



VIRGINIA OPERA'S 2025-2026 IN-SCHOOL PRODUCTION OF

Dragon's Breath

A New Children's Opera

by Evan Mack, Libretto by Joshua McGuire

STUDY GUIDE



VAOPERA

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Objectives

Purpose of the Teacher's Guide

- To acquaint the audience with musical storytelling
- To familiarize students with the “world of opera” – its vocabulary, history, etc.
- To provide a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching require skills and curriculum
- To promote the understanding of how opera, as an art form, reflects and comments on our society and the world in which we live
- To promote realization of the importance of literature as a mirror of human experience, reflecting human motives, conflicts, and values
- To help students identify with fictional characters in human situations as a means of relating to others

Before the Performance Students Should Be Able To:

- Recognize the character names
- Recognize voice classifications
- Understand how music and drama combine to tell a story

Dragon's Breath

An opera for children and adults

THE PRODUCERS

Composer	Evan Mack
Librettist	Joshua McGuire
Set & Props by	Roberta Brennan
Costumes by	Pat Seyller
Stage Directors	Meaghan Deiter
Music Director/Pianist	Brandon Eldredge

THE CHARACTERS

Alan	Melanie Dubil
Dragon	Daniel Esteban Lugo
Mom/Somi	Maggie Kinabrew
Dad/Dewitt	Adam Partridge

Meet the Authors

EVAN MACK, COMPOSER

Composer Evan Mack has devoted much of his compositional life to opera and song. His first major operatic composition was *Angel of the Amazon*, premiering in May of 2011 by Encompass New Opera Theatre in New York City and was subsequently released by Albany Records. Two years later, Fresno State Opera Theater premiered *The Secret of Luca*. This was the first of several collaborations with librettist Joshua McGuire. In August 2016, their American grand opera *Roscoe* had its orchestral premiere with the Albany Symphony starring Metropolitan Opera star Deborah Voigt.

Their Christmas opera for children *Lucinda y las Flores de la Nochebuena* is quickly becoming a holiday standard with yearly productions by San Francisco Opera, Opera in the Heights, and Fresno State Opera. Their one-act opera *The Ghosts of Gatsby* premiered in 2019 and won the National Opera Association's Argento Chamber Opera Competition.

Evan Mack has proven as deft at song writing as opera. His song *A Little More Perfect* is a setting of Justice Anthony Kennedy's final paragraph of the Marriage Equality Decision by the Supreme Court in 2015. The song had its professional premiere at the Glimmerglass Festival in 2016 and the orchestral premiere at the Fort Worth Opera Festival in 2017. His new cycle *If Only Lenny Were Here*, which celebrates the life of Leonard Bernstein had its world premiere with the Schenectady Symphony in October of 2018.

Evan was named "2018 Professional of the Year" by Musical America, was a composing fellow at the John Duffy Composers Institute, and a resident artist at Yaddo. He is currently published with Hal Leonard, Alfred, and Amazon. Evan is a Teaching Professor at Skidmore College. He lives in Ticonderoga with his wife, Kristin, and two sons, Carter and Henry.

JOSHUA MCGUIRE, LIBRETTIST

JOSHUA MCGUIRE has written several opera librettos in partnership with composer Evan Mack. In October 2016, *Roscoe* received a full performance by the Albany Symphony featuring soprano Deborah Voigt. His collaboration with Mack also produced *Lucinda y Las Flores de la Nochebuena*, a children's opera commissioned by the Fresno State Opera Theatre. Since premiering in 2016, the opera has played for over 25,000 children.

Mack & McGuire's one-act opera *The Ghosts of Gatsby* won the National Opera Association's 2019 Dominick Argento Prize for contemporary opera. *Yeltsin in Texas!* is currently being expanded and developed into a full-length musical theatre piece with The Blueprint Project. McGuire is currently developing *A Nearer Mother* with Evan Mack, as well as a multimedia opera entitled *Siddhartha* with composer Murray Hidary.

