

*Virginia  
Opera*

**WAGNER'S  
TRISTAN & ISOLDE**

**STUDY GUIDE**

**2004-2005 SEASON**

# **TRISTAN AND ISOLDE**

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## Premiere

First performance on June 10, 1865, at the Nationaltheater, Munich, Germany

### Cast of Characters

<b>King Marke</b>	Bass
<b>Tristan</b> , his nephew	Tenor
<b>Kurwenal</b> , Tristan's warrior-companion	Baritone
<b>Isolde</b> , Irish princess	Soprano
<b>Brangaene</b> , her maid	Soprano (sometimes a Mezzo)
<b>Melot</b> , a courtier	Tenor (sometimes a Baritone)
<b>A shepherd</b>	Tenor
<b>A helmsman</b>	Baritone
<b>A young sailor</b> (voice only)	Tenor

### Brief Summary

Setting: Cornwall and Brittany in the Middle Ages

Tristan's ship is carrying Isolde, daughter of the Irish king, to Cornwall so that she can be married to its king, Marke. She is brooding and on edge. Tristan stays at his post, not speaking to her unless necessary. She tells Brangaene of her past history with Tristan. He came to her in disguise to be healed from wound he received in combat with the Irish champion, Morold. Morold was Isolde's betrothed. As she cured his wound she realized who he really was and tried to strike him with a sword. When she looked into his eyes she was unable to kill him. Now he has come back to escort her to Cornwall to marry his uncle, the king. She hates him and her situation and decides the only way out is to kill both herself and Tristan with a poison draught. She tells her maid to prepare the potion and summon Tristan. When he arrives they are both tense but still feel a mutual attraction. Brangaene cannot bring herself to prepare the death potion and substitutes a love potion instead. The two drink the potion and fall into each other's arms, finally declaring the love they have always felt for each other but were unable to express. The ship docks and King Marke arrives. Tristan and Isolde fulfill their roles but are dazed and mechanical.

They meet passionately whenever they can find time to be alone. Eventually they are caught together by the king and his courtiers and exposed as lovers. Tristan does not try to defend himself when Melot challenges him and Tristan is mortally wounded. His companion Kurwenal spirits him away to his childhood home in Brittany, where he slowly dies of his wound. Isolde follows him by ship. As she arrives he dies in her arms. She bends over him and retreats to another world where she desires only to follow Tristan in death. King Marke, who has followed Isolde on another ship, arrives to tell the lovers he has learned the truth from Brangaene and forgives them. It is too late, but it does not matter to the lovers. They are blissfully joined in death which was their destiny.

## Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

### Prelude

The opening orchestral section of the opera has long been paired with the closing section in a stunning symphonic piece that has graced many a concert stage. Entitled “Prelude and Liebestod” (Love-death), Wagner himself called this pairing, “Liebestod and Verklärung” (Transfiguration). For many it encapsulates the entire work in a kind of musical shorthand and for some it constitutes their sole knowledge of *Tristan and Isolde*, albeit without voices. As the opening music of the fully-staged opera, the Prelude serves a pivotal function as the musical introduction of the philosophical issues at hand.

The Prelude begins very quietly with a descending chromatic phrase that is paired with a rising four-note phrase. The point where these two phrases intersect, in just the third measure of the Prelude, is known as the “*Tristan* chord.” These two phrases, or motifs, as well as the chord recur over and over again in the opera. The Prelude introduces eight principal motifs which are known by various names but not firmly fixed, i.e. longing, yearning, the gaze, Tristan, Tristan’s suffering, grief, sorrow, love potion, desire, magic, anguish of Tristan, death potion, Tristan and Isolde, etc. These motifs, or fragments of the motifs, recur as the story unfolds and the underlying emotions and motives of the characters are brought to bear. The music in the Prelude serves as an orchestral illustration of the themes Wagner is exploring. Wagner himself wrote that in the Prelude he wished to project a sense of longing without satisfaction, a longing without end.

### Act I

The orchestra spins out the musical “action,” underpinning a vocal line that can be described as “infinite melody.” The vocal line drives itself forward, seemingly independent, but not in actuality. The voices of the characters are an integral part of the orchestral fabric and both have equal weight. The opera is through-composed, i.e., once the music begins it does not stop until the end of the act.

