

PATHWAYS FOR UNDERSTANDING

Le Nozze di Figaro by W.A. Mozart



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An Introduction to *Pathways for Understanding Study Materials*

The goal of *Pathways for Understanding* materials is to provide multiple “pathways” for learning about a specific opera as well as the operatic art form, and to allow teachers to create lessons that work best for their particular teaching style, subject area, and class of students.

Meet the Characters / The Story/ Resources

Fostering familiarity with specific operas as well as the operatic art form, these sections describe characters and story, and provide historical context. Guiding questions are included to suggest connections to other subject areas, encourage higher-order thinking, and promote a broader understanding of the opera and its potential significance to other areas of learning.

Guided Listening

The Guided Listening section highlights key musical moments from the opera and provides areas of focus for listening to each musical excerpt. Main topics and questions are introduced, giving teachers of all musical backgrounds (or none at all) the means to discuss the music of the opera with their students. A complimentary CD of the full opera, as well as the full libretto (with English translation), are provided as part of the Guided Listening resources and are sent via mail.

Guiding Questions / Discussion Points

Guiding Questions or Discussion Points appear within several sections of these materials to spark discussion in your classroom and facilitate student exploration. Note that these questions are not intended to serve as “official” learning outcomes for the opera experience; rather, we hope that they act as a point of departure for prompting meaningful analysis and conversation amongst students. We are aware that teachers incorporate the study of opera into their classrooms in many ways and to address a variety of student outcomes, and we expect that individual teachers will adapt these materials to best serve their specific curriculum and instructional goals.

CD Provided

Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*
Lucine Amara, Roberta Peters, Mildred Miller,
Kim Borg, Cesare Siepi

The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus
Erich Leinsdorf, Conductor

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Libretto Provided

Le Nozze di Figaro

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte
English Version by Ruth and Thomas Martin

G. Schirmer’s Collection of Opera Librettos
Copyright 1951 by G. Schirmer, Inc.

Production Information

Music:	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Text (Italian):	Lorenzo Da Ponte
World Premiere:	Paris, Opéra Comique, February 11, 1840

Meet the Characters

Figaro	Count Almaviva's valet who is engaged to Susanna.
Susanna	The Countess's witty and beautiful maid who is engaged to Figaro.
Cherubino	A flirtatious teenage page.
The Countess	The wife of Count Almaviva who is still in love with her husband, although she knows he is unfaithful.
Count Almaviva	Employer of Figaro and Susanna; although he was once deeply in love with his wife the Countess, he is now pursuing Figaro's fiancé Susanna.

The Story of *Le Nozze di Figaro*: Synopsis

Act I

Count Almaviva's country estate near Seville, late 18th century. The servants Figaro and Susanna are preparing for their wedding. Figaro is furious when his bride tells him that the count has made advances toward her and vows to outwit his master ("Se vuol ballare"). The scheming Dr. Bartolo appears with his housekeeper, Marcellina, who wants Figaro to marry her. When she runs into Susanna, the two women trade insults. The page Cherubino enters; finding Susanna alone, he explains to her that he is in love with all women ("Non so più"). He hides when the count—who is angry because he caught Cherubino flirting with Barbarina, the gardener's daughter—shows up. The count again pursues Susanna, but conceals himself when the music master, Basilio, approaches. When Basilio tells Susanna that Cherubino has a crush on the countess, the count furiously steps forward. He becomes further enraged when he discovers the page in the room. Figaro returns with a group of peasants who praise the count for renouncing the traditional feudal right of a nobleman to take the place of a manservant on his wedding night. The count orders Cherubino to join his regiment in Seville and leaves Figaro to cheer up the unhappy adolescent ("Non più andrai").

