

OPERA ATELIER

timeless



STUDY GUIDE

Making of an Opera
September 19-23, 2011

www.operaatelier.com

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About Opera Atelier

Opera Atelier holds a unique place in the North American theatre community, producing opera, ballet and drama from the 17th and 18th centuries. These productions draw upon the aesthetics and ideals of the period, featuring soloists of international acclaim, period ballet, original instruments, elaborate stage decor, exquisite costumes and an imaginative energy that sets Opera Atelier apart. Opera Atelier is not in the business of "reconstruction", rather, each production is a new creative effort and takes its own place in history. We strive to create productions that would have been recognized and respected in their own time while providing a thrilling theatrical experience for modern audiences.

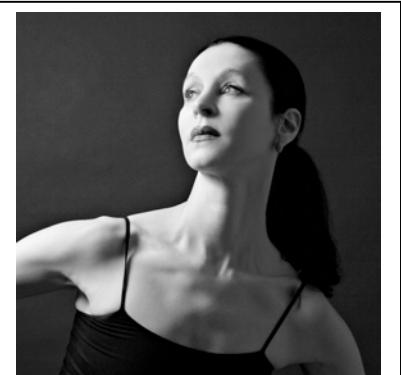
Founded by Marshall Pynkoski and Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg in 1985, Opera Atelier has been acclaimed throughout Canada, in Houston, Cleveland, New York, Stuttgart, Halle, Bremen, London (BBC Proms), Paris, Montreux, Citta di Castello, Singapore, throughout Japan and, most recently, in Seoul Korea. We collaborate with some of early music's most distinguished artists including Andrew Parrott, Trevor Pinnock, Hervé Niquet, Marc Minkowski and many others. Opera Atelier's 2000 production of Lully's *Persée* (performed for the first time since the 18th century) was hailed by William Littler of The Toronto Star as "the operatic event of the year, a triumph for director Marshall Pynkoski, choreographer Jeannette Zingg, their design team and their cast..."

Mr. Pynkoski and Ms. Lajeunesse Zingg also direct the School of Atelier Ballet (SAB) which operates under the umbrella of Opera Atelier. Graduates of the SAB are performing professionally in companies throughout North America and Europe including the National Ballet of Canada and Opera Atelier.

Opera Atelier's commitment to education extends to our Making of an Opera Program, which has introduced thousands of children to all aspects of production and performance. Opera Atelier has received four Lieutenant-Governor Awards for Excellence in Arts Management.



Marshall Pynkoski



Jeannette Lajeunesse
Zingg

Baroque Opera Explained

Baroque opera has its beginnings in the late Renaissance in Italy. It was originally conceived as an attempt to revive ancient Greek drama. Although no classical Greek music survived, Renaissance scholars were aware that Greek drama included declamation, and choral chanting. Consequently, early attempts at reviving this art form included these elements in addition to stories based on Classical themes and mythology.

As absolute monarchs throughout Europe identified themselves more and more strongly with Greek heroes and myth-makers, they appropriated these stories and frequently used them as a means of personal promotion.

By the 17th century, opera had become a highly respected and codified art form in its own right. The gorgeous and elaborate productions of the 17th and 18th centuries were expensive to mount and required exceptionally well-trained singers, instrumentalists, dancers, machinists and scenic artists.

The greatest composers of the world lent their talents to developing this art form which came to be seen as one of the sublime examples of human creativity. Opera encompasses all of the arts, and enjoyed unparalleled popularity from its conception right up to today.

Opera is the stylish, dazzling, often beautiful, often sad, warm-hearted, funny, serious and even sexy form of music that has enriched our lives for hundreds of years. Originally an art form for a privileged few, opera has evolved into an international multi-media crowd pleaser.

The word "opera" is Italian and comes from the plural for the word "opus" which means work.

Opera combines the best of all worlds: spectacular singing, rich orchestral sounds, drama, dance, beautiful sets, lavish costumes, elaborate lighting and special effects. These artistic qualities combine to make opera one of the most powerful and comprehensive art forms.