He is also the author of *The Secret of Music: a look at the listening life*, a book of essays on music and mindfulness. McGuire is the recipient of fellowships from Yaddo, Opera America, and the American Center for New Works Development.

McGuire teaches at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music. He studied at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, where he pursued Master's work in both guitar and orchestral conducting. He currently resides in Nashville with his wife, pianist and conductor Jennifer McGuire, their son Thomas, and a basset hound.

What Is an Opera?

Ask students for their ideas of what an opera is. Write **opera** on the board. Under it, list the students' answers. Ask again after the performance and see if their opinions have changed.

What is an opera?

An opera is simply a play in which people sing. In most operas, all the words are sung. There are other types of operas, however, in which there is as much speaking as singing.

If an opera is just a play, then why do people sing?

The theater has been around for hundreds of years, and our society is fascinated with drama whether it be on television, in the movies, or at the theater. Music is added to all these types of entertainment to enhance the feelings being portrayed. Singing is a very special form of music because the instrument we use to sing (like our feelings) comes from inside us. Our voice is a part of us which expresses how we feel, whether we sing, talk, shout, laugh, cry, moan, growl, whisper, gasp, hiss, etc. Naturally, actors have used singing to express their feelings from the beginnings of theater, however, opera as we know it is only about 400 years old. Operas powerfully combine the drama of the theater with music, vocal and instrumental, to create the lasting art form that is enjoyed today throughout the world.

Why perform a children's opera instead of just a play?

We like to say that opera "has it all." Students recognize this instantly. There are so many aspects to an opera that are fascinating to young people: music, acting, singing, storytelling, costumes, sets, makeup, etc. Children's opera brings all these things together and presents them in a fun way... there's no question why students like it. It's fun!

A Short History of Opera

The word “opera” is the plural form of the Latin word “opus” which translates quite literally as “work.” The use of the plural form alludes to the abundance of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word “opera” as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by instrumental music.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of the theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued through the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as a part of the action, as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Most music historians hold that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence, Italy in the 1570’s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of **recitative** sections which revealed the plot of the drama, followed by **arias** which provided the singer an opportunity for personal reflection. The function of the chorus in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new form of opera was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished through the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own – retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini developed the art form through clearly defined periods of development which produced **opera buffa**, **opera seria**, **bel canto**, and **verismo**. The Austrian Mozart championed the **singspiel** (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven, Bizet, and Offenbach. Gounod and Meyerbeer were the leaders in French opera, which combined lavish sets and costumes, and incorporated ballet. The Germans von Weber, Richard Strauss, and Wagner developed the unique style of opera popular in their home country. The English, Spanish, and Viennese also helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, and

Carlisle Floyd have all crafted operas which have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, John Corigliano, Mark Adamo, Jake Heggie, Jennifer Higdon and others enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.

Opera Production

A pie with lots of pieces!

Opera is created by the combination of a myriad of art forms. First and foremost are the actors/singers who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra which accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping to portray the full range of emotions possible in an opera. These performances are further enhanced by wigs, costumes, sets, and specialized lighting, all of which are designed, created, and then made by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic concept created by a playwright, who alone or with help fashions the script or **libretto** – the words the artists will sing. Working together, the composer and librettist team up to create a musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. When their work is done, the composer and librettist entrust their work to another duo, the conductor and stage director. These two are responsible for bringing the story to life. The conductor prepares the music, while the stage director is in charge of what we see on the stage.

The design team, with help from the stage director, take charge of the physical production of the story world on stage. Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers are brought on board to help create a new production. A set designer combines the skills of an artist and an architect using blueprint plans to design the physical settings required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. After the set is constructed, painters paint the set following the original plans from the set designer. When the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light on the stage and the set, meeting the practical needs of the actors on stage and also creating a mood for the audience. Using specialized lighting instruments, color gels and computers, the lighting designer plots out which light come on at what time, and how quickly or slowly throughout the story of the opera.

