

ADVANCED OPERA DIPLOMA HANDBOOK 2026-2027

Version 1.0

The Royal Academy of Music moves music forward by inspiring successive generations of musicians to connect, collaborate and create.

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**UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON**

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ROYAL ACADEMY OPERA KEY STAFF

DEPARTMENT CONTACTS: ROYAL ACADEMY OPERA

Head of Opera	Dr Christopher White ChrisWhite@ram.ac.uk	
Opera Company Manager	Abigail Ellison aellison@ram.ac.uk	07498 369667
Opera Producer	Joss Bundy j.bundy@ram.ac.uk	07977 467969

DEPARTMENT CONTACTS: VOCAL FACULTY

Head of Vocal Studies	Professor Kate Paterson kpaterson@ram.ac.uk	07966 416764
Head of Vocal Faculty Opera	Chris Hopkins chopkins@ram.ac.uk	
Senior Administrator	Chris Loake c.loake@ram.ac.uk	
Administrator	Alexa Carey acarey@ram.ac.uk	

PROGRAMME CONTACTS

Tutor for Opera students	Dr Sarah Callis s.callis@ram.ac.uk	020 7873 7347
Head of Postgraduate Programmes	Professor Neil Heyde n.heyde@ram.ac.uk	020 7873 7452

ROYAL ACADEMY OPERA KEY DATES

The plan of the year is shown below, and the Key Dates document with full details of special events and production rehearsal and performance dates will be issued to all students at the earliest opportunity. Repertoire and language coaching and acting and movement classes take place throughout each term.

The normal RAO working week is Monday-Friday in term time; students will be notified as early as possible about any rehearsals or events taking place at weekends or outside of the term dates listed below.

Questions about specific dates can be directed to the Company Manager at any time.

Week No.	Week Commencing	RAO Activities
0	Mon 07/09/26	[Enrolment Week]
1	Mon 14/09/26	
2	Mon 21/09/26	
3	Mon 28/09/26	
4	Mon 05/10/26	Scenes rehearsals
5	Mon 12/10/26	Scenes rehearsals, Opera rehearsals
6	Mon 19/10/26	Scenes performances, Opera rehearsals
7	Mon 26/10/26	Opera rehearsals
8	Mon 02/11/26	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule] ¹
9	Mon 09/11/26	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
10	Mon 16/11/26	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
11	Mon 23/11/26	Opera performances
12	Mon 30/11/26	

Christmas Holiday, 07/12/26 – 03/01/27

Week No.	Week Commencing	RAO Activities
17	Mon 04/01/27	
18	Mon 11/01/27	
19	Mon 18/01/27	Scenes rehearsals
20	Mon 25/01/27	Scenes rehearsals, Opera rehearsals
21	Mon 01/02/27	Scenes performances, Opera rehearsals
22	Mon 08/02/27	Opera rehearsals
23	Mon 15/02/27	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
24	Mon 22/02/27	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
25	Mon 01/03/27	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
26	Mon 08/03/27	Opera performances
27	Mon 15/03/27	

Easter Holiday, 22/03/27 – 11/04/27

Week No.	Week Commencing	RAO Activities
31	Mon 12/04/27	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
32	Mon 19/04/27	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
33	Mon 26/04/27	Opera rehearsals [Three Week Rule]
34	Mon 03/05/27	Opera performances
35	Mon 10/05/27	
36	Mon 17/05/27	
37	Mon 24/05/27	
38	Mon 31/05/27	
39	Mon 07/06/27	
40	Mon 14/06/27	
41	Mon 21/06/27	
42	Mon 28/06/27	

¹ During the Three Week Rule, the opera rehearsals take priority over all other academic and external arrangements (including 1-1 singing lessons, coachings, and any commitments outside of RAM apart from pre-approved LOAs). For full information see the full Three Week Rule guide on page 12.

