

## LIBRETTO

A librettist dramatizes an idea, situation, story or other inspirational source. The librettist can:

- Research and identify source material, often with a dramaturge (someone who helps develop theatrical work)
- Suggest the context, time period, shape of the story and the arc of the plot
- Choose and develop character, conflict and resolution
- Write the words for songs and sung-spoken dialogue or recitative
- Understand the interplay between aria and recitative
- Choose prose or poetry, rhyme or non-rhyme scheme
- Write stage directions, if and as necessary
- Distill and shape the final “terse and pithy” libretto with an economy of language
- Collaborate with and be responsive to the composer

### **A good librettist is aware of:**

- Theatrical convention
- The intended audience
- The composer’s style and gifts
- The rhythmic possibility of the spoken word and its potential for both narrative and expressive song
- The fact that libretti must be compact because the music and song extend and stretch time

### **A Libretto is not:**

- A long, verbose, script
- A verbatim retelling of a story or play
- A series of short poems

### **Traditionally:**

- Drama is at the center of a libretto
- Drama is performed by characters in action and not by narration
- Drama is defined by characters in action encountering obstacles

### **Elements of a Libretto:**

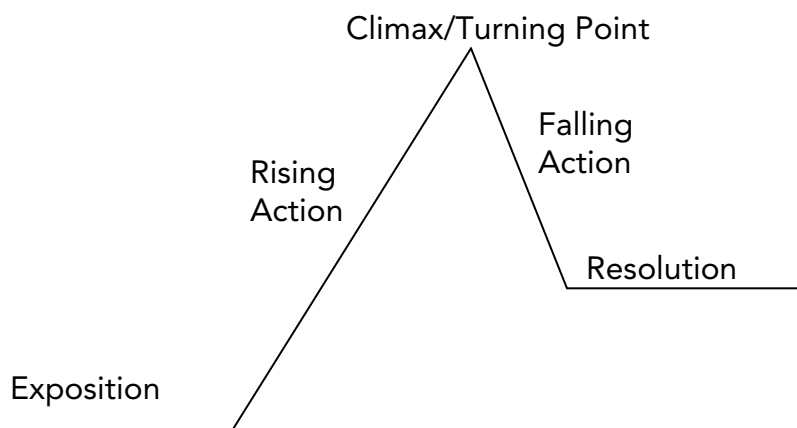
- Character
- Drama
- Obstacle
- Catharsis (climax/major turning point)
- Story
- Message (moral lesson)/ Theme

The libretto is the voice of characters in action while they express themselves via text and subtext. The text is what they say, and the subtext is what they really think (like a Voice Over).

## WRITING A LIBRETTO

It can be the **Hero's Journey** (from Aristotle's *Poetics*): A character's journey includes the encounter of obstacles or antagonist forces (internal or external). He/she should transcend those forces in order to achieve **catharsis** or personal growth. The recognition and/or resolution of a conflict by a character are what make a story.

It can follow the trajectory of a "**story mountain**."



You might use Tableau to help you create your libretto:

<b>TABLEAU 1</b> Beginning / EXPOSITION	<b>TABLEAU 2</b> Middle / CONFLICT	<b>TABLEAU 3</b> End / RESOLUTION
Set Up/ Background Info	Confrontation	Resolution
	Basis of "Drama" → The Character's goal + Internal or External elements that create an obstacle	Awareness leads to resolution  Catharsis

**Improvisation:** Spontaneous creation of scenes without advance rehearsing or scripting; an "on the spot" reaction to given circumstances. You may use improvisation to generate material for your libretto.

## *The Libretto Writing TOOLBOX:*

You can make choices about the following elements in your toolbox when **planning or drafting** your libretto:

**Adaptation:** Where are we? When are we? Who are we? What is the genre?

**Dramatic Structure:** What are the Beginning, Middle, and End? What are the Turning Points or what is the climax? Are there separate scenes?

**Central Conflict:** What is the conflict? Who is in conflict?

Man vs. Man

Man vs. Environment

Man vs. Society

**Characters:** Who is the main/central Character? Who are the supporting characters? What is the arc of the main character?

**Ensemble:** What is the breakdown of choral vs. solo? Are there scenes just for the principals (solos)? Are there ensemble scenes (chorus)?

**Language Choice:** How do the characters speak and why?

Epic Language/Heighted Speech

Naturalistic language/Colloquial Speech

You can make choices about the following elements in your toolbox when **writing or crafting** your libretto:

**Poetic Devices:** How do you make your writing lyrical?

Rhyme/Verse

Alliteration

Metaphor

Simile

Repetition

Rhythm

You may choose to write in the following forms:

**Recitative:** Dialogue exchanges between two or more characters, driven by plot and given circumstance. Model on dialogue.

