

# Opera for All

Fred Plotkin '80JRN is the author of *Opera 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Opera* and the lead opera correspondent for [WQXR Radio](#). He regularly appears on NPR to discuss his two passions — classical music and Italian cuisine.

By

[Julia Joy](#)

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Fred Plotkin in the Teatro at the Italian Academy. (Len Small)

**How did you become an opera expert?**

I've always loved the performing arts. My father was a musician, my mother was an administrator at Lincoln Center, and my stepfather was a manager at Columbia Records. I was a child actor, but I soon realized that I preferred life backstage. I studied Italian Renaissance history and opera production at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later I moved to Italy. I studied at DAMS in Bologna — Italy's equivalent to Juilliard — and got a Fulbright to work at the La Scala opera house in Milan. After returning to New York and studying journalism at Columbia, I got a job as a program editor for the Metropolitan Opera House and later became performance manager there.

### **What type of work do you do now?**

Outside of NPR, I consult with opera companies and teach a course at NYU called Adventures in Italian Opera. I'm the opera expert for [Times Journeys](#), which are small-group travel tours organized by the *New York Times*. I also write and lecture about Italian food and have published [six books](#) on the topic.

### **Most operas are more than a hundred years old. Why are they still relevant?**

Because they're about us. The tragedy, the passion, the insanity, and the discordant aspects of modern life are all reflected. And some operas, such as Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Verdi's *Don Carlo*, and Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, are very political — they deal with the role of the individual in society and how the decisions of leaders inevitably affect people's lives.

### **What are your feelings about contemporary opera?**

People say there are no good operas anymore, but I think there are fantastic works nowadays. One challenge with modern opera is that it is expensive to produce, because you have to pay royalties to living people. If I had to name one modern masterpiece, it would be [Dead Man Walking](#) by Jake Heggie, based on the book by Sister Helen Prejean. The opera is able to magnify certain emotions in ways that the book and film versions do not.

### **What's a great introductory opera?**

Verdi's *Rigoletto*, in part because most people already know some of the music. I recently took a friend to see it. She'd never been to the opera before, and she was in

tears by the end.

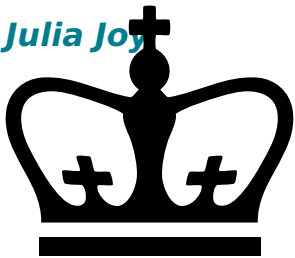
### **What advice do you have for an opera newcomer?**

First, you can't be passive. You have to actively listen to the music as it tells the story. I really believe that if you read the synopsis and then listen and watch without looking at the translations in the projected titles, you engage much more and get a lot more out of it.

Second, turn off your analytical faculties. You don't "understand" opera; you feel it. In our multitasking culture, we hear; we don't listen. We see, but we don't observe. Modern life teaches us to shut off our feelings, but opera activates our emotional potential. People who think it's a frivolous diversion just don't know.

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