The costume designer consults the stage director to design appropriate clothing for the singers. These designs are then made into patterns and created by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his or her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate fashions.

As a performance nears, rehearsals are held on the newly constructed set, using the costumes, lights, and orchestra to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the audience.

Opera Vocabulary Guide

- Aria (AH-ree-ah). A musical piece for solo voice.
- Baritone (BARE-ih-tone). The middle range male voice.
- Bass (BASE). Lowest male voice.
- Bel Canto (behl-CAHN-toh). Literally “beautiful singing”. Also a style of Italian opera made popular by composers Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti in the 19th century, which showcased the singing voice.
- Choreography Coordinated movements by performers in a play, musical, ballet or opera
- Coloratura (coh-loh-rah-TOO-rah). A singing style when singers sing very fast florid scales and arpeggios, usually all on one sound or syllable of a word.
- Contralto The lowest female voice.
- Conductor The person who leads the orchestra.
- Composer The person who writes the music.
- Designer Person who creates the scenery, costumes, and light.
- Duet A piece of music performed by two individual singers or instruments
- Ensemble Two or more singers singing and expressing their emotions at the same time.
- French operetta a style of light opera with spoken dialogue from 19th century France.
- Libretto (lih-BREHT-toh). Literally “little book”, this is the text or words of an opera.
- Mezzo-soprano (MEH-tso soh-PRAH-noh). The middle female voice.
- Opera (AH-peh-rah). A play that uses singing instead of speaking and is accompanied by instrumental music.
- Opera Buffa (BOOF-ah). Funny or lightheartedly themed opera.

- Opera seria (SEH-ree-ah). Dramatic or seriously themed opera.
- Overture The prelude to an opera, played by the orchestra alone.
- Recitative (reh-chih-tah-TEEV). A type of musical speaking where the words of the singer are sung in the rhythm of natural speech with melody added. Recitative is usually used between arias and ensembles to propel the story line.
- Props Objects placed on the stage and used by the actors.
- Score The book that contains the music and words of an opera.
- Set The scenery used on the stage to show location.
- Singspiel A type of opera created in Germany that uses spoken dialogue between arias and ensembles.
- Soprano The highest female voice.
- Stage Director The person who decides how the singers will move on stage and how they will act while they are singing their parts.
- Tenor (TEH-nor). The highest male voice.
- Trio A piece of music performed by three individual singers or instrumentalists
- Verismo (veh-RIHZ-moh). A style of Italian opera with very realistic characters popular in the late 19th and early 20th century.
- Vibrato (vih-BRAH-toh). The natural way for a voice or instrument to enlarge its sound through a rapid and small waver in pitch. Vibrato makes sound carry further and sound more powerful.
- Vocal range The scope of the human voice from its highest to its lowest sounds. Voices fall into these categories:

Female	Soprano	High
	Mezzo-soprano	Middle
	Contralto	Low
Male	Tenor	High
	Baritone	Middle
	Bass	Low

Dragon's Breath

An opera for children and adults

SYNOPSIS

During an argument with his Mom and Dad, Alan is suddenly overcome by an emotional Dragon, whom Alan recognizes as his own anger. Alan chases the Dragon into a magical realm called Clearplane – the dimension behind Alan's own eyes.

There he meets Dewitt and Somi, unique aspects of his own mind who, like his Mom and Dad, offer him advice on dealing with his emotions.

Next, the Dragon shares their own struggle with controlling their emotions and being seen as more than just anger, fear, and fire! Dewitt, Somi, & Alan return to test balancing emotions on Dewitt's paradiometer, finding equilibrium between all good or all bad actions. For a moment, Alan succeeds and a beautiful Butterfly appears. Again, Alan becomes frustrated and the Dragon returns!

After attempting to face the Dragon, Alan returns to Somi overwhelmed and needing comfort. Somi teaches Alan about the need to feel feelings and introduces Alan to the *Swoosh* - a way to overcome intense emotions. The audience joins Somi and Alan in experiencing emotions and *Swoosh*-ing them away, ending in Alan being overwhelmed yet again. Dewitt and Somi discuss what to do about Alan and finding the right way to cope with his emotions. They decide to give Alan space to discover the right way forward after sharing what helps them.