Act II

The countess laments that her husband no longer loves her ("Porgi, amor"). Encouraged by Figaro and Susanna, she agrees to set a trap for him: they will send Cherubino, disguised as Susanna, to a rendezvous with the count. The page sings a song he has written in honor of the countess ("Voi, che sapete"), after which Susanna begins to dress him in girls' clothes ("Venite, inginocchiatevi"). When she goes off to find a ribbon, the count knocks and is annoyed to find the door locked. Cherubino hides in the closet. The countess admits her husband, who, when he hears a noise, is skeptical of her story that Susanna is in the closet. Taking his wife with him, he leaves to get tools to force the door. Meanwhile, Susanna, who has reentered unseen and observed everything, helps Cherubino escape through the window before taking his place in the closet. When the count and countess return, both are stunned to find

Susanna inside. All seems well until the gardener Antonio appears, complaining that someone has jumped from the window, ruining his flowers. Figaro, who has rushed in to announce that everything is ready for the wedding, pretends that it was he who jumped. When Bartolo, Marcellina, and Basilio appear, waving a court summons for Figaro, the delighted count declares the wedding postponed.

Act III

Susanna leads the count on with promises of a rendezvous, but he grows doubtful when he overhears her conspiring with Figaro. He vows revenge (“Vedrò, mentr’io sospiro”). The countess recalls her past happiness (“Dove sono”). Marcellina wins her case but then, noticing a birthmark on Figaro’s arm, is astonished to discover that he is her long lost son, fathered by Bartolo. The joyful parents agree to marry as well. Susanna and the countess continue their conspiracy against the count and compose a letter to him confirming the rendezvous with Susanna that evening in the garden (Duet: “Che soave zeffiretto”). Later, during Figaro and Susanna’s wedding ceremony, the bride slips the letter to the count.

Act IV

In the garden, Barbarina tells Figaro and Marcellina about the planned rendezvous between the count and Susanna. Thinking that his bride is unfaithful, Figaro rages against all women (“Aprite un po’ quegl’occhi”). He leaves, just missing Susanna and the countess, who are dressed for their masquerade. Alone, Susanna sings a love song (“Deh! vieni, non tardar”). Figaro, hidden nearby, thinks she is speaking to the count. Susanna conceals herself in time to see Cherubino declare his love to the disguised countess—until the count chases him away to be alone with “Susanna.” Soon Figaro understands what is going on and, joining in the fun, makes exaggerated advances towards Susanna in her countess disguise. The count returns, finding Figaro with his wife, or so he thinks. Outraged, he calls everyone to witness his verdict. At that moment, the real countess reveals her identity. Realizing the truth, the count asks for his wife’s forgiveness. The couples are reunited, and so ends this mad day.

The Story of *Le Nozze di Figaro*: Guiding Questions

Act I: Revolutionary Romance

- For such a seemingly silly plot, this opera was seen as controversial. Why would the concept of a servant outwitting his master be considered revolutionary and contentious?
- Both sides of the master/servant relationship are explored in this opera. Compare and contrast the relationship between the Count and Figaro, and the Countess and Susanna.
- Why does Marcellina want Figaro to marry her? Does she love him?

Act II: "Porgi amor"

- Why do you think the Count is so cruel to the Countess? Do you think he has stopped loving her?
- Do you think Susanna's plan to punish the Count is a good one? Would you ever set a trap like this for someone? Why or why not?
- Cherubino is often the pawn in the day's charades. Do you feel bad for him? Or do you think he is a comic character who is enjoying the fun?

Act III: The Crazy Day

- Does the Count deserve to be tricked? Why or why not?
- The plot of the opera is very complex. How much time do you think passes during *Le Nozze di Figaro*?

Act IV: A Comical Conclusion

- Do you think the Countess was right to forgive the Count? Or does he deserve a harsher punishment?
- Do you think the Count will truly change his ways in the future? Will this experience make him into a faithful husband?

The History of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*

Adapted from "Le Nozze di Figaro" by Ted Libbey for *The NPR Listener's Encyclopedia of Classical Music*, published 2006 by Workman Publishing, New York.