A young sailor’s voice is heard, singing about an Irish girl he has left ashore. Isolde hears the words and feels insulted, thinking that the sailor is mocking her. She is being conveyed from Ireland to marry the King of Cornwall on the ship of Tristan, the king’s nephew. She begins to rage and her maid Brangaene tries to comfort her without success. When Isolde cries out for fresh air Brangaene opens the curtains enclosing her pavilion. Tristan can be seen deep in thought, looking out to sea. Watching him, Isolde mutters the words, “Chosen for me and lost to me.” She instructs her maid to summon Tristan to her.

Brangaene attempts to do as her mistress wishes but is courteously rebuffed by Tristan. He will not go before Isolde. He is merely conducting her to Cornwall to become the bride of his uncle. His companion, Kurwenal interjects with information that makes clear that Tristan and Isolde have had previous dealings. Kurwenal tells the crew the story of Tristan’s combat with Lord Morold of Ireland over the issue of tribute between Cornwall and Ireland. Morold was Isolde’s intended husband. Tristan killed him

and sent Morold's head back to Ireland, to Isolde, in place of the tribute he had demanded in Ireland's name.

Brangaene returns to inform her of Tristan's words. Isolde, who has heard Kurwenal, bitterly states that she has now become the tribute sent from Ireland to Cornwall. With a furious rush upward in the orchestra, Isolde begins a long monologue, giving more information about the past and why her state of mind is so turbulent. This monologue is occasionally presented in the concert hall entitled, "Isolde's Narration to Brangaene," or, "Isolde's Narrative and Curse." The narration begins using a fragment of a motif from the Prelude. Isolde relates how a small boat carrying a very sick man called Tantris drifted onto the Irish coast seeking the healing arts of the Princess Isolde. After healing the man she realized that he was the one who had killed Morold and his name was not Tantris, but Tristan! She wanted to kill him, to avenge Morold's death, but when she held the sword over him she could not strike. He had looked into her eyes and it stayed her hand. She nursed him, she protected him, and now how does he repay her? He takes her from Ireland as a token, as a price to be paid to Cornwall, as a wife to his uncle, the old king! Her narration becomes more frenzied as she relates the story, the music reflecting a motif called "Isolde's anger." The narration culminates with Isolde's wild curse on Tristan and a call for vengeance and death - death for them both!

Brangaene tries to console her, to reason with her, but Isolde cannot focus. Her mind is fixed on one thing- she could not bear the torment of being in the continual presence of Tristan and be unloved. Brangaene does not comprehend Isolde's true meaning. She thinks Isolde is referring to her intended husband, King Marke! So Brangaene reminds her of the potions her mother has sent along for various medicinal purposes, and pulls out the love potion. Isolde says no, there is a better one - the death potion. The orchestra continues on with the motif associated with the death potion.

Kurwenal arrives to tell them the ship will be landing very soon and to be ready. Isolde insists on Tristan paying his respects before she will depart the ship on his arm. As Kurwenal leaves to deliver the message, Isolde cries farewell to her faithful companion and gives Brangaene the potion, telling her to prepare it. The crew is heard, preparing the ship for landfall. Kurwenal returns, announcing Tristan. Brangaene and Kurwenal withdraw, and Tristan and Isolde stare at one another in silence, the orchestra transmitting the tremendous inner tension the two are feeling. When the silence is broken Isolde says she must have her vengeance. Tristan responds by giving her his sword, and in doing so, offering his life. The musical motifs employed are "Tristan, the hero" and "Morold.". She recoils and suggests instead that they drink reconciliation (the "death potion" motif is heard) and motions to Brangaene to bring the flask with the potion. Isolde pours the potion and gives the cup to Tristan, who takes it impulsively. To the sound of the "Tristan the hero" and "Consecration to Death" motifs, Tristan drinks from the cup until Isolde grabs the cup to finish its contents. With the sound of the early motifs of longing and the "Tristan chord" they stare at each other, motionless until they fall into each other's arms. Brangaene has substituted the love potion and they breathlessly express themselves, not understanding what has happened. Brangaene wrings her hands and confesses what she has done. Tristan and Isolde realize in horror

they now must live with this new burden. Simultaneously, the fanfares announcing the King and his retinue indicate his imminent arrival. The scene ends as all hail the approaching King and the two lovers struggle to deal with what has befallen them.