The word "Baroque" was originally used as an insult to describe art or music which was overly extravagant, even slightly bizarre. It comes from the Portuguese word *barroco*, a misshapen pearl. In the 20th century it has become the respectable name for music from about 1600, when opera was born in Italy, until about 1750, the year of Johann Sebastian Bach's death.

Don Giovanni Overview

Composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in 1787.

Italian libretto written by Lorenzo da Ponte.

First performed at the National Theatre, Prague, on October 29, 1787, with Mozart himself conducting. Inspired by the legendary character Don Juan, Mozart's outrageous comedy tells the tale of an incorrigible young playboy who blazes a path to his own destruction in a single day.

Opera Atelier's brand new period production runs at the Elgin Theatre Oct. 29-Nov. 5.

The Characters and Voice Types in *Don Giovanni*

Don Pedro, <i>The Commendatore</i>	Bass
Donna Anna, <i>The Commendatore's daughter</i>	Soprano
Don Ottavio, <i>Donna Anna's betrothed</i>	Tenor
Don Giovanni, <i>a young nobleman</i>	Baritone
Leporello, <i>Don Giovanni's servant</i>	Bass
Donna Elvira, <i>a lady</i>	Soprano
Masetto, <i>a peasant</i>	Baritone
Zerlina, <i>Masetto's betrothed</i>	Soprano

Don Giovanni Synopsis

ACT I

The opera opens in a typical Commedia dell'Arte scenario: A servant, Leporello, waits outside a house, the Commendatore's villa, for his master, Don Giovanni. Suddenly, Giovanni rushes out of the house pursued by Donna Anna. The uproar wakes up the Commendatore, who appears with his servants.

The old man is determined to defend the honour of his daughter, Donna Anna. In spite of Giovanni's initial refusal of the old man's challenge, a fight ensues. The Commendatore is fatally wounded. Donna Anna mourns her father, while her fiancé Don Ottavio, summoned unto the scene for help, pledges to avenge him.

Giovanni and Leporello reappear when the coast is clear. Suddenly, Giovanni catches the scent of a woman in the air. She is none other than Donna Elvira, seeking the man who won her heart and then forsook her in Burgos. Giovanni, the culprit, tries to console her before realizing her identity. He makes a quick getaway, leaving Leporello the difficult task of explaining everything to her. She soon learns from him that Giovanni's conquests are numerous in every country and that she was neither his first nor last lover.

Leporello joins his master. They come across a group of peasants celebrating the wedding of Zerlina and Masetto. Giovanni cannot resist another potential conquest: he sends the whole wedding party to be entertained in his home. While Leporello looks after them Giovanni propositions Zerlina.

Donna Elvira reappears and prevents Giovanni from leaving with Zerlina, who had agreed to follow him. Donna Anna and Don Ottavio appear and ask Giovanni for his assistance. Donna Elvira soon returns to warn them of Giovanni's character. Realizing that he cannot fully discredit her or silence her, Giovanni makes another quick and polite exit. Suddenly, Donna Anna realizes who he is. She tells Don Ottavio the full story of the events that led to the death of the Commendatore. Once again, she demands that he avenge her father's death.

Giovanni meets up with his servants again and starts to discuss a party he wants Leporello to organize for him. Zerlina begs jealous Masetto's forgiveness, then Giovanni appears and tries to lead Zerlina away. Eventually, all three leave together for the party. Soon Donna Elvira, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio appear at Giovanni's wearing masks and are asked to join the party.

Giovanni and Zerlina flirt with each other at the ball, and Masetto is furious. Leporello, acting on his master's orders, distracts Masetto while everybody dances a minuet, a contredanse and a German dance. Giovanni leads Zerlina to another room. Suddenly, we hear her scream and everyone rushes to rescue her. The door opens and Giovanni appears dragging Leporello and denouncing him as the culprit. Donna Anna, Don Ottavio and Donna Elvira drop their masks. They do not believe him and threaten vengeance. Giovanni manages to escape ingeniously.