Alan meets the Butterfly again - the Butterfly desperately tries to pantomime to Alan that they are his emotions, both the Dragon and a Butterfly. Alan gets frustrated, not understanding, until his anger flares and the Butterfly runs away.

Somi and Dewitt return, helping Alan see the connection between Clearplane and Alan himself, along with his emotions, the Dragon, and the Butterfly. Together, as the Dragon returns, they watch Alan grow up and learn to balance his emotions by facing his feelings head-on.

Suddenly the Dragon softens, balanced like Alan, to share that he was also the Butterfly, hoping to be Alan's friend. Before Alan leaves Clearplane, the Dragon shares a breathing exercise to help calm Alan's extreme emotions whenever he becomes overwhelmed.

As Alan zaps back to reality, he finds – along with his friends in the audience – that he has powerful new tools for dealing with whatever emotions life throws at him.

Music: K.3, K.4, K.6, K.7, K.9, 1.3, 1.4, 1.6, 1.9, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, 2.9, 3.3, 3.4, 3.6, 3.7, 3.9, 4.3, 4.4, 4.6, 4.7, 4.9, 5.3, 5.4, 5.6, 5.7, 5.9

Post Opera Activities

Music communicates information about the characters, their feelings and their environment. Watch a “scary” scene from a movie with the sound turned off. Explain to students the power music has to create a feeling or a mood. What’s missing? Watch again with the sound on and discuss how the music adds to the scene. Talk about scene from *Dragon’s Breath* that made them laugh or feel scared. How does tempo and pitch convey certain ideas? How do rhythm, dynamics and tone affect the story the music is telling? This exercise can be used to learn both mood and rhythm words.

Worksheet Activities: Opera Vocabulary and Pronunciation Guide
 Opera WordSearch
 Investigate the Opera & Fill in the Blanks

ALL ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Post Opera Activities

Pre K to 2: Included in the teacher guide are supplemental cut-and-paste activities to promote motor and language arts skills. All that is needed for these activities are scissors, crayons, and paste.















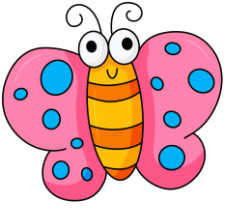

Worksheet Activities: Draw Dragon’s Breath
 Matching Pictures

Dragon's Breath

Matching Pictures

Name: _____

Cut and past the pictures from the bottom next to the pictures that they match.

Investigate Opera

WHAT DOES THE WORD OPERA MEAN?

The word **opera** comes from the Latin word **opus**, which means a work. What is a work? It is something a person makes or things up. It is a poem or a song or a drawing or a composition or any other creative thing a person makes. The plural of opus is opera. Opera means works in the Latin language. Today we use the word **opera** to describe one large work of performing art that contains many creative parts. An opera is many works that are combined together. In opera there is instrumental music, a dramatic play or comedy, singing and acting, scenery, costumes, special lighting and sometimes dancing.

WHERE DID OPERA BEGIN?

Opera was created over 400 years ago in Florence, Italy. In 1597, a composer named Jacopo Peri (JAHcoh-poh PEH-ree) wrote a play that was sung throughout instead of being spoken. He did this because he was trying to write a play the way the ancient Greeks did. During this period, educated people were trying to learn all they could about the world of ancient Greece so they could imitate it. The first opera was about a character in Greek mythology named Daphne. The idea of presenting plays that were sung became very popular and more and more composers began to combine music and drama. Love of opera spread all over Europe and eventually the world. Operas have been written in every language and its popularity shows no signs of slowing down.

As in a play, designers must be called on to create the costumes, lights, sets and makeup for an opera production. When the actual performance approaches, the singers have dress rehearsals where they get to wear their new costumes and perform on the newly build scenery. Rehearsals give the singers/actors an opportunity to practice their music and their acting with one another.