ROYAL ACADEMY OPERA TEACHING STAFF

Singing Teachers

Marcus van den Akker
Alexander Ashworth
Richard Berkeley-Steele
Michael Chance
Raymond Connell
John Lattimore
Piran Legg
Mary Nelson
Kate Paterson
Samuel Queen
Adrian Thompson
Giles Underwood
Marie Vassiliou
Susan Waters
Mark Wildman
Catherine Wyn-Rogers

Visiting Professors of Singing

John Mark Ainsley
Sir Thomas Allen
Susan Bullock
Lucy Crowe
Christian Gerhaher
Simon Keenlyside
Angelika Kirchschlager
Anthony Legge
Dame Felicity Lott
Ann Murray
Dennis O'Neill
Nicky Spence

Artist in Residence

Dr Edith Wiens

Principal Opera Coach

Jonathan Papp

Opera Coaches

Christopher Bucknall
Susan Bullock
Alexander Crowe
Brenda Hurley
Iain Ledingham
Steven Maughan
Michael Pollock
Valeria Racco
Jean Rigby
Peter Robinson
Brindley Sherratt
Andrew Smith
Lada Valešová

Class and Language Teachers

David Antrobus (Acting)
Florence Daguerre de Hureaux (French)
Selima Frianu (Italian)
Johanna Mayr (German)
Victoria Newlyn (Movement)

USEFUL RESOURCES

You can find a range of useful forms, procedures, and information in the [Student Information Hub](#) on SharePoint.

You can also follow the links directly to some key information below:

- [Competitions](#)
- [Department Handbooks](#)
- [Estates](#)
- [Intranet Forms](#)
- [Leave of Absence](#)
- [Library](#)
- [Performance Department](#)
- [Programme Handbooks](#)
- [Recording](#)
- [Registry](#)

INTRODUCTION FROM THE HEAD OF OPERA

The mission of Royal Academy Opera is to provide world-class training for young singers at the outset of their careers. I took my own first steps as an opera musician with RAO, and I know first-hand how much the institution has to offer its young artists. As an active opera professional, in the UK and in Europe, I am aiming to bring the best elements of the opera studio into our offering at RAO, ensuring that your next professional steps are as seamless as possible. Whilst performing in operas and scenes clearly forms the backbone of your work with us, there is vastly more to the operatic life than this, including but not limited to professional discipline, audition technique, an understanding of context, and broad repertoire knowledge. RAO is not merely a production factory, but a holistic course for the modern opera singer. I look forward to our work together!

ABOUT THE ADVANCED DIPLOMA

The Advanced Diploma has been established in response to external recognition of the level at which Royal Academy Opera students have been performing and in order to provide the best possible environment for meeting the pre-professional training requirements at this level. It is set at level 8 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in order to recognize the stage at which students usually enter the programme and to provide an appropriate framework for assessment. Whereas programmes at level 7 and below tend to be subdivided into various components (which have individual assessments), at level 8 the expectations are holistic. You will receive detailed feedback on all aspects of your work during the programme but none of these elements will receive a mark. You can read more about assessment below.

The programme aims and intended learning outcomes are provided below. The aims should be self-explanatory, but the learning outcomes are expressed in language that demonstrates how the Advanced Diploma meets expectations at level 8 (at which doctorates are also set) and may thus require close reading. The key elements are that we recognise the complexity of the synthesis of activities involved in opera and that we acknowledge the value of the artistic insight that can be communicated in performance. There is no written assessment.

PROGRAMME AIMS

- a) To provide high-level pre-professional training in opera skills.
- b) To enhance students' employability by developing professional standards in attitude, work patterns, preparation and performance.
- c) To provide opportunities to work with professional conductors, directors and coaches.
- d) To provide teaching and coaching to enable students to develop as interpreters capable of synthesising the complex musical, dramatic and linguistic elements of the medium.
- e) To broaden students' experience of operatic practice and operatic repertoire through core repertoire acquisition and participation in staged operatic productions and scenes.
- f) To provide training in different operatic styles and in different languages.
- g) To develop students' knowledge and understanding of the opera business through professional contacts, an introduction to professional experience, and through careers advice and guidance.
- h) To provide specific audition training and guidance in choosing correct audition repertoire.

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of the programme students should be able to demonstrate:

- a) The ability to communicate artistic insight at a level that meets professional expectations in a discipline that is constantly renewing itself.
- b) An authoritative synthesis in performance of a complex body of knowledge comprising musical, dramatic and linguistic elements.
- c) The creative capacity to conceptualize and deliver a role through collaboration with directors, producers and/or colleagues.
- d) Command of the technical skills necessary to deliver performances at an appropriate level and an understanding of the resources available to continue developing these skills.
- e) The qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable situations.
- f) The acquisition of an audition package, including the skills required to present a suitable curriculum vitae, biography and audition repertoire.