## Act II

The second act begins with a prelude that sets the mood for the ensuing scene using the motifs of “day,” “night,” “impatient longing,” and “ecstasy.”

The King has gone on a nocturnal hunting trip, arranged by Melot, one of the courtiers. Isolde is impatiently waiting for Tristan. Hunting horns can be heard in the distance. Brangaene cautions her mad impetuosity and warns her that she is leery of Melot, a knight she feels wishes to betray Tristan. Isolde scoffs at her and will not heed her warning. She sends Brangaene to keep watch at the tower while she extinguishes the torch that will signal Tristan it is safe to come to her chamber.

The music that ensues uses the “impatience,” “ardor,” and “ecstasy” motifs to build to a frenzied, syncopated climax as Isolde waves her scarf and Tristan bursts into the room to be embraced by Isolde. They exchange breathless fragments of speech until Tristan curses the light that prevents him from being with Isolde. They eventually calm their agitation and embark on a lengthy duet which covers their past, present and future, using the metaphors of day and night. Tristan draws Isolde down to a bower to begin the central part of their love duet called the “Liebesnacht” (Night of love) which begins with the words, “O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe” (Oh night of love descend upon us). This section has some characteristics of a traditional duet with the lovers sharing phrases of music and text.

Brangaene’s Watchsong, “Einsam wachend in der Nacht” (Lone I watch here) acts as an interlude between sections of the extended love duet. It also provides a respite from the intensity of the love duet as it reaches intermediate climaxes. The next part of the duet centers around a melodic idea sung first by Tristan, then Isolde, that they should find their perfect union in death, “So, stürben wir, um ungetrennt,” (Then we should die, undivided). Brangaene’s song returns, giving warning to the lovers that night is passing. Tristan and Isolde are oblivious to all but each other and their singing of the sweet night. The final section of the duet begins with the words, “O ew’ge Nacht (Eternal night). There is a long approach to the final climax, with peaks of musical tensions rising repetitively to an unbearable level. Before the musical tension can be eased and just as the lovers sing the words, “Highest joy of love,” there is a fierce dissonance using the full orchestra which is accompanied by a scream from Brangaene.

King Marke and the hunting party burst in on the lovers. Morning has dawned. Tristan says for Isolde’s hearing alone, “The bleak day for the last time.” King Marke now sings a lengthy monologue full of sadness and disbelief that Tristan, so noble, and close to him, could do such a thing (“Marke’s Grief” motif). He asks him many questions for which Tristan has no answer. Speaking almost in code, Tristan faces Isolde (“Love of Tristan and Isolde” motif) and asks her if she will follow him to his destination (“Yearning for Death” motif), to the land of darkness (“Land of Oblivion”

motif), the mysterious realm of the night (“Night of Love” and “Land of Oblivion” motifs) to which he now invites her (“Love of Tristan and Isolde” and “Yearning for Death” motifs). She replies that she will be happy to go with him to his true realm (“Land of Oblivion” motif), his home (“Love of Tristan and Isolde” motif), if he will show the way (motif “Yearning for Death”). Tristan kisses her forehead.

Tristan’s actions galvanizes Melot who draws his sword, challenging Tristan. Tristan offers no defense, allowing Melot to wound him. Tristan falls into Kurwenal arms as the sound of Marke’s motif rings out from the brass section.

### Act III

Kurwenal has brought Tristan to his ancestral home on the rocky coast of Brittany. Using the motifs “Despair,” “Solitude,” and “Languid Suffering,” a bleak picture is established. A shepherd, keeping watch, plays a mournful tune on his pipe (the sound is produced by an English horn). The shepherd is keeping watch for a ship bearing Isolde, who they believe is the only one who can save Tristan’s life. Kurwenal tells the shepherd to play a happy tune if Isolde’s ship comes into view. Tristan awakens, unsure of where he is, and is told that he is at his family seat, Kareol (“Kareol” motif).