The person who actually writes the words for an opera is called a **librettist**. Often the words are adapted from an existing story or play. Evan Mack is the composer and Joshua McGuire is the librettist for *Dragon's Breath* that Virginia Opera is performing at your school.

HOW IS THE OPERATIC VOICE DIFFERENT?

Operatic singing is different from popular singing. There is more vibration in a opera singer's voice. This vibration is called **vibrato**, an Italian word. It helps the singer hold notes for a long time without taking a breath. Proper breathing is very important because the air in the lungs must be let out very slowly in a controlled way. Opera singers must be able to sing very high and very low, in a wide range, and sing fast runs, which are many notes in a row sung very rapidly. They do not use microphones to project their voices. All the power in their voices must come from inside their bodies. It takes years of study and practice to learn to do this. The highest singing female voice

is called **soprano** and the lowest male voice is called **bass**. Opera singers must be able to sing in different languages because most operas are performed in the language in which they were originally written.

Fill in The Blanks

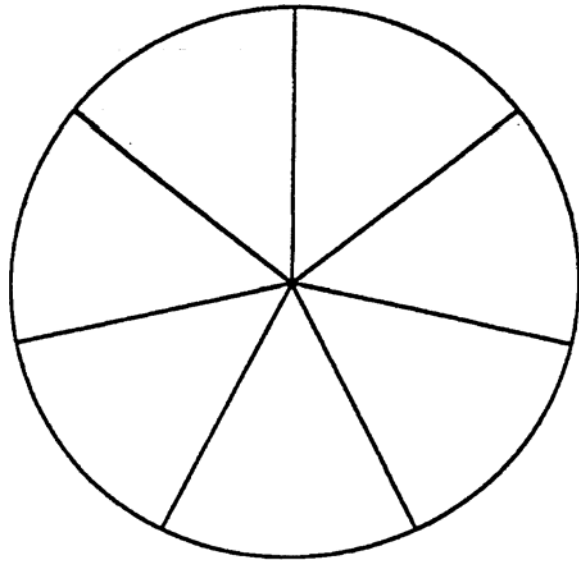
Now that you know all about opera, see if you can fill in the blanks below with the correct answer. Refer back to “Investigate the Opera” for the answers.

1. The person who writes the music is the_____.
2. The composer of *Dragon’s Breath* is_____.
3. The person who writes the words to an opera is called a_____.
4. The city where the first opera was performed was_____.
5. The person who creates the costumes and sets is a_____.
6. In *Dragon’s Breath* the character of Mom/Somi is sung by the highest female voice, which is called_____.
7. The singers have_____so they can practice.
8. A play that is sung throughout is an_____.
9. _____is the Italian word that makes the difference between an opera singer’s voice and a popular singer’s voice.
10. Many notes in a row which are sung very rapidly are called_____.

The Opera Pie

Make your own "Opera Pie" by listing the different kinds of performing arts that make up one whole opera.

Make each piece of the pie a different color. Color in the boxes next to the different components of each opera.



PIE LEGEND

<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

THE 5 W'S OF OPERA HISTORY

WHO	wrote the first opera?	_____
WHAT	was the name of the first opera?	_____
WHERE	was the first opera	_____
WHEN	was the first opera written?	_____
WHY	was the play sung instead of spoken?	_____

