



Beginner's Guide to Opera

Welcome to our Beginner's Guide to Opera. If you've never been to see an opera before and would like to give it a go, this guide will let you know what to expect when you get there and hopefully will answer lots of questions you might have.



You might find it useful to read our Beginner's Guide to the Theatre first, as this gives loads of information (e.g. how to buy tickets, where to sit, dos and don'ts of the theatre, what to wear) that's also good to know when going to see an opera, as the majority of opera performances take place in theatres.

1. What is opera?

Opera is performance on the stage where performers sing throughout. Accompanied by music (often an orchestra), it combines art, design, speech, drama, vocal and instrumental music, so if you fancy trying a bit of everything at once, why not take a trip to the opera?

2. What is an opera performance really like?

Opera productions today are likely to be every bit as dramatic, action-packed, emotional and exciting as modern theatre or films.

Opera goes back hundreds of years, so for some productions the plot may seem to tell an old-fashioned story, but the human emotion, passion and drama in these plots

never goes out of style! Many companies now produce modern versions of classic operas, bringing the setting of these stories bang up to date.

3. It's my first time, which opera do you recommend?

Songs from operas are used every day on the TV and in films, so you'll probably find you know loads of operatic music already! If you go along to any of the following operas you might hear some music you recognise:

- La Traviata or Aida by Puccini
- Otello or Falstaff by Verdi
- Carmen by Bizet
- Eugene Onegin by Tchaikovsky
- Peter Grimes by Britten
- The Barber of Seville by Rossini
- The Tales of Hoffman by Offenbach

All these have irresistible tunes that you'll be humming as you leave the theatre, and they also have good plots. Mozart operas are marvellous but tend to be quite long, with a running time of more than three hours, so you may prefer to try a shorter opera first.

You might also like to try a more modern opera. These tend to be less emotional than older operas, and some have storylines that centre around topical issues, such as Opera North's recent production of [Skin Deep](#), which was all about cosmetic surgery.



4. Is opera suitable for children?

Children between 5 and 18 are welcome and tickets are normally cheaper than an adult ticket. However some shows may not be suitable for young children – make sure you check this with the box office staff when booking your tickets.

5. If I'm new to opera, how will I understand what's going on?

You won't fail to be moved by the sheer power and emotion of the event, but to get even more from the experience, you could try the following:

- Telephone the theatre or opera company in advance and request a story/information sheet to read before the performance – not all theatres provide this, but it's definitely worth asking the box office when you book your tickets.
- Buy a programme when you arrive at the theatre. Most programmes will give an outline of the story so you can read up on this before the curtain goes up. This can also give lots of other interesting information about the production, and you can take it home as a souvenir!
- Borrow a CD of the opera or 'highlights' from your local library and learn all the good tunes.

There are quite a few modern films and stage productions that take their storylines from operas, so if you go along to one of these you might find that the story is quite familiar! These include *Moulin Rouge* (based on Verdi's *La Traviata*), MTV's *Carmen: A Hip Hopera*, starring Beyoncé (based on Bizet's *Carmen*) and the musical *Rent* (based on Puccini's *La Bohème*).

6. What if it's sung in another language?

When an opera is sung in a language other than English a translation is often displayed on a digital screen above the stage – these are called surtitles. The staff will be able to advise you what language the performance will be in and whether surtitles will be available or not. The screen is not visible from some areas of theatres, so if a view of the screen is important for you make sure to tell the box office staff when booking your seats.



Until you become familiar with the storyline of an opera, it's best to go to performances with surtitles if you can so you don't miss any of the action!

7. What do I wear? Formal? Informal?

There is no official dress code for opera, but some people do dress up to make the evening more special, so you might want to go

for a smart-casual look.

8. Is opera for me?

There's only one way to find out. If you've seen The Godfather, watched the World Cup, or TV advertisements, you're already familiar with opera music. Seeing the real thing is even better, so give it a whirl and book your tickets now!

9. So what can I see in the West Midlands?

The following companies regularly perform in the West Midlands, and will all be able to give good advice on what to see if you're new to opera:

Birmingham Opera Company www.birminghamopera.org.uk
Welsh National Opera www.wno.org.uk
English Touring Opera www.englishtouringopera.org.uk

Images kindly supplied by [Birmingham Conservatoire](#) and [Birmingham Hippodrome](#).

Image 1: Opera at Birmingham Conservatoire – Christian Payne

Image 2: Birmingham Hippodrome Audience – Neil Pugh

Image 3: Birmingham Hippodrome, a busy matinee performance – Stewart Helmley