

# In love with opera

OPERA IS A MYSTERY TO MANY, BUT ONCE YOU KNOW WHAT IT INVOLVES AND GET A TASTE FOR IT, THERE WILL BE NO KEEPING YOU AWAY

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## Opera Australia's tips for beginners:

### Pick what you know

Go for a story or composer you are familiar with. Opera Australia's website ([opera-australia.org.au](http://opera-australia.org.au)) features summaries of each production, plus set photos and music clips. For *La Boheme* (pictured), you may know *Musetta's Waltz* or the duet *O soave fanciulla*, or have seen the musical, *Rent*, which is based on the classic. A quick pre-performance Wikipedia doesn't hurt either.

### Check the length

You don't want to sit through six hours of Wagner, so check the length. Most operas are between two and three hours long, with at least one interval. *La Boheme* is 2 hours and 10 minutes, including interval.

### Watch the surtitles

All performances are presented with surtitles, instant English translations, projected on a screen above the stage, so don't worry about not understanding what's going on. But bear in mind it's good to just listen to the music occasionally.

### Wear something comfortable

The image is of full-length gowns and furs, but the truth is black tie is not compulsory. At *La Boheme*, there was a mix of everything from jeans to tuxedos.

### Applause

Applause is encouraged, although it's polite to wait until the music and singing have stopped. Foot stomping is an opera tradition, so don't be alarmed.

Amelia Farrugia is humming *The Merry Widow Waltz* as she (there's no other word for it) waltzes around a dressing room beneath the soaring sails of the Sydney Opera House. Dressed in a figure-hugging black silk gown, black fur and carrying an enormous feathered fan, she looks every inch the opera diva about to take the lead opposite David Hobson in Opera Australia's *The Merry Widow*.

So it comes as a surprise when the Mosman mother-of-one says she nearly ended up in the gown and wig of a barrister instead of an opera star.

"I got into law at the University of Sydney and intended doing that, and it was Dad's idea that I pursue singing instead," she says.

As a 16-year-old, the only musical member of a "not really musical" family, she had been decidedly nonplussed when her teacher told her that her voice was more suited to the classical repertoire than that of a pop star.

"I was a bit 'oh', because at that stage you want to be Mariah Carey, she says. "But when I was in high school, a teacher played *Summertime* from (Gershwin's opera) *Porgy and Bess* and I loved it. I remember thinking 'God if I could sing like that.'"

Opera might seem like a *fait accompli* for the vocally-blessed Farrugia, but if you're one of the many who would like to 'know' opera and throw around words like *libretto* and *contralto* without blushing, how do you learn to love what many consider to be the most refined art form?

It is a question I was forced to face recently when an invitation arrived to attend the new production of *La Boheme* directed by theatre maestro Gale Edwards.

At ease at the theatre, ballet, festivals and any kind of gallery, my only opera experience thus far had been a children's production of *Die Fledermaus* and an ill-advised stint in the chorus of a school production of *HMS Pinafore*.

Serious opera was a mystery – an alien planet populated by eastern suburbs matrons with furs and French champagne, and busty sopranos belting out arias.

"That image – of overweight women with horns on their heads screaming at the back of the circle – is the oldest cliché in the book, it hasn't been true for years," says Stuart Maunder, a former executive director of Opera Australia, who has staged virtually every major opera (with the exception of Wagner, which he describes as "not my thing" and *Die Rosenkavalier* – "If (villain) Baron Ochs comes on stage again, I'm going to scream.") Now a freelancer, the North Sydney director is currently in Perth staging *The Tales of Hoffman* by Jacques Offenbach.

"Opera is huge. It's the past 400 years of music, and to say that one knows opera or one hates opera, is silly," he says. "It's like saying you don't like Shakespeare or you don't like plays, or you don't like Thai food. There are as

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many operas as there are audiences, so if you don't like French opera, you might like Italian opera. Or if you don't like Italian opera, you might like Wagner."

You don't even have to be able to read music, as Lindfield opera lover Michael Berman discovered. An engineer by trade, his love of opera was, surprisingly, inspired by an engineering tour he took of the Sydney Opera House in 1971.

Realising he had no idea what went on within its famous sails, he signed up for a music appreciation course and was flabbergasted by what he found.

"The teacher asked who had seen an opera and everybody put their hand up except for me," he says. He is now a member of Northside Opera ([northsideopera.org.au](http://northsideopera.org.au)), a study group which has met weekly for more than 30 years.

"I still can't read a note of music, so when they talk about musical terms, I don't understand much, but I'm still fascinated," he says.

But how do you go about finding "the one"? After all, everyone knows that opera is supposed to be a transformative experience. Just look at what it did for Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.

Maunder believes the best advice you can give someone is to pick an opera that affects them at some deeper human level.

"Start with something that reaffirms the human spirit – *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Magic Flute*. Not coincidentally they're all by Mozart," he says.

"Some of the best operas are the ones you come away from talking about."

*La Boheme* fortunately gets the tick, described by Maunder as "a pretty perfect opera". Written by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, it is the fourth most produced opera worldwide and tells the story of two bohemians in Paris, Rodolfo and Mimi, one of whom is suffering (and eventually dies of) consumption.

"With the right cast and the right chemistry between the bohemians, it's the perfect opera to start with," Maunder says. He clearly remembers the first opera he saw as a student at the University of NSW, when a friend "physically dragged" him to a screening of Ingmar Bergman's film version of *The Magic Flute*.

"It was revelatory," he says. "The music, the characters, which were right for their roles. There was no suspension of disbelief whatsoever."

Done right, he says, opera should be the most extraordinary theatre experience you can imagine.

"When it does come together, which is rare, it's an assault on every sense," he says.

"In *La Boheme*, in Act IV when Mimi is dying, you shouldn't be aware of anything else. If you're thinking 'For God's sake, take her to the emergency room,' the production's lost it."

Read what reviewer Tom Pillans thought of *La Boheme* on page 18.

## Opera Rollcall

### Want more?

Opera Australia (OA) has five productions in coming months.

### Of Mice and Men

Director Bruce Beresford turns his hand to opera in this Australian premiere of John Steinbeck's classic 1937 novella, starring Grammy Award-winning American tenor Anthony Dean Griffey. From Saturday.

### The Merry Widow

Starring crowd-pleasers David Hobson and Amelia Farrugia (see main story), OA promises plenty of gowns and glamour in this new production of Franz Lehar's popular operetta. It even spawned a ballet of the same name. From August 4.

### Lakme

With a vibrant set inspired by traditional Hindu paintings, Delibes' Eastern-inspired opera has an English officer and the daughter of a Brahmin priest falling in love, and features the famous *Flower Duet* and *The Bell Song*. From August 24.

### Macbeth

With a combination of Verdi's music and a Canadian director whose previous credits involve directing Cirque du Soleil, you are guaranteed plenty of drama in this striking production of Shakespeare's tragedy. From September 10.

### Don Giovanni

The seventh-most performed opera worldwide, and considered by some to be Mozart's finest, this production boasts the charismatic Teddy Tahu Rhodes as the sexy and dangerous lothario, Don Giovanni. Starts from September 24.