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

The play on which [*Le Nozze di Figaro*] is based had appeared in 1778 as a sequel to the wildly successful *Le Barbier de Seville* (1775). While it involved more or less the same characters as its predecessor, it presented a sharper and more critical assessment of the social order, and for that reason Louis XVI kept it off the French stage until 1784, when he reluctantly allowed a production at the Comédie-Française. His normally liberal-minded brother-in-law, Emperor Joseph II, followed suit, banning performances of the play in Austria but allowing the text to be published and to circulate freely. Mozart came across it in 1784 and immediately saw its potential. He was aware of the success Giovanni Paisiello (1740–1816) had had with his operatic adaptation of *Le Barbier de Seville*—the Italian's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* had been the hit of the 1783 season in Vienna—and he knew the public wanted a sequel.

Mozart began work on *Figaro* in September 1785, finishing the score in April 1786. Listeners at the third performance of the opera called for so many encores that the emperor had to issue a decree allowing only arias to be encored. But the opera's finer qualities eluded the Viennese, who took greater pleasure in *Una cosa rara* by Vicente Martín y Soler (1754–1806), which premiered on the same stage six months later. *Figaro* dropped out of the repertoire after nine performances and was not revived in Vienna until 1789. The story was different in Prague, where *Figaro* premiered in December 1786 and enjoyed a huge success. The opera's triumph in the Bohemian capital, and the commission for *Don Giovanni* that resulted directly from it, proved to be the high-water mark of Mozart's career.

With *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Mozart carried the architecture of opera and the art of characterization into new realms. The arias are brilliant crystallizations of feeling and humor, for example, the title character's "Non più andrai" at the end of Act I, but *Figaro's* greatest significance lies in the ensemble numbers and the astonishing

extended finales to Acts II and IV. Here, utilizing the principles of key organization and symphonic argument he had mastered in his instrumental compositions, Mozart generated a dramatic and comedic thrust unprecedented in the history of opera.

Guided Listening: "Se vuol ballare, signor Contino"

CD 1 , Track 6 | Libretto pg. 3

The master of the household, Count Almaviva, has just made advances toward the beautiful maid, Susanna. Figaro, the male servant who is engaged to Susanna, comforts his bride with his plan to foil the Count's lewd intentions.

Discussion Points

- What are the Count's intentions with Susanna? Why does this bother Figaro?
 - Do you think it's right for the Count to pursue Susanna in this manner? Why might you do if you were in Susanna's place?
- How would you describe Figaro's personality? Is he a comedic or dramatic character, or a combination of the two?
 - What musical components give you this feeling about Figaro's character? Would you describe his musical tone as light or dark? Does his music tend to be legato ("smooth") or staccato ("short")? Does this influence the way you view him as a character?
 - What do you think Figaro looks like? Do you think he's tall or short? Big or small? Describe Figaro the way you envision him.
- How does Figaro plan to outwit the Count? Use specific words or phrases from the libretto to support your answer.
- If you were Susanna, would you be comforted by Figaro's assurances? Why or why not?
 - Would you describe Figaro as a serious or light-hearted character? What might this imply about the actions he will take against the count?
 - Do you imagine Susanna will let Figaro take care of the situation, or do you think she will take matters into her own hands? Predict what will happen in the scenes to come.

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Discussion Points (continued)

- Do you think Figaro is brave for promising to “upset” his master’s plan?
 - If so, why is he brave? Think in terms of the time period in which the opera takes place.
 - If you were Figaro, would you take the same risk? Why or why not?
 - Do you think this says something about Figaro’s love for Susanna? Explain.

Guided Listening: "Non so più cosa son, cosa faccio"

CD 1, Track 12 | Libretto pg. 6

An amorous Cherubino confesses his general lovesickness for all women, including the Countess.

Discussion Points

- Who is Cherubino?
 - How old is he?
 - How would you describe him? Is he lethargic, sneaky, silly, romantic, or something else?
 - Describe Cherubino's physical appearance. What might his costume look like?

