

Considerations when finding/writing a libretto for a short opera or dramatic art song

1. **Think theatrically.** You are telling a **story**. Something should be happening. Either a character is going through some challenge, or expressing an emotion or a reaction to something or two characters are bouncing off each other. But **drama, character** and **story** are key and it must “**play**” on stage.
2. **Public domain** sources are good. Dead people, great to work with. OR a living writer you can speak to directly. Heirs, estates and obtaining rights are a pain in the ass.
3. **OVERWRITE AT FIRST.** Blast is out, then be a thoughtful **editor**. Slash, cut, extend, conjoin disparate phrases if they help build an idea or dramatic moment. You are never stuck. If something doesn't work, tweak it, alter it, reimagine it, or toss it out. **Be merciless with your material.** Nothing is sacred and your opinion rules. If the work is PD, feel free to change it or insert your own material. **Indulge your artistic license.**
4. You are presenting **characters in action**, not reciting a story. **Show us**, don't tell us. Think about **character**. Who are they? What do they want? What would they say? **Take dictation from them.**

Possible sources: (remember: **engage the audience**, pull them in and **take chances**)

A scene from a play or movie or TV show. (**Be aware that you might have to obtain the rights**)

A short story (many are online and **public domain**)

Essays, famous or not.

Passages from unlikely books/sources (“Etiquette”, by Emily Post, a self-help book, a bio, a preface)

Poetry is often non-dramatic. See if it **travels** and has some **tension and release** in it.

Any dramatic situation: a therapy session, musical audition, oral exams, Deadpool meets Dr. Phil...

A news article or current event. (Dramatize Trump and Kim Jong Un, and no need to be kind.)

A political speech, or debate or interview

An editorial, sports analysis, **any media** that is compelling and entertaining.

An original idea. Two characters in conflict? One going through a challenge?

Go with your gut. What do you get a kick out of? **Anything goes!**

Musical/Dramatic Considerations:

Language/words are the stuff. **Show us**, don't describe.

Start with your libretto and change it as you compose. (Write **musical suggestions** in the margins.)

Always think of the **singer's voice** and its **range** and register.

(show stuff to singers if you want feedback. The **voice is a very particular thing**. Be mindful.)

Make the words clear, the setting sensible rhythmically.

Assume it will be heard once and you want it to be **understood**.

Hanging around in the upper register is hard on the singer and the words are hard to understand. Be kind to your singers, but use all registers.

Act/sing the parts yourself as you are writing to make sure they land/resonate with you.

Picture the staging and keep in mind the timing of stage action.

(how many bars does it take for that character to move across the stage?)

Keep the arrangement sensible so you do not drown out the singer.

Use space, pauses, sudden changes in dynamics, give it a **shape**.

Edit, edit and edit. Change anything at any time to make things fit and flow. **Keep it lean and clear.**

Experience has shown me that **singers can be great allies** to composers. Write well for them and they will share your work. There it is. Centuries of creative endeavor distilled into a one-page self-help brochure. Good luck and have fun!