INTERMISSION

Don Giovanni Synopsis, continued

ACT II

Leporello claims to be fed up and about to leave his master forever. He suggests his master renounce the pursuit of women. Giovanni rejects his pleas as ridiculous and soon drags him out on a new chase.

Giovanni is now interested in Elvira's maid. To woo her, he decides to exchange clothes with his servant. Elvira, looking down at Leporello from a balcony succumbs to his singing to her. She actually hears Giovanni's voice while she sees Leporello, in Giovanni's clothing, miming the words. She comes down to join Leporello and is soon led away by him leaving the coast clear.

Giovanni serenades the maid with a mandolin. Masetto appears, armed and in the company of villagers. Giovanni, disguised as Leporello, offers to help them find Don Giovanni. After sending the peasants off on the wrong track, Giovanni tricks Masetto into giving him all his weapons. After giving Masetto a serious beating, Giovanni makes yet another quick exit. Zerlina appears and comforts her lover by promising him...the ultimate medication.

Meanwhile, Leporello tries to extricate himself from Donna Elvira. At the very moment he thinks he can finally escape, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio appear followed by Zerlina and Masetto; they all confront him. They are, of course, very surprised to see Donna Elvira trying to defend him. Leporello throws off his disguise and reveals his true identity; naturally, this does not save him. Then a higher motive calls everyone away: they must find Giovanni and denounce him to the local authorities.

Leporello joins his master at night. While Giovanni teases Leporello about the good time he just spent with another conquest, they both notice a statue of the Commendatore. Upon his master's request, Leporello reads the inscription at the base of the statue: "Here, I await Heaven's vengeance upon a vile assassin." Suddenly, a voice is heard warning Giovanni of his impending doom. Leporello is terrified but Giovanni thinks that someone is playing a practical joke at their expense. Giovanni invites the statue to a banquet in his own villa and the stately stone character accepts his invitation.

Don Ottavio enters with Donna Anna. He offers to marry her the next day but she begs him to wait as they are mourning her father's death.

Don Giovanni prepares for the banquet he promised the statue. Musicians play favourite tunes (one of which is an aria from *The Marriage of Figaro*). Donna Elvira appears and pleads with Giovanni to repent and marry her. He dismisses her and she departs. She is heard screaming and Giovanni sends Leporello to find out what frightened her.

Leporello soon returns to warn his master of the approach of the statue. Giovanni orders his servant to invite the statue in. Leporello hides under the table and Giovanni has to open the door himself. The unusual guest declines Giovanni's meal but offers his hand, inviting the Don to a dinner of his own. Giovanni accepts the invitation taking the statue's hand. Suddenly, Giovanni drops to his knees terrified and the statue demands repentance. Giovanni repeatedly refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing.

Baroque Acting and Gesture

By Marshall Pynkoski, Opera Atelier Co-Artistic Director & Don Giovanni Director

Over the past 25 years Opera Atelier has developed an extremely detailed and recognizable performance style based on the gestural acting/oratorical technique of the 17th and 18th centuries. Essays in classical oratory by Quintillian and Cicero provided a model for Baroque actors, as did postures and gesture taken from both classical and contemporary paintings and sculpture. Rhetorical gesture was designed to accompany individual words of text, rather than to display the pervading emotions. Like the text, gestures were coherently and gracefully linked to provoke the maximum response from the spectator. Ideally, the use of gesture assists the actor in eliciting an emotional response from the audience, while he maintains control of his technique – a necessity when dealing with the sheer density of text of most Baroque opera and drama. The Baroque actor is a storyteller. It is his job to make the audience feel what he describes. The Baroque actor strives to ensure that audience members are not voyeurs, rather they are participants in the emotional journey of each player.

