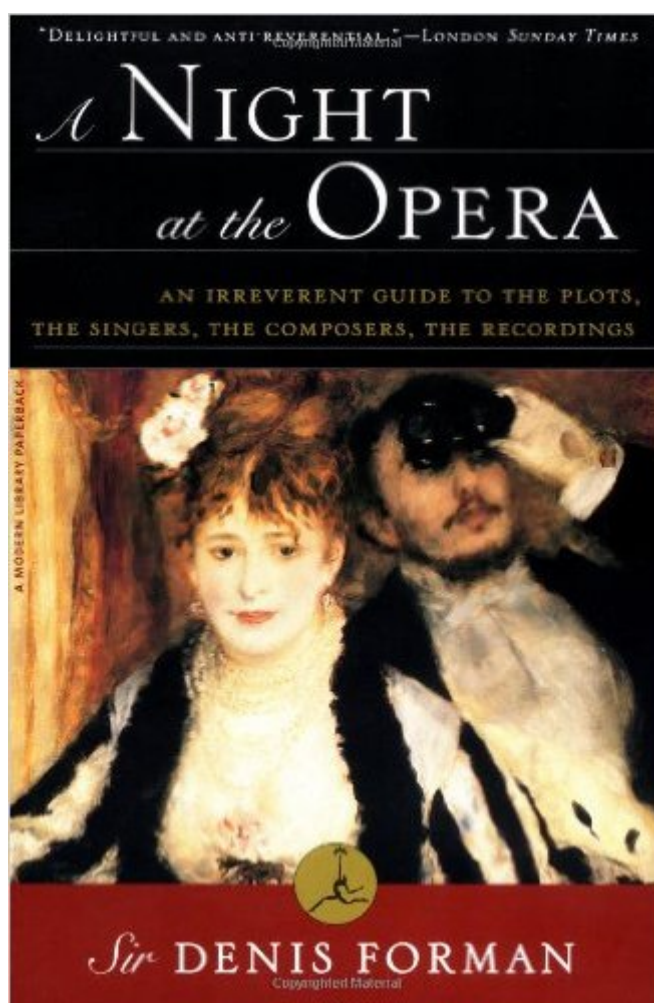


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# A Night At The Opera: An Irreverent Guide To The Plots, The Singers, The Composers, The Recordings (Modern Library Paperbacks)



## Synopsis

With an encyclopedic knowledge of opera and a delightful dash of irreverence, Sir Denis Forman throws open the world of opera--its structure, composers, conductors, and artists--in this hugely informative guide. *A Night at the Opera* dissects the eighty-three most popular operas recorded on compact disc, from Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* to Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. For each opera, Sir Denis details the plot and cast of characters, awarding stars to parts that are "worth looking out for," "really good," or, occasionally, "stunning." He goes on to tell the history of each opera and its early reception. Finally, each work is graded from alpha to gamma (although the Ring cycle gets an "X"), and Sir Denis has no qualms about voicing his opinion: the first act of *Fidelio* is "a bit of a mess," while the last scene of *Don Giovanni* "towers above the comic finales of *Figaro* and *Così fan tutti*— and whether or not [it] is Mozart's greatest opera, it is certainly his most powerful finale." The guide also presents brief biographies of the great composers, conductors, and singers. A glossary of musical terms is included, as well as *Operatica*, or the essential elements of opera, from the proper place and style of the audience's applause (and boos) to the use of surtitles. *A Night at the Opera* is for connoisseurs and neophytes alike. It will entertain and inform, delight and (perhaps) infuriate, providing a subject for lively debate and ready reference for years to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Suppose you had an eccentric, British uncle who was absolutely nuts about opera. You're a tyro

yourself, so whenever you go CD shopping or attend a live performance, he entertains you with a humorous summary of the libretto (not too hard to do with an opera if it's not "Wozzeck"), tells you which bits to really listen for, and provides a critique of singers. He's an expert---after all he was the deputy chairman of one of England's great opera houses---but he's not a snob. Listen to what he has to say about death in the mystic land of Oprania: "Death is extremely common and has an almost universal characteristic unknown in our world, namely a period of Imminence during which the doomed person suffers a compulsion to sing. There are few known cases in Oprania where death has occurred without an aria, or at least a cavatina, being delivered during Imminence. The period of Imminence for long deaths can last for up to a whole act. Not even decapitation can ensure an aria-free death..." If you think bursting into song at death's door is highly unlikely, listen to what the author--I mean your uncle--has to say about Valentin's death (he was stabbed by Faust with the help of the devil) in Gounod's "Faust:" "Valentin is found dying in the street by a respectful and horrified chorus. He makes the customary brave gestures of a soldier in the face of death and turns on Marguerite [his sister who is Faust's lover] rather nastily (first in recitative and then in a short aria) saying that the only course open to her now is to become a hooker for the rest of her life." Valentin curses his sister and dies, and for all his musical effort is only awarded one star (out of a possible three) by Sir Denis.

This guide is one of several books that I purchased to learn about opera (so, beginners, listen up - opera experts go elsewhere). This guide is unique, witty, and entertaining. The "irreverent" style of the synopses is fun at first, but if you read several in a row it can wear thin. Read the synopsis of Adriana Lecouvreur that furnishes online to see if you appreciate the style - it is fairly typical except that some of the others have more of a British accent. The British slang sometimes goes over my head which means that I miss the point that is being made so cleverly. However, the real plus of the irreverent style is that it helps to cast the story in more contemporary light (which makes suspension of disbelief easier). I like that there are real opinions about the works, not just descriptions. Some guides are so brief and sterile that you don't really get any flavor - not so here, there is flavor everywhere. What you may not be able to tell from the excerpt is that the four-page synopsis they show for Adriana Lecouvreur is only about half of the coverage of that opera. Following the synopsis is a scene-by-scene description of the action with what to look for at each point, then followed by a news and gossip and a comments section. Very comprehensive. The synopsis is only about half the coverage of each opera. The appendices at the back of the book also are good study material. They include: operatica (an elementary who's who and what's what at the opera house, about 55 pages);

composers (brief biographies, about 40 pages); artists (again bios, about 25 pages); and a glossary (about 15 pages). To learn about opera you need several references. This one is so unique that I say you should get it just for variety.

On the face of it, Sir Denis Forman's *A Night at the Opera* would seem to fulfill a need. It is described on the cover as "an irreverent guide to the plots, the singers, and composers, the recordings." Well, perhaps opera could use an irreverent guide, since it has acquired a reputation, more because of its fans than through any inherent flaw in opera itself, of being stuffy (remember that at one time people flocked to the opera the way they go to motion pictures today). The book is certainly irreverent although not as much of a guide as it claims to be. The book describes 83 operas, supposedly the 83 that had three or more recordings listed in the December 1992 Gramophone CD catalog. While I find it difficult to believe that, almost 10 years after CDs hit the market, there were not three recordings of *Lohengrin* available, I suppose that is possible. For each opera, after a one-sentence summary of the plot and a list of the characters, Sir Denis begins with a detailed summary of the story. This can be useful for the newcomer wanting to get an idea of the story of a particular opera. However, the terminally cute summaries get in the way of being able to read the book from cover to cover. The lack of punctuation other than periods is something that others may find less tiresome than I do. The next section is called "Look Out For." This is a summary of the sections of the music. The author uses a system of one, two or three stars to point out what he considers to be the highlights. Of course, since we are dealing here with his opinions, not everybody is going to agree with them.

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