



## **The Mezzo and Contralto Voice in Opera**

***Art Axelrod***



## **The Opera Guild of Rochester**

### **Guild Address:**

P.O. Box 92245  
Rochester, NY 14692

### **Opera Guild of Rochester Website:**

[www.mercuryoperarochester.org](http://www.mercuryoperarochester.org)

### **Guild Contacts:**

Dr. Agneta Borgstedt, Chair – (585) 334-2323

## Ranges of the Human Voice

The Fundamental Ranges:

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

In opera, solo voices are classified more finely:

Fall 2015

The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

3

## Principal Vocal Ranges in Opera

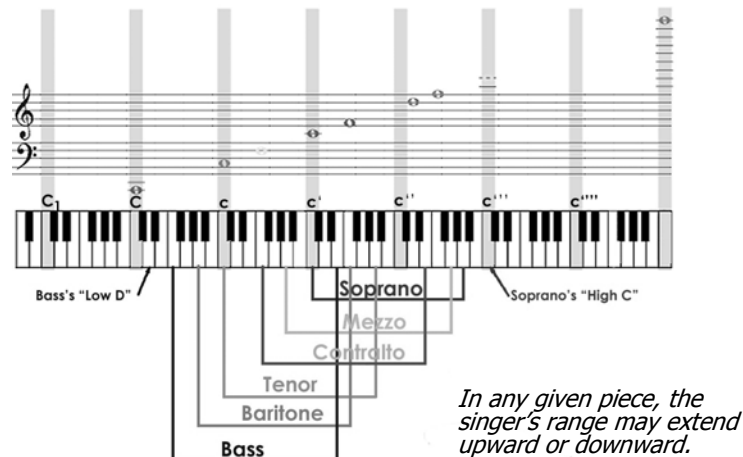
- ◆ **Soprano**
- ◆ **Mezzo-Soprano (Mezzo)**
- ◆ **Contralto**
- ◆ **Tenor**
- ◆ **Baritone**
- ◆ **Bass**

Fall 2015

The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

4

## Principal Vocal Ranges

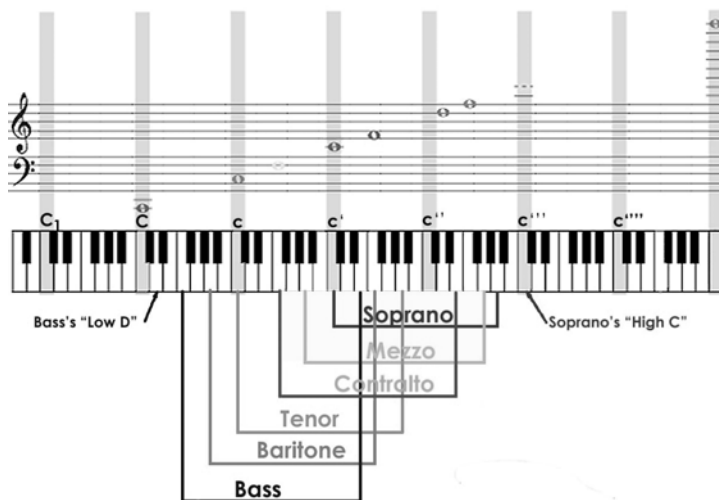


Fall 2015

The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

5

## Mezzo/Contralto Vocal Ranges



Fall 2015

The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

6

## 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”

## 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**

Gioacchino 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”**

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!

## 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  
mudering 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.

Fall 2015

The Opera Guild of Rochester

35

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.