- Who is the target of Cherubino's affections?
 - How does he describe his love for her?
 - What images does Cherubino employ to convey his love?
 - What does this imagery add to the excerpt? Does it make the language more poetic or more narrative? Explain
 - Do you think Cherubino's love interest feels the same way about him? Why or why not?

- What vocal range does the character Cherubino sing in? Would you consider this to be a high or low range?
 - What is Cherubino's voice part?
 - Cherubino is played by a woman, but the character is male. What do we call this type of role in opera? In what other operas have you seen this method used before?

- Do you feel that Cherubino's voice matches his personality or character? How about the way he sings in this piece? Does he seem more like a wise gentleman, or a love-struck teenager?

Guided Listening: "Porgi amor"

CD 2 , Track 1 | Libretto pg. 11

In her chamber, the Countess laments her husband's infidelity and her own loneliness.

Discussion Points

- Listen closely to the instrumental introduction until 1:08.
 - How does the introduction help set the mood for the excerpt? Is the music loud or soft, fast or slow, smooth or disjointed?
 - What kind of singing voice do you expect to hear following the introduction? Do you expect to hear a light and airy voice, a strong and echoing voice, or something else?
 - After listening to the Countess's entrance, were you surprised by her voice? Was it what you expected?
 - Was her entrance aggressive or gentle? Did it seem like a natural extension of the instrumental introduction, or was it totally different?
 - How does her voice and the way she sings compare with the words she's singing?

- To whom is the Countess singing in this excerpt? Is she singing to someone in particular?
 - Who might the Countess be able to confide in? Is she able to talk with her husband about his actions? If she's unable to talk with the Count, who might be there to listen and help?

- Do you hear any repeated musical material in this aria? If so, where? Take a moment to write out the form of this musical excerpt.

- Do you feel bad for the Countess? Why or why not? If you were friends with the Countess, what advice would you give her?

Guided Listening: "Voi che sapete"

CD 2, Track 3 | Libretto pp. 12-13

Susanna and the Countess persuade Cherubino to perform a song he has written about his new perspective on life and love.

Discussion Points

- What is your impression of Cherubino?
 - How old do you think Cherubino is?
 - What characteristics within the music give you a specific image of the character Cherubino? When explaining your position, reference the music and libretto for support.

- To whom is Cherubino singing in this excerpt?
 - How does Cherubino seem? Is he nervous or calm? Anxious or confident?
 - How would you feel in Cherubino's position?

- What do you notice about the excerpt that may be different from the others you have heard so far? Do the lines of libretto remind you of a certain type of literature? If so, what?

- If you were the Countess, would you be flattered or annoyed with Cherubino's affections? Why?

- Listen closely to the orchestra at 1:48.
 - Do you hear a difference in their playing? Does it get faster or slower?
 - Does the range in which the orchestra plays change? If so, does it get higher or lower?
 - How does the change in the orchestra's playing coincide with Cherubino's words in this moment?

Guided Listening: "Esci omai, garzon malnato"

CD 2, Track 9 | Libretto pg. 18-19

The Countess, Susanna, and Cherubino carry out their plan to trick the Count, while the Count is sorely surprised and momentarily outwitted.

Discussion Points

- What has happened immediately preceding this excerpt? Why are the Count and Countess fighting?
 - Who does the Count believe is in the closet? What might happen to the Countess if the Count should find anyone other than Susanna in the dressing area?
- Do you think it is fair of the Count to treat the Countess this way, considering his own plans involving Susanna? Why or why not?
 - What does this excerpt tell us about marital relationships during the time period in which the opera takes place? Were husband and wife considered equal in a marriage? Explain your reasoning.
- What does the Count threaten to do to Cherubino? Is this a fair punishment? Why or why not?
 - Do you think that the Count will actually see his threat through, or do you think it's just that, a threat? What might an alternative punishment be for Cherubino?
 - Do you believe what Cherubino did was wrong? Explain.
- Listen closely to the "conversation" between the Count and the Countess in this excerpt. Does it sound heated or loving? Is their singing reminiscent of a certain type of discussion? Explain.
 - Do you think all hope is lost for the Countess and Count's marriage, or do you think they still love one another?
 - What about their actions make you feel this way? Explain.