Tristan, in somewhat of a delirium, knows that he has glimpsed oblivion (“Land of Oblivion” motif), but the longing for Isolde brought him back to consciousness, (“Longing” and “The Gaze” motifs). When will Isolde extinguish the light so that he might find peace, (“Ardor”, “Mystery”, and “Ecstasy” motifs). Kurwenal reveals that he has sent for Isolde. Tristan is overjoyed and praises him (“Tristan’s Protector” motif), and continues to try to explain his thoughts (“Languid Suffering,” “Yearning for Death” motifs). Tristan reflects on all the grief and sadness in his life and how the tune of the shepherd’s pipe reminds him of it. Now he thinks of his longing for Isolde and death.

As he sinks into another delirium he imagines Isolde coming to him. He becomes more agitated (“Tristan’s Ailing,” “Bliss of Night,” “Isolde, Angel of Death” motifs) as the shepherd’s pipe plays a bright, happy tune. Isolde’s ship has been sighted and Tristan, in great excitement, tears at his bandages. The accompanying motifs are “Love,” “Yearning for Death,” “Love’s Yearning,” “Bliss of Night, and “Isolde, Angel of Death.” As Isolde comes toward him (“Ardor” motif), Tristan sinks into her arms, speaks her name, and dies.

Isolde tries unsuccessfully to get Tristan to respond, and eventually collapses over his body. A noise is heard from the beach. The shepherd informs Kurwenal that another ship has arrived. Kurwenal prepares to defend his master’s home (“Tristan’s Protector” motif). The King, Melot and Brangaene all appear. Brangaene has told King Marke about the potion and he has come to forgive the lovers and unite them. Kurwenal fights with Melot and kills him. He then attacks others in the King’s retinue and is mortally wounded. He staggers to Tristan’s side and dies at his feet. King Marke is full of anguish and Brangaene revives her mistress.

Isolde seems unaware of their presence. With her eyes fixed on Tristan, she imagines she sees him smiling, and begins the process of sinking into her own oblivion. She sings the words, “Mild und leise wie er lächelt,” (Gently and softly he is smiling), the opening words of Isolde’s Liebestod (Love-Death). Isolde sinks down onto Tristan’s body, mystically uniting with him in death. The music contains motifs representing Isolde’s emotions, touches on music from the Act II love duet, and near the end, is dominated by the “Ecstasy” motif. In the final moments of the opera, the unresolved opening motifs of the Prelude (“Longing” and the “Tristan chord”) are, at long last, brought to musical completion. The lovers and the listener are at peace.

## Historical Background

The importance of the opera, *Tristan und Isolde* can not be overstated. From a musical standpoint, many consider it to be the beginning of modern music. Wagner's uninhibited use of dissonance challenged the whole system of tonality in Western music and set the stage for atonal music in the decades to come. It also influenced generations of artists in all disciplines with its profound treatment of human love that goes beyond deep emotion into a metaphysical world.

The means by which Wagner achieved this end required a libretto, music and staging that was a radical departure from all that had gone before. As a result, musicians did not readily understand the music. Singers had trouble learning their roles. The parts of Tristan and Isolde were excessively demanding, both physically and emotionally. (Rumors of a "Tristan curse" sprung up when the tenor singing the part of Tristan died suddenly three weeks after the premiere!) *Tristan* was not staged until five years after it was written. Audiences either loved or hated the work. Wagner did receive ecstatic support from musical luminaries and the intelligentsia.

Wagner had decided to write an opera based on the Tristan legend some years earlier, in the latter part of 1854. He was in the midst of composing one of his *Ring* operas, *Siegfried*, when the subject of Tristan invaded his thoughts. He was also in the midst of a love affair with Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of his patron. In a letter to his friend, Franz Liszt, he wrote, "Since I have never in my life tasted the real happiness of love, I shall raise a monument to this most beautiful of all dreams, in which from beginning to end that love will be thoroughly satiated. I have drafted in my mind a Tristan and Isolde, the simplest but most fullblooded musical conception." He eventually put *Siegfried* to one side for the time being (actually, a total of twelve years!) and turned his attention to this new subject matter.

The Tristan legend which probably dates back to the Celtic period of European history began appearing in literary form in the twelfth century. Gottfried von Strassburg wrote a well-known version sometime between 1200 and 1220. Wagner used this version as the source material for his libretto. (Wagner always wrote his own librettos). In September 1857, Wagner completed first the prose and then the poem form of the libretto. He then fully composed each act in its entirety before embarking on the next. This was not his usual pattern of composition. As each act was completed it was sent to the publishers, making changes or revisions impossible. The first act was completed in April 1858, the second in March 1859 and the third act was completed in August 1859.