LEARNING AND TEACHING PROCESSES

The programme uses a range of teaching methods to ensure that students' learning processes are stimulating, challenging, diverse and complementary.

In keeping with other programmes at FHEQ level 8 components are not given a numerical mark. The principal modes of teaching are described below:

- **Singing Lessons and Repertoire Coaching.** Regular one-to-one tuition given by an eminent practitioner/teacher underpins the core aims of the programme. It is designed to enable students to continue developing key professional disciplines: technique, interpretation skills, repertoire building, programme/portfolio building, audition techniques, and so on. It enables students to refine their reflective, critical and informed attitudes to performance.
- **Opera Coaching** specifically prepares students for roles in opera scenes or productions. It is designed to support Opera Productions and Scenes with individually targeted training.
- **Language Tuition** is provided on a one-to-one basis to support the preparation of Opera Productions and Scenes and to prepare students more generally for the demands of the profession. These sessions are individually tailored to specific developmental needs.
- **Acting and Movement** classes provide the necessary dramatic training and support to accompany the musical and linguistic skills outlined above.
- **Seminars** will provide students with historical context to the operatic canon, and visiting opera professionals will share current advice on how to navigate the practicalities of entering the profession.
- **Opera Productions and Scenes** provide a key synthetic and collaborative focus of the learning and teaching experience. The process of preparation and the experience of performance bring together all of the aspects of the programme and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their individual responses to specific challenges.
- **Masterclasses** provide students with opportunities to present work to a leading visiting artist, normally in an 'open' setting (open to other students and members of the public). Masterclasses complement one-to-one tuition by widening the range of interpretative judgment to which the students are subject. They are designed to expose students to the very highest international professional standards and provide additional high-profile performance opportunities.

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Two precepts underpin the programme's assessment strategy: (i) the function of assessment is to enable students to demonstrate that they have achieved the programme's intended learning outcomes at an appropriate level; (ii) assessment promotes and supports student learning. In keeping with other programmes at FHEQ level 8 components are not given a numerical mark. The principal modes of assessment are described below:

- End of Year One report. This is a short report by the Head of Opera to acknowledge student engagement and progress during the first year of the programme.
- Opera Scenes and Productions. These will be assessed by the visiting director/musical director who will provide a report on the student's engagement in the rehearsal process and their final performance. This will provide an external perspective on the student's work.
- Final Appraisal. At the end of the Spring term of the second year, students will undertake a viva (c.30 mins) with the Head of Opera and Course Tutor (or their nominated representatives) to discuss their work over the programme and to acknowledge that all of the requirements of the programme have been met. This will be documented in a short report written by the Course Tutor.

PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

The Advanced Diploma in Opera is a two-year full-time programme of study. There is no provision for part-time study. Progression to the second year is dependent on satisfactory progress as documented in the End of Year 1 report.

Under the regulations, you may be allowed, at the discretion of the Head of Opera, to spend time under appropriate supervision at another organisation or institution (including opera companies and festivals). This is subject to you being able to undertake sufficient assessed work on the programme to fulfil the intended learning outcomes. Final confirmation that sufficient work has been assessed to award the diploma lies with the Examination Board.

COMMUNICATION

You are expected to check your Academy email every day, including during vacations. It is easy to ensure that you can access your RAM emails on your own phone/laptop/tablet – visit the IT helpdesk to set this up.

Please also ensure you notify the Company Manager and the Registry of any changes to your contact details (particularly your mobile telephone number) throughout the year as these methods of communication will also be utilised, particularly to convey urgent information.

TIMETABLING

Some classes have regular weekly slots but there is no standard RAO weekly timetable.

A weekly schedule of all RAO activities is issued via PDF and ASIMUT on a Thursday evening (or, at latest, Friday afternoon) by the Company Manager. It is vital that students check both ASIMUT and the PDF schedule. The weekly schedule lists classes, guest coaching, language coaching, master classes, production rehearsals, costume fittings, etc. Each day's listing also indicates which students have Leave of Absence.