Guided Listening: "Dove sono i bei momenti"

CD 3, Track 8 | Libretto pg. 30

The Countess reflects on days gone by.

Discussion Points

- Have the Countess's feelings for her husband changed? Use specific examples from the libretto to support your answer.
 - How is this aria different or similar to the Countess's previous aria, "Porgi amor"?
 - Are the musical qualities the same or different in these two arias? What was the Countess expressing in the prior excerpt
 - Would you describe this aria as legato (smooth), staccato (short), and/or melismatic (moving) in nature? Did the musical qualities used by the Countess in the previous aria modulate into something different in this excerpt? If so, how has her music changed throughout the opera? Explain.
 - Compared to her previous aria, how are the Countess's feelings similar or different in this excerpt?

- Do you feel that the Countess is experiencing an internal conflict? If so, what is the conflict?
 - How might the Countess's internal conflict have been avoided? How might it be relieved?
 - Have you ever struggled with an internal conflict? If so, describe the conflict and explain how it was ultimately resolved.

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Discussion Points (continued)

- Listen at 2:18. There's a musical and emotional shift at this moment in the piece. What is happening?
 - What changes in the music? Does the tempo stay the same, or does it get slower or faster? How might you describe the energy in this moment?
 - Read the libretto. What is the Countess saying?
 - Predict what will happen to the Countess in the scenes to come!

Guided Listening: "Sull'aria – Piegato è il foglio"

CD 3, Track 10 (0:00 – 2:32) | Libretto pg. 31

The Countess and Susanna carry out yet another plan to reveal the Count's indiscretion. Here the pair write a letter from "Susanna" to the Count to schedule a rendezvous later that day.

Discussion Points

- What are the Countess and Susanna doing in this excerpt? To whom are they writing a letter, and why? Do you think their plan will work?
 - What could go wrong with the plan? Is anyone else aware of the arrangement other than the Countess and Susanna? If so, who? Do you think they should tell anyone else?

- How do you think the Countess feels about Susanna?
 - Do they have a typical servant/master relationship? Explain.
 - Why does the Countess trust Susanna, despite the fact that she is the object of the Count's desire?
 - Do you think that Susanna has a similar trust of the Countess? Explain.

- Compare the Countess and Susanna. Think about how their life circumstances might differ, and also how they might be similar.
 - How are the vocal lines of Susanna and the Countess similar? How are they different? Explain.
 - Do these two characters have the same or different voice parts? Do they sing in the same range or different ranges? How are you able to tell?

- Do you feel the Countess has gained more confidence throughout the opera? If so, explain your reasoning.
 - Have you ever encountered a situation where you felt intimidated? How did you overcome your feelings? Were you able to stand up for yourself in the end?

Guided Listening: "Tutto è disposto..." and "Aprite un po' quegl' occhi"

CD 3, Track 16 – 17 | Libretto pg. 37

Figaro allows his jealousy to impact how he feels about Susanna.

Discussion Points

- What does Figaro now doubt about his bride, Susanna? Why? Does he have reason to doubt her sincerity? Has Susanna ever been dishonest with Figaro?
- What do we call the musical selection before the aria that is heard in the excerpt "Tutto è disposto..."?
 - How is this speech like singing different in this excerpt than the music heard in "Aprite un po' quegl' occhi"?
 - What do we call the section of music heard in the second selection?
 - Define the form heard throughout these two excerpts.
- How does Figaro describe women in this excerpt?
 - What kind of language does he use? Is it mostly literal or mostly figurative? Give at least one example of a figure of speech from the excerpt (i.e. a metaphor or a simile).
 - What might this aria/speech say about Figaro's perception of women as a whole? Do you think he has an adequate reason to feel this way? Why or why not?
 - How do you think Susanna will react when she learns that Figaro has so easily distrusted her? Do you think she will be upset, sad, or angry? How might you feel if you were placed in Susanna's position?
- Based on Figaro's words, do you think he is conflicted by his feelings? Explain your reasoning using specific examples from the libretto.
- Do you think Figaro's assessment of women is fair? Why or why not?

