

## Slackers at Covent Garden

### Lead-in

The Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London, is Britain's premier opera house. The greatest opera singers in the world perform there in major opera productions.

What sort of people go to operas? Discuss these questions with a partner.

- 1 What's the difference between the following types of people? You may need to use a dictionary
- snobs and slackers
  - the riffraff and the elite
  - the general public and corporate guests

Which types would you expect to see at an opera?

- 2 Look at the type of clothes below. Which would you wear if you were going to an opera?

a pair of trainers	a bow tie	a woolly pullover	a t-shirt	a suit
a mini skirt	a dress	a pair of shorts	a tracksuit	a fleece
a pearl necklace	a pair of sunglasses			

Do you think it is important to dress well when you go to an opera or ballet?

- 3 In your country, what sort of people go to operas, and what do they typically wear?

### Reading 1

You are going to read a newspaper article about the sort of people who attend the Royal Opera House.

Read the passage and answer the question below.

*In what ways are the performances and the audiences at the Opera House changing?*

## Slackers show up at Covent Garden by Maev Kennedy

On a recent first night there were trainers, fleeces and woolly pullovers among the bow ties and pearls in the best stalls seats at London's Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. The theatre is positively boasting that the riffraff are storming the barricades of high culture, just four years after Sir Colin Southgate became chairman and provoked a furore by declaring war on such slackers.

Figures just released by the new director, Tony Hall, show that more than half the people booking tickets have never before been to the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. The figures for new attenders were 53% three years ago when the opera house re-opened after an \$82m redevelopment, and 52% in the 2000-2001 season. But this season, just from September to February, an even greater percentage of the audience was new - and the percentage could rise to a record level for the entire year. There have been no sightings yet of T-shirts or smelly shorts, but it cannot be long before Sir Colin's worst nightmares come true, and he has to sit through an opera next to somebody dressed in a tracksuit.

"We must not downgrade the opera house",

Sir Colin remarked after his appointment. A spokesman for Covent Garden said recently: "We have opened our doors and people are coming who would not have come in the past."

Launching the season, the new music director, Antonio Pappano, said it was only in England that opera was perceived as elitist and for the rich. "Every little town in Germany has its own opera house, its own ballet company and its own theatre."

The figures for new audiences represent only about two-thirds of the seats - the remainder are taken up by membership schemes and corporate sponsors.

However, figures already released by Covent Garden do suggest that the new audiences are younger and poorer than the critics might suspect: a fifth of opera goers reportedly earn low wages, and 42% are under 45 years old.

Coming shortly, Mr Hall and Mr Pappano promised, were more cheap seats, pop concerts, big names, opera road shows, and big screen relays of performances not just to the Covent Garden piazza but to the rest of London.

*The Guardian Weekly* 11-4-2002, page 14

## Reading 2

Read the passage again and decide whether the sentences below are true or false. Discuss them with a partner.

- 1 The Opera House is pleased that more ordinary people are going to see operas than in the past.
- 2 Even today the majority of people going to the Opera House attend regularly.
- 3 The former director, Sir Colin Southgate, would like everybody to dress well when attending an opera.
- 4 All over the world opera audiences tend to be rich and upper class.
- 5 Most people going to the Royal Opera House are over 45.
- 6 They only perform operas at the Opera House.

## Vocabulary in context

Find a word or phrase in the passage to complete the sentences. Use the context of the sentences below to guess the meaning of the word.

- 1 The most expensive seats in the Opera House are in the \_\_\_\_\_. That's because they are near the stage and have the best view.
- 2 During the French Revolution, many ordinary people brought down the king by \_\_\_\_\_. This phrase is now used as a metaphor for causing a sudden or violent change.
- 3 Sir Colin made a lot of people angry when he suggested the Opera House should be for the elite. He was criticised in the press and by the government. It really \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4 Recently they spent a lot of money changing the décor and improving the sound quality of the Opera House. It was an expensive \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5 It's important when \_\_\_\_\_ of operas that you start with one that is popular.

## Follow-up

Answer these questions for yourself.

- 1 Are you an opera-goer or theatre-goer? What do you enjoy about going out to the opera or theatre?
- 2 When you go to the opera, ballet or theatre do you dress well? Do you think it is important that people dress and behave well? Would you be angry if the person next to you was wearing jeans and drinking coke?
- 3 It is very expensive to go to the Royal Opera House, and a lot of taxpayers' money is used to keep it running. Do you think that opera and ballet should be supported by government money so that the price of tickets can be low, so that more people can go? Or do you think that taxpayers' money should be spent on other things? – if rich people want to go to the opera they should pay for it themselves!

Talk to your partner.

## Teacher's notes - Slackers at Covent Garden

### Lead-in

It is a good idea to find pictures of an opera house and people dressed in formal evening clothes to help introduce the lesson and some of the vocabulary. You could put them on the board, ask the students what they are pictures of, and what is the connection between the opera house and the way people dress to attend operas.

Read through the introduction with the students, then ask them to discuss the questions with a partner. Make sure the students understand all the vocabulary. Have a brief class feedback.

### Answers

- 1
  - a. A snob is someone who thinks and behaves as if they are better than other people, usually because of their social class. This word shows that you do not like people like this.  
A slacker is a lazy person - someone who tries to avoid working or dresses badly
  - b. Riffraff is an insulting or humorous word for people of a lower social class.  
The elite are a small group of people who have a lot of power or advantages.
  - c. The general public are ordinary people in society.  
Corporate guests are guests of companies – people who have been given free tickets because they are important clients of major companies.
- 2 It depends on the student's own culture, but, typically, in Britain at least, one would expect a bow tie, a suit, a dress, a pearl necklace.
- 3 Students' own ideas.

### Reading 1

Read through the introduction with the students. Ask them to read the passage and answer the question. Let the students check with a partner before feedback.

#### Answer

The audience is less well-dressed, newer – more people are attending for the first time, poorer, younger.

The performances are not just major operas. There are more cheap seats, pop concerts, big names, opera road shows, and big screen relays of performances to the rest of London.

### Reading 2

Ask the students to read the passage again and decide whether the sentences are true or false. Let them discuss their answers with a partner before feedback.

#### Answers

- 1 True
- 2 False

- 3 True
- 4 False
- 5 True
- 6 False

### **Vocabulary in context**

Ask the students to work in pairs to find a word or phrase in the passage to complete the sentences. They should use the context of the sentences below to guess the meaning of the word.

### **Answers**

- 1 Stalls
- 2 Storming the barricades
- 3 Provoked a furore
- 4 Redevelopment
- 5 Launching a season

### **Follow-up**

Give the students a few minutes to think about the questions then put them in pairs or small groups to discuss their opinions.