Students are requested to inform the Company Manager of their regular singing lesson and coaching times and any changes to these at the earliest opportunity, so that these can be factored into the planning of the weekly schedule.

Any timetable clashes must be brought to the attention of the Opera Company Manager immediately. If you arrange to swap a session with another student the Opera Company Manager and the relevant teacher or coach should also be notified directly.

Students are encouraged to keep the Company Manager informed of their coaching requests, which will be included in the schedule whenever possible.

During production periods it is often necessary to issue a revised schedule for the following day, so you will need to check your Academy e-mail every day, including at weekends.

ILLNESS

If you are ill and will miss a class or activity, you should contact both the Opera Company Manager and any teachers or coaches whose sessions you will miss, including any group classes. You should also inform your vocal coach or singing teacher if you will miss an individual coaching or lesson.

In the event of long term illness you should visit your doctor in order to obtain a medical certificate. When you return to the Academy you should report to your Tutor as soon as possible.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE PROCEDURE

You will need to apply for Leave of Absence if you hope to take any time away from the Academy during the term, regardless of whether or not you will miss any Academy activities (classes, rehearsals etc) which are part of your schedule of study. Full information on the Leave of Absence Procedure, including the application form, can be found on the [Student Information Hub](#) on SharePoint.

- You must apply for Leave of Absence as far in advance as possible by completing the [Leave of Absence: Opera](#) form on SharePoint.
- It is your responsibility to check the dates of your Academy commitments that pose clashes.

- You must not accept any work, sign contracts or book travel until a Leave of Absence has been formally agreed with the Company Manager and Head of Opera.
- In the case of emergencies or last-minute external opportunities, go straight to the Company Manager who will advise you accordingly.

Please note that the summer term does not end until 04 July 2027 and any requests for absence before this date must be submitted to and approved by the Company Manager and Head of Opera.

THREE WEEK RULE

The Three Week Rule is put into place three weeks before performance week. This means that the opera rehearsals take priority over all other academic and external arrangements. This includes group classes, 1 to 1 singing lessons/coachings and any commitments outside of RAM (excluding pre-approved LOAs).

If you have a singing lesson or coaching that clashes with a session within the three week rule we ask that you rearrange this with your teacher so that you are able to attend the opera rehearsal. If your lesson/1 to 1 singing lesson or coaching overlaps the opera rehearsal by a few minutes please let the Company Manager know in advance – if the overlap is too big or the opera rehearsal is of particular importance we may ask you to move your lesson, but once you have informed us of the overlap we will advise you on what to do.

PERFORMANCE PROTOCOL

Students are required to attend all timetabled activity unless a Leave of Absence (LOA) has been granted (see above).

It is essential that singers bring sufficient copies of any music for coaching sessions for themselves, the coach and the pianist. When participating in a masterclass, students are expected to provide a copy of the music they will present to the Company Manager well in advance, and to bring copies to the masterclass for the teacher and pianist.

Students are expected to be fully prepared for rehearsals and to arrive warmed-up, 5 minutes before the beginning of the rehearsal. For stage rehearsals, students are expected to arrive with sufficient time to get into costume and makeup before the rehearsal start time and to arrive to stage promptly when called by the stage management team.

PRODUCTIONS

RAO presents three fully staged productions with orchestra per year. The selection of operas (which may sometimes include double or triple bills of full acts or one-act operas) is geared towards the specific talents among the current group of singers on the course. A balance is sought across any two-year period, with regard to period, style and language, in order to give all students as wide an experience as possible. These major productions are double cast, in order to give opportunity to as many people as possible. Casting is organised to give the most appropriate experience for each singer across the two years, although occasionally a role may require a singing assessment.

The rehearsal process lasts approximately 5-6 weeks. As with all opera companies, it begins with concentrated music calls (both individual and in ensemble) and proceeds to staging. The climactic final weeks consist of stage and piano rehearsals, piano dress rehearsals, Sitzproben, stage and orchestral rehearsals, and dress rehearsals for each cast. These major opera productions each receive four performances, so each cast member performs twice. Representatives of opera companies, artists' agencies and the national press are invited to attend these performances.