Opera Word Search

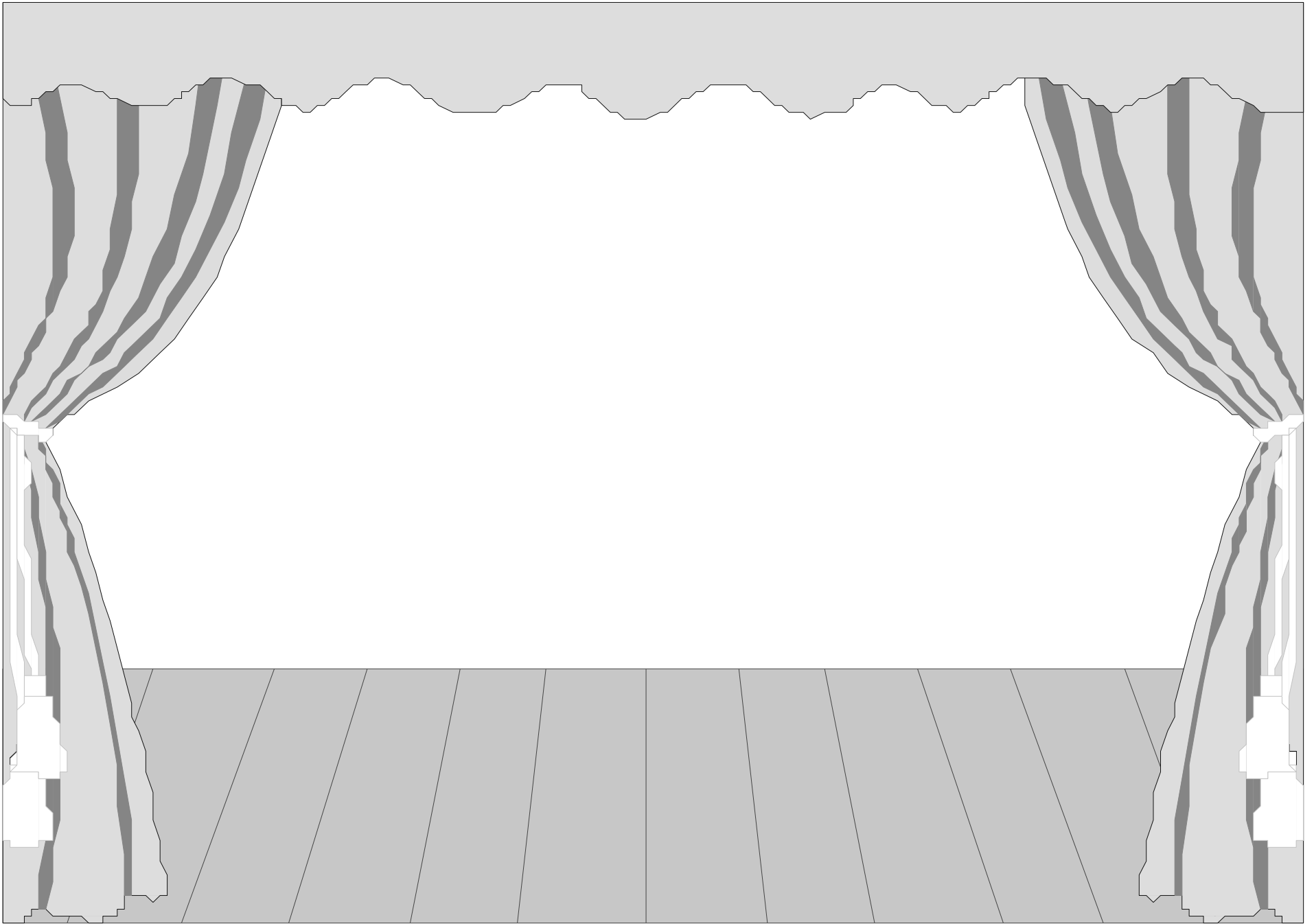
Find the following music vocabulary words in the puzzle below. Circle them.