The libretto itself caused controversy. Some deplored it as bad poetry. Much of the verse consists of short phrases containing very few words. The characters frequently speak symbolically, suggesting a thought rather than declaiming one. The story does not proceed chronologically. Full understanding of the plot does not come until the characters explain what has come before, usually in lengthy monologues. Plot action and reality are unimportant while the psychological states of the characters are preeminent. What Wagner was trying to achieve was the love story of two people for whom the enduring

realization of their love was unattainable in this world. In his writing of *Tristan*, Wagner was inspired and deeply influenced by the philosophy of Schopenhauer. An additional spiritual source was the tradition of German Romanticism with its emphasis on the inner world of dream and ecstasy, and its attraction to night and death.

*Tristan und Isolde* is the most symphonic of Wagner's operas. The drama is played out not so much on the stage but in the orchestra. Leitmotifs are stated, combined, recombined and contrasted in a whirl of continuous motion. The motives, feelings, and desires of the characters are explained and underlined in the orchestra. The solo voices are part of the overall fabric. They are all part of an endless stream of melody which flows from the singers and the orchestra. Harmonically, the music is never at rest. Through the use of chromaticism and dissonance Wagner plays out the psychological tensions of the lovers, not finding musical resolution until the lovers themselves are at peace. The first chord of the opera is the most famous single chord in the history of opera. It is known simply as the "Tristan chord." It contains two dissonances, doubling the desire for resolution in the ear of the listener. Resolution never comes completely while the drama is being played out. Every resolution of a dissonance is incomplete in some manner so that musically the listener is in a constant state of tension, replicating the condition of the lovers. Resolution is not achieved until the end of the opera, on the very last chord, after Isolde joins Tristan in death.

Wagner also played a pivotal role in the evolution of opera staging. There were many aspects of conventional opera that Wagner criticized and wished to change. His style of writing, as exhibited in *Tristan*, was seamless with nothing interrupting the flow of the drama. This was in stark contrast to conventional operas with arias, recitatives, duets, etc, in set pieces which stopped the flow of action to allow for applause. Wagner wrote several books about his theories, the most famous of which is *Opera and Drama*. In this book he lays out his view that an opera should be a "Gesamtkunstwerk" or Total Art-Work. Nothing should interfere with the flow of the drama. His many ideas about opera production and staging could not be realized until he was able to build a theater in Bayreuth to his own specifications. Present day audiences have Wagner to thank for the orchestra pit, state of the art lighting and stage machinery, seating all facing the stage, and theater lights dimming at the beginning of the performance. All these innovations were designed to permit complete concentration on the music-drama being performed. *Tristan und Isolde* was first performed in a manner consistent with Wagner's principles at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1886 after his death.

## Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the opera, why won't Tristan go to Isolde's quarters?
2. Why is Isolde so angry?
3. What is the purpose of the love potion?
4. In what way is the love potion really a death potion?
5. Why does Isolde want both she and Tristan to drink the potion? Why does he drink the potion so eagerly?
6. Does drinking the love potion make Tristan and Isolde fall in love with each other?
7. Many people say the action in the opera is in the orchestra. Why would this be the case?
8. Which character dominates Act I? Act II? Act III?
9. King Marke forgives the two lovers at the end. Why is this important?
10. There is much symbolism concerning light and dark (day and night) in the opera. What does the day represent? What does night?
11. Loyalty upheld or betrayed is another theme in the opera. Give examples of who displays loyalty to whom and why. Where are the betrayals?
12. The lovers must deal with two worlds. How would you define these two worlds. How do Tristan and Isolde express themselves in relation to these two worlds?
13. Does the real world (external) or the dream world (internal) win in the end?



of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



# The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<b><i>Soprano</i></b>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<b><i>Mezzo-Soprano</i></b>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<b><i>Tenor</i></b>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<b><i>Baritone</i></b>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<b>Verdi Baritone</b> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<b><i>Bass</i></b>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<b>Buffo Bass</b> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	<b>Basso Cantate</b> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

# Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