The gestures for both rhetoric and opera fall into the following categories:

- Emphatic gestures – in which the actor enforces the important words by gesture;
- Imitative gestures – in which the actor imitates, for example, the gentleness of a scene he talks about with a gentle gesture;
- Affective or expressive gestures – in which the actor expresses a particular passion such as fear or grief with specific gestures.

Some of the gestures can be combined to form a complex gesture expressing two or more meanings at once. Each of them can be performed in such a way as merely to suggest its meaning rather than to make it explicit. Baroque gesture and rhetorical speech patterns prevailed on the European stage throughout the nineteenth century.

Don Giovanni Director's Notes

By Marshall Pynkoski, Opera Atelier Co-Artistic Director & Don Giovanni Director

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is frequently presented as a dark, psychological drama featuring a sexually immature, aging Lothario. The 20th century (still reeling from the Puritanism that was a direct reaction against the license of the 18th century) takes comfort in insisting that Don Giovanni does not love women, rather he hates them; hence his extraordinary number of conquests and inability to achieve intimacy. The point of view has often been portrayed since the middle of the 19th century and into the present day. This very modern psychology becomes highly problematic should a director wish to exploit the fact that da Ponte's libretto for *Don Giovanni* is firmly rooted in the Italian Commedia dell'Arte and is packed with standard – indeed typical – Commedia scenarios, dialogues, and characters.

The opening scene alone signals to us that we are in the world of the Commedia dell'Arte and is virtually identical to the opening scenes of numerous famous Commedia scripts that survive to this day. In those scripts, the servant, Harlequin, is forced to wait outside the bedroom, tavern or inn while, inside, the master indulges himself. Harlequin always begins the show with a litany of complaints regarding his master, his situation, and his wish that he could change places with him.

Don Giovanni does not hate women. Rather, he adores all women. He falls in love with the last woman to cross his field of vision, and the schtick is that all the women, in turn, find him irresistible. Think of Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*: the Don is a Cherubino who has lived to be 25 years old! Opera Atelier's *Don Giovanni* is a comedy about a young man who, like many young people, believes himself to be immortal. Like all successful comedy, it contains moments of great pathos and power. Ultimately, we must love the Don as does every woman in Mozart's opera. By the final scene, he is more than merely seductive: he becomes truly heroic.

People often look for the dark side of *Don Giovanni* because the opera was originally referred to as "dramma giocoso". It is important for us to know that in the 18th century the Italian word "dramma" (like the French "drame") had no connotations of the serious or tragic. The word "dramma" simply meant "a play". Thus a literal translation of "dramma giocoso" is "a comic play".

This production takes Opera Atelier's performance style and stretches it to the limit. Our singers and dancers, intimately familiar with Opera Atelier's aesthetic must now parody that style in the comedic tradition. Period dances have been carefully created for the famous ballroom scene and throughout the opera. The Artists of Atelier Ballet act as a visual thread that links the scenes.

Opera Atelier's Set Design

The proscenium stage that we know today was invented in the 17th century. Before this time theatrical events took place out of doors on movable carts and platforms or in the banqueting and reception halls of palaces and great homes. Opera as we know it was invented in this period as an entertainment for rich and powerful patrons wealthy enough to commission these spectacular and frequently allegorical dramas set to music. An increasing demand for these entertainments led to the creation of public theatres with seating arranged around a stage that very much resemble a picture in a frame. The scenic designer of these productions (who often worked as an architect, engineer and painter) treated the stage as his canvas and the carved and gilded proscenium as his frame.

Part of the challenge in designing the various locations specified in an opera was creating the illusion of depth on a frequently shallow stage. We need only to look at the painting of the period to discover the inspiration for theatrical designers of the day. Artists since the Renaissance had perfected the study of perspective drawing and painting. These principles were used by stage designers to create painted scenery that reduced in scale as it approached the back of the stage. This "forced perspective" was employed on painted backdrops, side panels that slid back and forth into the wings and borders that were raised or lowered from the ceiling. Using these elements the designer could create changeable scenes of pastoral landscapes, turbulent seas, cloudscapes (often people with gods and goddesses) or virtually any desired location. Wooden clockwork machinery operated by stagehands was concealed below or above the stage and moved the scenery and provided the means for many special effects; hand-cranked waves could churn a painted sea, chariots flew through the air on ropes, and demons and dragons ascended from hell through trap doors. All theatres at the time were lit with candles or oil lamps and it is not surprising that most eventually burnt to the ground. A famous and perfectly preserved example with original machines and scenery is the Drottningholm Court Theatre in Sweden.

