ability to learn and perform new music j. Vocabulary to communicate with composers/librettists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music theory</li> <li>• Harmony/aural skills</li> <li>• Music history (specifically encompassing solo vocal compositions and opera/music theater)</li> <li>• Vocal coaching</li> <li>• Literature classes (e.g., recitative, aria, score construction)</li> <li>• Work with coaches/conductors in productions and ensembles</li> <li>• Keyboard skills</li> <li>• Conducting study</li> </ul>
<b>Dramatic skills</b> FND/DEV	Dramatic skills, including: a. Basic opera and theatrical stagecraft (e.g., 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 historical and cultural context) e. Ability to create effective performances (energized/compelling/focused) f. Research and study of source materials g. The ability to connect honestly and deeply to text, in whatever language is being sung h. Familiarity with opera directing styles (regie, traditional, modern, concert) i. Substantial understanding of theatrical periods and styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acting classes</li> <li>• Repertoire/dramatic coaching</li> <li>• Improvisation</li> <li>• Characterization</li> <li>• Opera workshop</li> <li>• Work with directors in productions/studio classes</li> <li>• Theater history and period Styles</li> <li>• Humanities studies</li> <li>• Literature classes</li> <li>• Observation and cultural exploration (go to museums, theater, dance, operas, musicals)</li> </ul>

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<b>Physical skills</b> FND/DEV	Physical skills, including: a. Physical self-awareness b. Physical fitness, agility and stamina c. Assimilation of physical vocal technique and stage comportment d. Basic stage combat/violence e. Character movement experience (pants roles, age, physical impairment, athletic) f. Knowledge/experience in period movement and dance g. Expanded understanding of stage combat, including weaponry h. Expressive use of body language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movement classes</li> <li>• Stage combat/fencing</li> <li>• Dance classes</li> <li>• Other modalities (e.g., Alexander Technique, yoga, body mapping)</li> <li>• Opera workshop</li> <li>• Work with directors and choreographers in productions</li> <li>• Lifestyle coaching (nutritionist, trainer)</li> <li>• Improvisation</li> <li>• Mime/mask work</li> </ul>
<b>Interdisciplinary knowledge and awareness</b> FND/DEV/ADV	a. Self-motivated research and study of arts and humanities b. Intellectual curiosity b. Eagerness to dig deeply into one's craft c. Connecting opera to other genres and interdisciplinary influences d. Broadening world view and awareness e. Understanding of social stereotypes inherent to the repertoire/field and how those may be addressed with 21 <sup>st</sup> -century performers and audiences f. Developed identity as an artist citizen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History classes (e.g., opera history)</li> <li>• Characterization</li> <li>• Classes to build context in a particular period/place</li> <li>• Classes to increase intellectual understanding (literature, political science, philosophy)</li> <li>• Reading and listening lists</li> <li>• Internships</li> <li>• Travel</li> <li>• Attending performances</li> <li>• Social impact and outreach experiences through the arts</li> <li>• Volunteerism</li> </ul>

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<b>Self-knowledge /self-care</b> FND/DEV/ADV	Self-knowledge/self-care, including: a. Care of the instrument/body b. Self-awareness c. A well-defined sense of one's individual strengths, weaknesses and limits d. A healthy lifestyle e. Ongoing self-actualization and development of emotional resilience f. Creation and maintenance of one's personal mission statement and goals g. Fortitude in career highs and lows h. Understanding the demands of the lifestyle (travel/sleep/vocal health) i. Knowledge of medical resources and vocal sustainability for career longevity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applied voice</li> <li>• Therapy</li> <li>• Yoga, meditation, Alexander Technique and other modalities</li> <li>• Personal training/gym workouts</li> <li>• Inner game of music-type studies</li> <li>• Spiritual or centering practice</li> <li>• Nutrition</li> <li>• Visiting artist talks</li> <li>• Advisement from career professionals</li> <li>• Vocal hygiene/pedagogy</li> <li>• Auditory health</li> <li>• ENT clinics (annual screenings)</li> <li>• Partnerships with local hospitals/ENT clinics</li> </ul>
<b>Professionalism (soft skills)</b> FND/DEV	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 h. Good communication, interpersonal and social skills at various levels (colleagues, patrons, employers, composers/librettists) i. Appropriate personal presentation (for auditions, rehearsals, public events) j. Knowledge of the field and industry (important figures, news and trends)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audition techniques</li> <li>• Participation in productions</li> <li>• Attire consultations</li> <li>• Business etiquette classes</li> <li>• One-on-one mentoring</li> <li>• Master classes and talks with respected professionals</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial experiences</li> <li>• Internships</li> <li>• Volunteerism</li> <li>• Networking</li> </ul>

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<b>Business skills (hard skills)</b> FND/DEV/ADV	a. An understanding of how the industry works (e.g., current working artists, companies and their repertoire structures) b. Appropriate business presentation (resumes, cover letters, digital media presence, written communication) c. A sense of personal financial management d. Contract negotiations, union standards e. Ability to manage your own career f. An understanding of the working structure of opera companies (who does what) g. Self-employment issues (tax law for artists, insurance, etc.) h. Basic technology skills (website, A/V editing, social media marketing) i. Understanding how to work with an artist manager j. The ability to communicate effectively with company leaders k. Structural differences in the European system, symphonies, major chorales.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business classes</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial experiences</li> <li>• Financial planning</li> <li>• Budget training</li> <li>• Visiting artist talks</li> <li>• One-on-one mentoring</li> <li>• Internships</li> <li>• Writing classes</li> <li>• Marketing/social media classes</li> <li>• Books/how-to manuals</li> <li>• Music business</li> <li>• Professional associations</li> </ul>
<b>Synchronicity (Luck)</b>	Awareness of opportunities to capitalize on relationships built in the field  “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity” — Seneca	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interaction with active performing artists and professionals in the field</li> <li>• Q&amp;A sessions</li> </ul>