

Topic 014

Lighting for Opera & Music

Opera lighting Design

Lighting for opera used to refer to traditional 'grand opera', however, today it may also refer to contemporary opera. As such, opera may be performed in the grandest of concert halls, or in the least elegant of hockey arenas. Opera is about music, theatre, singing, acting and dance, and as such lighting design for opera is typically a combination of theater, dance and musical theatre lighting techniques. Fortunately for the lighting designer, and due to the need for good acoustics, most professional operas take place in well-designed theatres or concert halls.

Opera Lighting-Techniques

Opera lighting must light the singers for clarity, the dancers and chorus for interest and the scenery for atmosphere. Operas may be simplistic and straight forward, or highly complex and stylized. It is not unusual for 'visions' to appear from out of 'nowhere'. Nor is it unusual to have the 'devil' frequently appear or disappear throughout the course of the production. The opera lighting designer must be ready for this and for much more.

The 'scale' of opera lighting can often exceed that of theatre, dance or musical theatre lighting. Typically, opera will use a great deal performance space. The stage is usually large, the lighting positions are usually at a 'high trim' of 28'-35' and there is usually a large amount of scenery to light.

To further complicate matters, the opera designer must work quickly. Generally there is less time to 'light' an opera than there is for a typical stage musical, theatre or dance production. Professional performers and union crews are expensive (and plentiful) and the opera lighting designer will often have only one or two lighting rehearsals, prior to the opening of the production.

Most opera singers are like moths and they tend to gravitate towards the light. They seldom miss their specials and if they do they are very good at 'finding their light' very quickly. This designer has also learned that no matter how the director may block an opera, most opera stars will end up downstage center - in front of the conductor, most of the time.

Next to the opera director, it is the Maestro (conductor) that runs the show. The conductor is a very important member of the artistic team and is concerned with how the singers and musicians sound together. During a performance it is considered appropriate to spotlight the Maestro upon entering the orchestra pit. Further it is mandatory that the singers and musicians, all are able to clearly see the maestros' hands at all times. In this respect a downlight is usually used from above, to light the maestro's body, arms and hands.

It is generally assumed that an opera lighting designer is familiar with the music and the opera that they are lighting, unless of course it is a new original opera. Knowledge of opera is mandatory and often must be assumed when a designer is hired. If the designer does not know the opera, he has a tremendous opportunity to take the score and a recording (CD, Video, etc.) and become familiar with it before he even attends his first rehearsal. The score and the recording will provide a valuable aid to: scene breakdown, mood & atmosphere, blocking and general 'lighting looks'.

Musical Theatre Lighting Design

Lighting the "Musical", typically refers to lighting the large scale musical theatre productions (al a Broadway or the West End). Classic productions include: 'Hello Dolly', 'My Fair Lady', 'The King & I' , 'Oklahoma', 'Showboat', 'Guys & Doll's', 'Sound of Music', Annie, etc. More contemporary musicals include; 'The Lion King', 'Phantom of the Opera', 'Cats', and many more. The typical musical contains elements of drama, singing, dance and music. A small musical may only have a cast of 4 performers and 2 musicians. A large musical may have a cast of 50-100, actors and dancers and 50 musicians. The musical 'moves' quickly and usually has a great many different scenes and locations.

The usual musical theatre production takes place in a proscenium type of theatre, with the orchestra located in the orchestra pit. Usually the theatre is never quite large enough to accommodate the full amount of scenery, lighting, performers and musicians, necessary.

The musical is often structured with alternate scenes, played downstage of one of several different backdrops. This allows a full scene to be 'preset' upstage. When the drop rises, we are magically transported to a new stage setting.

Musical Theatre Lighting- Techniques

Most 'classic' musicals strive for realism. That is, many of the scenes are lavishly designed as realistic and believable interiors or exteriors. In this respect, the lighting is expected to provide a specific mood, atmosphere and indication of time of day. Often this information is also provided by the lyrics and by the script.

In addition to the element of realism expected by the audience, musicals also contain elements of fantasy and surprise. It not uncommon during a song, to completely isolate performers with follow spots, and then suddenly 'restore to reality' at the end of the song. Other numbers may be full production numbers, with full chorus and dancers requiring colorful and rapid lighting changes throughout.

Typically, musicals make extensive use of followspots. This is necessary if the performer is to be isolated during musical numbers, and featured during 'book' scenes. Two (2) to five (5) followspots are typically used, from the ceiling of the auditorium. Followspots are also sometimes used from behind the proscenium arch (bridge spot) to provide a steeper & more isolated lighting angle to the stage.

Lighting techniques for the musical are varied. Visibility is usually provided for by the followspots. 'Area lighting' is often provided for the 'book scenes', color; washes, sidelight and back light are usually provided for the production and dance numbers. The backdrops and

cyclorama are illuminated for interest and mood. Musicals often have a high level of 'glitz' (or effect) lighting. Strobes, neon, beacons, tracking bulbs, mirror balls, etc. are all commonplace.