ALLEGRO
ARIA
BARITONE
BASS
COMPOSER
COSTUME
DESIGNER
DUET
ENSEMBLE
LIBRETTO

MEZZO
OPERA
PIANO
PROPS
REHEARSAL
SCORE
SET
SINGER
SOPRANO
TENOR

STAGE
TEMPO



Virginia Opera Presents Dragon's Breath

Student Worksheet Answer Guide

INVESTIGATE THE OPERA/FILL IN THE BLANKS

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------|
| 1. Composer | 6. soprano |
| 2. Evan Mack | 7. rehearsals |
| 3. Librettist | 8. opera |
| 4. Florence, Italy | 9. vibrato |
| 5. Designer | 10. run |

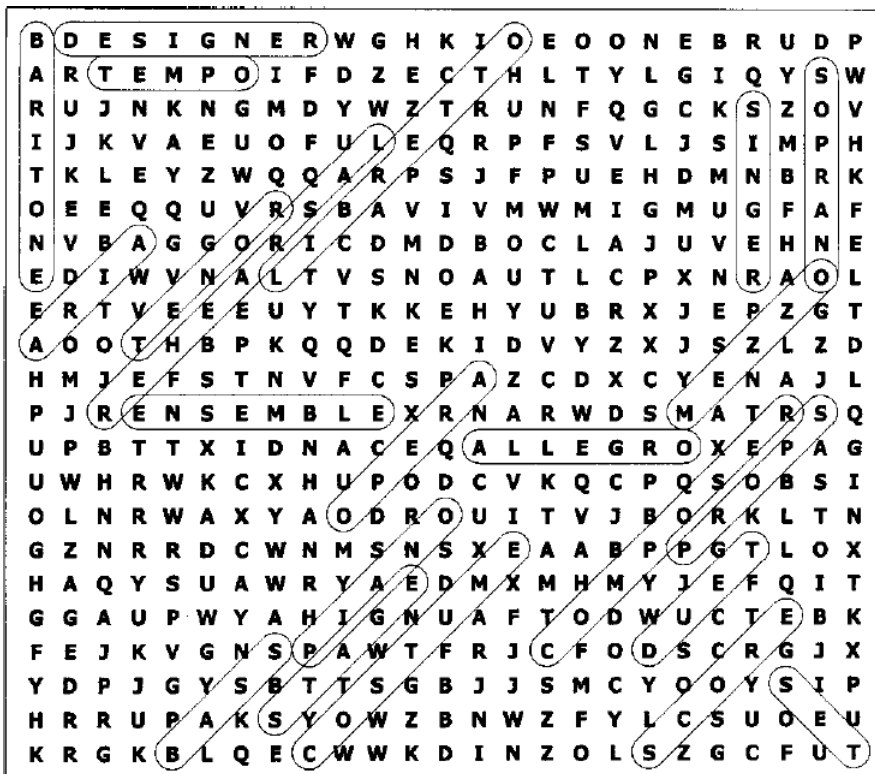
THE OPERA PIE

symphony orchestra	costumes
theater	singing
acting	scenery
special lighting	dancing

THE FIVE W'S OF OPERA HISTORY

Who	Jacopo Peri
What	Daphne
Where	Florence, Italy
When	1597
Why	To write a play the same way as the ancient Greeks

OPERA WORD SEARCH





Teacher/Administrator Evaluation Form

Date of Performance _____ School _____ Grade levels _____

Address _____ City/Town _____ State _____ County _____

Total students in attendance: _____ BOCES: _____

Demographics: (this information is important for our grant documentation)

Percentages of student population: White _____ Black _____ Hispanic _____ Other _____

Percentage of student population living in homes below poverty level: _____

Percentage of students receiving government assisted lunch program: _____

Please circle below to rate our program, 1-unacceptable, 2-below average, 3-average, 4-good, 5-excellent

Were the preparatory materials helpful? 1 2 3 4 5

Were the performers courteous and professional during their visit? 1 2 3 4 5

Was the production suitable for an educational environment? 1 2 3 4 5

Was the production suitable for the age group attending? 1 2 3 4 5

Did the performance hold the students' attention? 1 2 3 4 5

Please describe the students' reaction to the performance: _____

Comments: Please include here any other comments or suggestions about the teacher guide or performance that you may have that would help us improve our program. Your comments may be included in future marketing materials. If you do NOT want to be quoted, please check here . ____

Would you be willing to book a visit from Virginia Opera next year? _____

Signature _____ **THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS FORM!**