Opera Atelier is a company devoted to the production of period inspired opera, ballet and drama. As part of a creative team, the set designer's task is to understand and visually interpret the style and technology of the Baroque stage. While never recreating historical designs, Opera Atelier produces original sets and costumes inspired by these early sources.

Having researched the conventions of the early stage, the designer must then study the storyline of the opera by reading the libretto and determining the changes of location from scene to scene. At this point he or she must consult with the director about an overall visual concept for the piece.

Ultimately, a good design is one that is both beautiful and functional. To ensure that it works in conjunction with the movements on stage required that the designer work closely with the director from the start. Drawings, painting, and scale models are employed to establish the mood of each scene and to determine entrances, exits, and special effects. Generally a complete miniature set is created in advance so that the designer, director, carpenters and scenic artists can consult on the practicality and cost of the design. The designer must work with a technical director who oversees the construction and installation of the set, a lighting designer who will help create the changing atmosphere on the stage and prop-makers who build furniture and objects handled by the singers or actors.

A Glossary of Opera Terms

Aria: Italian for 'air', an aria is the major vocal piece where one singer expresses feelings and showcases the voice. Called a "static" moment in the scene, an aria freezes the action of the plot to focus on the emotion or thought.

Duet: An aria composed for two. Two singers express their feelings to each other or to the audience.

Libretto: Italian for 'little book,' a libretto refers to the script of an opera, written by the librettist. There is much debate over which is written for which: libretto for the music, or vice versa!

Recitative: Speech-singing, where the singer semi-chants the words in rhythm of free speech. Recitative is used to further the plot ("kinetic") or set up an aria and can be seen as a precursor to hip hop music and spoken word poetry.

Singspiel: A German term, a singspiel is a highly theatrical opera involving fantasy and has spoken dialogue between arias.

Chorus: A group of singers who perform the vital role of providing support to the principle singers. The chorus sets the scene and creates the mood for an opera, much like the way a Greek chorus furthers the plot and propels the action. It is composed of all voice ranges.

Voice Categories and Types

Bass: The lowest of the male voices.

Basso Buffo: Italian for "buffoon bass", who plays comic roles.

Baritone: A middle-range male voice.

Castrati: Castrati flourished during the period 1650-1750 singing both male and female roles in the soprano range. Their popularity was due to the strength and flexibility of their voices.

Coloratura Soprano: Singer with the highest range of notes.

Contralto: The lowest range of the female voice, rich voice quality. Mezzo and Contralto singers are almost interchangeable, and for this reason we almost never hear of contraltos.

Countertenor: A male alto who trains his falsetto voice rather than the lower range. Countertenors specialize in parts originally written for castrati.

Haute Contre: The "high tenor" usually sings higher than the other tenor roles.

Helden Tenor: Literally a "heroic tenor" with a strong voice and great stamina.

Mezzo-Soprano: A middle-range female voice.

Soprano: Singer with a high range of notes. Lyric sopranos are light in quality while dramatic sopranos have a full rich tone.

Tenor: Has the highest range of notes of the male voices.

Featured Aria from *Don Giovanni*

One of the most popular arias in *Don Giovanni* is the "Catalogue Aria" ("Madamina, il catalogo è questo") sung by Leporello to Donna Elvira in Act 1, scene 5.