Productions are complemented by Opera Scenes with piano accompaniment, which allow students to work intensively on smaller-scale projects, further helping to ensure that they are exposed to a range of periods and styles.

RECORDINGS

Single fixed camera recordings are taken of RAO productions and scenes, and students will be given access to these via eStream. These recordings are taken for archive and learning purposes only, and cannot be downloaded or used on students' websites or for anything other than self-reflection and study.

For information about making recordings while at RAM please see the [Recordings Department information page](#).

CONCERTS

INDIVIDUAL REQUESTS FOR A CONCERT

If you have a concert project in mind that you would like to put on at the Academy with fellow students, you can submit an application to the Artistic Planning Group.

Proposals should show creative, imaginative and balanced programming, which will be an important part of the consideration process. Collaborations with other students (including cross-department collaborations) are always particularly welcome.

The Lunchtime, Early Evening or Late Concert Application Form can be found on the [Performance Department](#) section of the Academy SharePoint.

If you have any questions about your application please contact the **Concerts and Prizes Administrators**, Harriet McGivern and Oliver Doyle, on concertsandprizes@ram.ac.uk 020 7873 7308 (Room G9). Harriet and Oliver are responsible for programming and administration of lunchtime concerts and also Academy prizes and competitions.

EXTERNAL CONCERT OPPORTUNITIES

You may wish to apply for an external concert opportunity. You can find all the information you need on the [External Bookings](#) section of the Academy Intranet.

If you have any questions about External Bookings please contact Lauren Woods, **External Bookings Manager** externalbookings@ram.ac.uk 020 7873 7304 (Room G9). Lauren is responsible for the administration of the Academy's External Booking service, which exists to offer performance opportunities outside of the Academy to students. These opportunities include recitals, choral society concerts, concertos and background music for corporate and private events. Lauren also manages the Academy's Student Route Visa Work Placement Policy.

INSTITUTIONAL INFORMATION

FEEDBACK (TO THE ACADEMY)

Student Union members and specific postgraduate student representatives are part of Academy committees. Students are encouraged to use their representatives and let them know of any matters of concern that they wish to be raised at these committees.

Academy students are given the opportunity to complete an online survey each year, which covers both programme-specific feedback and institution-wide provision.

Why should I fill in the annual student survey?	Your feedback helps us to improve the programme so that it better suits your needs. Your thoughts and opinions help us to see what works and what doesn't, and give us the opportunity to fix things.
How will my feedback be used?	All feedback is anonymous, so you can be really frank! Class leaders, tutors and heads of department are interested to see how the programme is being received, and use the information to plan their teaching.
What's in it for me?	A better programme for everyone! Your comments could also help future students decide which classes to take, for example.

BEYOND YOUR STUDIES...

Graduation may seem a long way away, but we hope that beyond your studies here you will still feel part of the Academy as a member of our alumni community. To get in touch, email alumni@ram.ac.uk.

For your immediate steps before and after graduation, be sure you connect with the Artist Development team. There are many opportunities available, including one-to-one advice.

For more details contact our Artist Development team: Anna Wolstenholme awolstenholme@ram.ac.uk, David Taylor DTaylor@ram.ac.uk and Catriona Price CPrice@ram.ac.uk

STUDENT ROUTE VISAS

Students studying at the Academy on a Student Route visa are restricted in their ability to undertake external performance related work, as they are prevented from:

1. Undertaking work as an entertainer
2. Working on a self-employed basis

Students are allowed to take on external performance work (paid or unpaid), as long as it is arranged through the Academy. This is possible if the work can be seen as a professional development opportunity, but you must follow the relevant guidance in order to comply with your visa regulations.

Information about how to undertake external performance work (paid or unpaid) can be found on the [External Bookings](#) page on Sharepoint, which contains the Academy's [Student Route Work Placement Policy](#) and the [Application Form](#) which must be completed for any paid or unpaid external performance work.

If these processes are not followed, it could place a student's visa status in jeopardy, which, in turn, could have serious consequences for their place at the Academy and their right to remain in the UK. If the Academy has reason to believe a student has broken the terms of their visa, we are obliged by law to report that student to the UK Border Agency.