**Aria:** Long-form expression by one or more characters, driven by emotion and character need. Model on monologue or soliloquy.

	RECITATIVE	ARIA
MUSIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Voice prevails over accompaniment</li> <li>▪ Complex (unpredictable) melody</li> <li>▪ Simple (sparse) accompaniment</li> <li>▪ Accompaniment punctuates voice</li> <li>▪ Vocal line shaped according to natural inflections of voice</li> <li>▪ Fluctuating tempo and meter</li> <li>▪ More speech-like, less distinctive in style/genre</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Voice and accompaniment equally important/present</li> <li>▪ Accompaniment participates dramatically</li> <li>▪ Repetition in melody and accompaniment</li> <li>▪ Vocal line shaped according to melodic contour</li> <li>▪ Consistent tempo and meter</li> <li>▪ Distinct use of style/genre</li> <li>▪ Subtext and perspective conveyable through melody and/or accompaniment</li> </ul>
LIBRETTO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conversational</li> <li>▪ Colloquial</li> <li>▪ Brief thoughts and/or phrases</li> <li>▪ Multiple ideas conveyed</li> <li>▪ Expository</li> <li>▪ Plot-driven/factual</li> <li>▪ Structurally free (unformed)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Poetic/Lyrical</li> <li>▪ Descriptive (use of imagery, metaphor, etc)</li> <li>▪ Use of rhyme and onomatopoeia</li> <li>▪ Longer thoughts and/or phrases</li> <li>▪ Singular ideas conveyed</li> <li>▪ Highly structured (formed)</li> <li>▪ Repetitive</li> <li>▪ Distinct shifts in scope</li> </ul>
CHARACTER: Action/Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Action prevails over expression</li> <li>▪ Reflects sentiment of libretto</li> <li>▪ Realistic</li> <li>▪ Mostly external</li> <li>▪ Forms questions</li> <li>▪ Mostly sudden shifts in emotion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Expression prevails over action</li> <li>▪ Reflects sentiment of music (subtext and/or perspective)</li> <li>▪ Revelatory</li> <li>▪ Internal or external</li> <li>▪ Finds answers</li> <li>▪ Mostly gradual shifts in emotion</li> </ul>

## Recitative vs. Aria Text Example

Papageno's Aria: "I'm sure that there could never be...."

From The Magic Flute

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

German libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder

English translation by Jeremy Sams

Premiere: September 30, 1791 at the Freihaus-Theater auf der Weiden, Vienna

**Tamino** (*comes to and looks about him fearfully*):

Where am I?

Am I still alive?

*(In the distance panpipes are heard, quietly accompanied by the orchestra.)*

What's that noise?

*(Papageno comes down the footpath; on his back is a large birdcage which reaches high above his head, and which contains a variety of birds; with both hands he holds a set of panpipes, and he plays and sings.)*

**Papageno:**

I'm sure that there could never be  
A more contented man than me.  
I earn my living as I please,  
I charm the birds from out the trees.  
I set my nets against the sky,  
I call the birds and down they fly....  
So when you hear my music play  
You'll know that I'm not far away.

If only I could cast a spell  
To capture pretty girls as well.  
My nets would get them by the score,  
Each day I'd catch a hundred more.  
And soon I would fulfill my dream,  
A thousand girls in my harem....  
If I achieved my heart's desire,  
I'd hang up my nets and retire.

A thousand maidens might be fun,

But I'd have to set my heart on one.  
I'd choose the girl I liked the best  
And take her home to share my nest.  
We'd bill and coo, we'd hug and kiss,  
And ev'ry night I'd play her this...  
I'd hold her close, the pretty thing,  
And she would sleep beneath my wing.

**Tamino:** Hey there! Who are you?

**Papageno:** Who am I, I'm a man like yourself. More to the point, who are *you*?

**Tamino:** A man as well. And my father's a king, the king of many lands...

**Papageno:** King? La...? Are you trying to tell me that beyond those mountains there are other lands?

**Tamino:** Hundreds. Look, just tell me where we are!

**Papageno:** Hm. I can't. I just live here.

**Tamino:** Then *how* do you live?

**Papageno:** I eat and drink like everyone.

**Tamino:** But how do you pay for it?

**Papageno:** I catch birds, yeah, for the Queen of the Night, and her ladies bring me food and drink in return.

**Tamino** (*aside*): This has to be the same Queen of the Night my father told me about. Perhaps he's one of her familiar spirits.

**Papageno** (*aside*): What's he looking at me like that for...?

Oh, (*aloud*)

Just you stay where you are. I've got superhuman strength when I'm roused....

**Tamino**: So it was you who rescued me from the snake?

**Papageno**: Snake? Is it dead?

**Tamino**: How did you do it? You're not armed...

**Papageno**: Hm? Ah, well the secret's.... in the wrist action... of the wrist.