If possible, students should listen to the aria in advance of their workshop. It can be played online at the following link: <http://mp3skull.com/mp3/leporello.html>

English Translation:

My dear lady, this is a list
Of the beauties my master has loved,
A list which I have compiled.
Observe, read along with me.
In Italy, six hundred and forty;
In Germany, two hundred and thirty-one;
A hundred in France; in Turkey, ninety-one;
In Spain already one thousand and three.
Among these are peasant girls,
Maid servants, city girls,
Countesses, baronesses,
Marchionesses, princesses,
Women of every rank,
Every shape, every age.
With blondes it is his habit
To praise their kindness;
In brunettes, their faithfulness;
In the very blond, their sweetness.
In winter he likes fat ones.
In summer he likes thin ones.
He calls the tall ones majestic.
The little ones are always charming.
He seduces the old ones
For the pleasure of adding to the list.
His greatest favourite
Is the young beginner.
It doesn't matter if she's rich,
Ugly or beautiful;
If she wears a petticoat,
You know what he does.

English translation of Leporello's "Catalogue Aria" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* provided by [New York City Opera Project: Don Giovanni](#), from Columbia University.

The Orchestra

Excerpts from Tafelmusik's study guide, *Go for Baroque* by Allison Mackay.

How is a Baroque orchestra different from a modern orchestra?

1. Opera Atelier's orchestra, [Tafelmusik](#), plays on so-called "original instruments" - the instruments which the composers of Baroque music played themselves. Orchestral instruments have changed over the years to reflect changing tastes in sound production. Modern violins have to be loud enough to be heard in the back row of a large concert hall; the violin of Bach's time was usually played in a small church or the salon of a palace and the warm sound of gut strings (made from sheep intestines) was loud enough to fill the intimate space.
2. One of the most striking features of a Baroque orchestra is the continuous presence of the harpsichord. It doubles the line played by the cello and bass in the left hand and makes the orchestra sound louder by filling out the harmonies with chords. The harpsichord's distinctive sound is created by quills made from bird feathers which pluck the strings, making the bass line sound clearer and the rhythms more driving.
3. Baroque orchestras were usually directed by one of the players instead of a separate conductor (although at Opera Atelier, we have a conductor because there are soloists and choristers who need direction).

The Orchestra - A Baroque Innovation

In Renaissance instrumental ensemble music, each part was played by one musician. Baroque composers continued to compose solo and chamber music but they also experimented with creating a fuller sound by putting several performers on one part to form an orchestra.

Baroque composers began to compose more extended instrumental pieces than in earlier times and they created forms in which several movements could be grouped together. Sometimes these movements were in contrasting but related keys. Our modern system of major and minor keys is an invention of the Baroque period; Baroque composers were the first to think of their music as a series of chords built above a bass line, each having a relationship with the main note of the key.

Dance Terms

Corps de ballet: A group of dancers in a ballet company separate from soloists and principals.

Renaissance Dance: Renaissance dance was the first dance style to be recorded. The High Renaissance dates from approximately 1400 to 1600 although none of these periods can be pinned down to exact dates. Renaissance social dancing varied from lively group dances such as the Branle, to stately court dances such as the Pavane. Theatrical dances were often versions of social dances with complex patterns. The dances of the Commedia dell'Arte were very acrobatic in contrast to the court ballets.

Baroque Dance: The Baroque period 17th and 18th centuries developed both theatrical and court choreographic styles greatly due to the Academy of Dancing established during the 1660's at the behest of Louis XIV. Many Baroque dances have come down to us through dance notation. The vocabulary of steps is huge and far more virtuosic than in earlier periods.

Early Ballet: Early ballet began to evolve out of Baroque toward the end of the 18th century. It shares many aesthetic principles with the Baroque but is also an attempt to reflect Greek and Roman antiquity due to the discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Romantic Ballet: Romantic ballet (approximately 1830 - 1860) was a revolutionary change in aesthetic with story ballets and a change from Greek myths to European fairy tales as subject matter.

Classical Ballet: Classical ballet came after the Romantic and is characterized by brilliant virtuosic technique, the short tutu, and the predominance of the ballerina.

