A note to Teachers and Parents:

Our objectives with this informative and practical opera guide and performances (both live and virtual) are...

§ to introduce students to the fundamental components of opera.
§ to give students a very brief historical perspective of opera’s development.
§ to introduce some basic terminology.
§ to encourage multidisciplinary studies across many subject areas.
§ to educate as well as entertain.

We achieve these objectives by...

§ presenting opera as fun, entertaining, and culturally significant.
§ providing you with background information on this year’s production as well as some basics about opera and its history.
§ connecting opera to your music and general classroom curriculum with suggested pre- and post-performance activities.

Why opera education?

§ Our “in-school” programs present material through visual, aural, and action methods, thus reaching out to many different types of learners.

§ Exposure to opera as a multidisciplinary art helps students develop intelligence in a variety of areas, including abstract thinking and problem solving.

§ Opera provides opportunities for self-expression through a variety of forms, which in turn leads to the development of valuable communication skills, self-discipline, perseverance, and leadership.

§ Opera combines drama, poetry, instrumental music, singing, scenery, costumes, lighting, and many wonderful special effects. Such collaboration is important for students to witness, as it helps to encourage them to develop a broadened, multidisciplinary perspective.
WHAT IS OPERA?

At its core, opera is the telling of a story through music and words.

Opera is the most inclusive of all forms of art in that it brings together an enormous array of artistic practices: Singing, instrumental playing, musical and linguistic composition, acting, dancing, lighting design, sound design, set and prop design, costume design, make-up and hair design, choreography; the list goes on and on and on. By accessing and executing this many art forms simultaneously, opera has a unique ability to create both an incredibly emotionally and intellectually-enriched storytelling. The stories told through opera can be or funny or serious, but most importantly, opera unites people of diverse backgrounds with shared experience created through music, drama, and theater.

WHERE IS OPERA FROM?

Though opera as we know it can be traced back over 400 years ago to what is modern-day Florence, Italy, opera can be found on every continent across the globe. Opera is written in many languages because of the nationalities of their writers and creators: English, Italian, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Czech, just to name a few. Opera is representative of so many individuals and cultures and its stories aim to reveal and explore the humanity in all of us.
The very beginning of the creation of an opera involves someone who writes the words and someone who sets these words to music. The words of an opera are called the libretto (the Italian word for “little book”), much like the words of a play or movie are called the script. And just as an author writes a book, a librettist is the person who writes the libretto. A composer takes the librettist’s words and uses music as a tool to define the personality and feelings of the characters as well as to create the overall energy and mood of the story. The human voice, especially when singing, can express an incredible variety of feelings and emotions. The combination of the librettist’s text and composer’s music creates the score.
At front and center: the singers. The characters in an opera have distinct personalities and the singers who represent them do also. These distinctions are broken down into voice types that best represent the character and music written for them. The most common (but not all) voice types and the approximate range of notes for these singers are listed below, arranged by register:

- **SOPRANO**
  - Click to hear what a SOPRANO sounds like!

- **MEZZO-SOPRANO**
  - Click to hear what a MEZZO-SOPRANO sounds like!

- **CONTRALTO (Alto)**
  - Click to hear what a CONTRALTO sounds like!

- **TENOR**
  - Click to hear what a TENOR sounds like!

- **BARITONE**
  - Click to hear what a BARITONE sounds like!

- **BASS**
  - Click to hear what a BASS sounds like!
It also takes many individuals offstage and backstage to put an opera together. Can you figure out who these people are or what they do? (Answers at the bottom of the page.) To learn a little bit more about these essential opera personnel, be sure to check out the “Opera Glossary” page.

1. Wig/Makeup Designer
2. Set Crew
3. Conductor
4. Stage Manager
5. Costume Designer
The approach to singing opera is very different kind from that of singing pop music. The biggest and most apparent difference is that an opera singer uses NO amplification for their voice - no microphones, no speakers, nothing. They must train their voice (similar to the way an athlete needs to train their body) in order to be heard in a theater and over the sound of an orchestra playing with them. Some other characteristics of an operatic voice are:

- **A large range** (the ability to sing high notes, low notes, and everything in between, evenly)
- **Breath control** (the ability to sustain long, musical phrases)
- **Vastly contrasting levels of dynamics/volume** (the ability to sing both loudly and softly) that can still be heard through accompanying sound of instruments

When a singer uses the above techniques most effectively and in a healthy manner, a natural “vibrato” occurs. This is the pulsing sound you hear when a singer sustains a note. It is caused by the breath passing through our larynx and causing vibration of the vocal folds. Singing in this way is natural to how our bodies are built and the reason why opera singers can sing loudly for many hours and for many, many years without causing any damage to their voice.
**OPERA GLOSSARY**

**Set** - The scenery on stage which indicates where the action takes place

**Blocking** - The actors’ movements on stage, determined during rehearsals by the stage director

**Costume** - The clothing a singer wears to portray a character

**Crew** - Group of people who operate behind the scenes, controlling the curtain, changing scenery, managing props, running sound effects, and more

**Prop** - An object used or brought onstage by the performers

**Rehearsal** - The time when performers practice, either with piano or orchestra

**Stage Director** - The person who tells the performers where and how to move on stage and who determines the story’s interpretation and overall look or concept

**Stage Manager** - The person responsible for the smooth execution of the backstage elements of a performance

**Wig/Make-up Designer** - The person responsible for designing and assembling the hair and make-up that the singers wear onstage

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**What makes up the STAGE?**

**Act** - The main sections of a play or opera

**Librettist** - The person who writes the words to an opera (the libretto)

**Character** - The people in a story, also called a role or part

**Scene** - Segment of action within an act

**Libretto** - Literally means “little book” in Italian; the words to an opera
What makes up the MUSIC?

**Aria** - A song sung by only one person

**Chorus** - A group of singers who function as a unit onstage, representing townspeople, crowds, and other various large groups

**Composer** - A person who writes music and sets a librettist’s text to sound

**Conductor** - The person who leads the orchestra and is in charge of the musical interpretation of an opera

**Ensemble** - A musical passage sung by multiple characters; usually occurs at pivotal points in the drama or at the end of an act

**Score** - Written form or blueprint of a musical composition, containing all instrumental voice parts as well as words

**Orchestra** - A group of musicians who play together on various musical instruments

**Overture** - The piece of music played by the orchestra at the beginning of an opera; it often introduces music that will be heard later in the opera

**Tempo** - The speed at which music is performed

**Vibrato** - A naturally pulsating tone that wavers from slightly above to slightly below the actual musical pitch and has a rich, emotional quality

**Recitative** - Words that are sung in the rhythm of natural speech, and propel the story’s action forward

**Register** - Range of tones within an individual’s voice
Now what do you know about opera that you didn’t know before?