Fall 2015

The Opera Guild of Rochester

36

## 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!

# Playlist

## The Mezzo Voice in Opera

### Art Axelrod – Fall 2015

#### **Strong Heroine – Bel Canto / Coloratura Mezzo**

1. **“Una voce poco fa ... Io sonno docile”** from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (3:48)  
Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)  
Cecilia Bartoli (ms) – 1988  
Radio Symphony Orchestra, Stuttgart, Gabriele Ferro, cond.  
Arthaus Musik 100091 (DVD)

#### **“Dark” Heroine – Dramatic Mezzo**

2. **“Carreau! Pique!”** (The fortune-telling scene) from *Carmen* (3:18)  
Georges Bizet (1838-1875)  
Marina Domashenko (ms), Carmen – 2003  
Orchestra and Chorus of the Arena di Verona, Alain Lombard, cond.  
TDK DVUS-OPCAR (2004)

#### **Flighty Young Girl – Lyric Contralto**

3. **“Olga’s Aria”** from *Eugene Onegin* (3:34)  
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)  
Yelena Novak (c), Olga; Maria Gavrilova (s), Tatyana – 2000  
Orchestra of the Bolshoi Theater, Mark Ermler, cond,  
TDK DVUS OPEON (2005)

#### **The Scheming Princess – Dramatic Mezzo**

4. **“Oh, how bored!”** from *Boris Godounov* (1872 version) (3:49)  
Modest Mussorgsky (18xx-18xx)  
Olga Borodina (ms), Marina – 1990  
Royal Opera House Covent Garden; Kirov Opera, Valery Gergiev, cond.  
Philips 075 089-9 (1993)

#### **The Heroine’s Companion - Duet**

5. **“Mira, O Norma”** from *Norma* (3:31)  
Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835)  
Daniela Barcellona (ms), Adelgisa, June Anderson (s), Norma – 2001  
Teatro Reggion Parma, Europa Galante Orchestra, Fabio Biondi, cond.  
TDK OPNOR (2002)

#### **Trouser Role: Teenage Boy – Lyric Mezzo**

6. **“Voi che sapete”** from *Le Nozze di Figaro* (2:34)  
W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)  
Pamela Helen Stephen (ms) – 1993  
The English Baroque Soloists, John Eliot Gardner, cond.  
Deutsche Grammophon Archiv 073 018-9 (DVD)

### **Baroque Trouser Role: The King – Lyric Mezzo**

**7. “Ombra mai fu” (“Largo”) from *Serse (Xerxes)* (3:52)**

George Frideric Handel, (1685-1759)

Anita Terzian (ms) -- 1989

Polish Radio Chamber Orchestra, Agnes Duczmal, cond.

Studios Classique CD SC 100 300

### **Tragic Gypsy – Dramatic Mezzo**

**8. “Stride la vampa” from *Il Trovatore* (3:01)**

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Fiorenze Cossotto (ms) – 1978

Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera, Herbert von Karajan, cond.

TDK DVUS-CLOPIT (DVD)

### **The Witch – Dramatic Mezzo**

**9. “Re dell’abisso...” from *Un ballo in maschera* (2:10)**

Giuseppe Verdi (18xx-18xx)

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

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

Deutsche Grammophon 073 029-9 (2002)

### **Ježibaba, The Witch – Dramatic Mezzo**

**10. “Hocus, pocus ...” from *Rusalka* (2:28)**

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Larissa Diadkova (ms), Ježibaba; Renée Fleming (s), Rusalka – 2002

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

TDK DVUS-OPRUS (2003)

### **Mysterious Earth-Mother – Dramatic Contralto**

**11. “Weiche, Wotan, weiche!” from *Das Rheingold* (5:08)**

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Patrica Bardon (c), Erde; Bryn Terfel (bbr), Wotan – 2010

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, cond.

Robert Lepage, director

Deutsche Grammophon 073 4852 (2012)

### **Historic Performance – Lyric Contralto**

**12. “Blow the winds southerly”, British Folk Song, (Roud No. 2619) (2:24)**

Traditional – English Northumbrian

Kathleen Ferrier (c) – 1949

A capella

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

### **The Eccentric Russian Prince – Dramatic Mezzo**

**13. Prince Orlofsky: “Chacun à son goût” from *Die Fledermaus* (9:19)**

Johann Strauss II (1825-1899)

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.

Kultur D2030 (1984)

TT = 48:56