Pas de deux: A dance for two.

Don Giovanni Choreographer's Notes

By Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, Opera Atelier Co-Artistic Director & Don Giovanni choreographer

“Madame Mozart told me that great as his genius was, he was an enthusiast in dancing, and often said his taste lay in that art rather than in music.”

- Michael Kelly (the first Don Basilio in *The Marriage of Figaro*)

Mozart's love of dancing is well demonstrated in the several dozen contredanses and German dances and over one hundred minuets which he has left to us. He studied ballet with Vestris, the greatest dancer of his day and enthusiastically participated in Masquerades himself. In 1783, he wrote to his father, asking him to send a Harlequin costume for a performance: “I composed the scenario and the music, the dancing master kindly controlled our steps, and I must tell you we really played quite well!” The Masquerade was a popular Commedia dell'Arte form which had a strong influence on European theatre during Mozart's life.

In 1778, Mozart collaborated with the famous choreographer Jean-George Noverre in a light ballet-pantomime, “Les Petits Riens”. He hoped to receive commissions for more ballet music from Noverre and it is unfortunate that these hopes never materialized. Just over two years later, Mozart was writing dance music for *Idomeneo*, including an opening Chaconne (strongly influenced by Gluck), a Passacaille, a Passepied, and a Gavotte, all with written choreographic notes by Mozart in which he visualized the choreography and even suggested individual dancers.

The dances in *Don Giovanni* are particularly brilliant in that they are completely integrated into the action. In *Don Giovanni*, a minuet, a contredanse and German dance (an early waltz) are meant to be danced simultaneously in an ingenious ballroom scene, in which they provide a background for the seduction of Zerlina. These dances, along with the Peasant Dance in Act One, are choreographed using steps and gestures current in the theatre of Mozart's day.

A Convincing Fight!

By Jennifer Parr, Fight Director

What is stage fighting? It is exactly that, fighting for the stage; but what does that mean?

Perhaps we should start with what it is not. It is not fencing. Although a stage fight should look as though it is being made up before your eyes, it is, in reality, a very carefully choreographed set of movements similar to a dance. Stage fighting is sometimes referred to as 'combat mime' because fighters must work together to create an illusion of spontaneity, an illusion of danger for the audience while doing their best to protect each other from any real danger of injury.

In the 17th and 18th centuries the 'Science of Arms' or 'Art of Self Defense' was an inescapable part of the life of every man of the upper classes. Not only was the ability to handle a sword necessary for war but it was also fashionable. Duels were constantly fought throughout this period although they were against the law, and boys would be taught from a young age 'the art of elegantly dispatching a neighbour to the next world.' Some girls managed to share their brothers' lessons, or otherwise learned the skills necessary to protect their own honour; some even fought duels, but they were the exception not the rule.

When a stage fight is choreographed for an Opera Atelier production it draws on this wealth of historical material and then goes beyond the reality. A fight is always a 'spectacle', a display of virtuoso skill with the apparent chance of danger similar to a trapeze or tightrope act. At the same time a stage fight must also be something more than spectacle; it must tell the audience something important about the characters involved, and must advance, or give a new twist to, the story.

The process of creating a stage fight always begins with the libretto and music of the opera and with research into the historical period. The next step involves in-depth discussions between the director and fight director to determine the role of the fight in the director's overall vision of the opera, followed by discussions of set and costume design and casting. The fight director then prepares the choreography of the fight and teaches the performers (singers and/or dancers) working constantly with the director.

Opera Atelier stage fights have sometimes featured the use of broadsword and spear but usually focus on the rapier, either single rapier, or in combination with a second rapier, dagger, buckler, or cape – typical weapon combinations of the period. The first Opera Atelier production to feature stage fights was the gala performance of *The Loves of Mars and Venus* in 1990. Since then many more fights have been featured in productions ranging from Mozart's ever popular *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, to the exciting 'new Baroque' performances of Charpentier's *Medée*, Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* and Lully's *Persée* (on both stage and film).