***Le Nozze di Figaro* Resources: About the Composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria, where his father, Leopold, was a violinist and composer in the service of the Prince Archbishop. Leopold dreamed of becoming the leading musician in the Prince's court – but when he recognized Wolfgang's potential, he decided to give up his own ambitions to promote his son's talents.

Mozart learned his first simple pieces for clavier (a predecessor of the piano) at the age of four, and began to write his own pieces at the age of five. Leopold was determined to make his talented son famous; a child prodigy, he wagered, could bring in a lot of money for a relatively poor family. But Leopold also believed that his son's talent was God-given, and it was his duty to share it with the world.

In 1762, before Mozart was six years old, his father brought him and his sister Maria Anna to Munich to perform before Bavarian royalty. After a similar visit to the Court at Vienna, Mozart and his sister caused such a sensation that they were able to tour Europe for three-and-a-half years. When he was twelve years old, Mozart wrote his first opera, *La Finta Semplice*, and he resumed his travels. Eventually returning home to Salzburg in 1771, he spent his teenage years composing masses, concertos, divertimenti and serenades for the local ruler, Archbishop Colloredo.

In 1781, at the age of twenty-five, Mozart wrote his first great opera, *Idomeneo*, and was summoned by Archbishop Colloredo, who was then visiting Vienna. But Mozart was treated so disrespectfully in the Archbishop's service that he resigned, and at his last meeting, he was kicked out of the Archbishop's Vienna residence.

Mozart stayed in Vienna, determined to make a living as an independent composer. He married Constanze Weber, and the newlyweds survived on the money Mozart made by teaching a few pupils. In the early 1780s, he met librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, who provided him with the libretto for *Le Nozze di Figaro*. *Nozze* premiered in Vienna

on May 1st, 1786, and was enthusiastically received by the public. Mozart and Da Ponte's next opera, *Don Giovanni*, had a successful premiere in Prague in October of 1787, but a slightly different version performed in Vienna the next year was not as well-received. Meanwhile, Mozart's financial situation worsened. Though he became Court Composer to the Holy Roman Emperor, he was not paid well for his work. In 1789, he was offered a more generous salary by the Prussian Emperor, but Mozart refused to leave Vienna. Mozart's monetary troubles worsened. His wife, Constanze, got sick, and a third opera written in collaboration with Da Ponte, *Così fan tutte*, was not successful enough to solve all his problems. In 1791, he wrote two final operas: *Die Zauberflöte* and *La Clemenza di Tito*.

Throughout that year Mozart became ill and increasingly despondent. When he died on December 5th, 1791, his funeral was attended by a few friends but not by his wife, who was too ill and grief-stricken to leave her home. He died penniless and, according to the Viennese custom of the time, was buried in a mass grave. He was just 35 years old.

Despite his unfortunate end, Mozart's musical genius is still cherished today, and his timeless operatic masterpieces are known and celebrated throughout the world.

Le Nozze di Figaro Resources: Online Resources

Note: click on the blue link below the description to visit the corresponding page.

Video Clips

- **Le Nozze di Figaro: From Page to Stage**
Informational Video, Glyndebourne Festival (2012)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ml96PGBIwmA>
- **The Marriage of Figaro**
Production Preview, English National Opera (2011)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQx81UhXbaA>
- **Interview: The Music of Wolfgang Mozart's Le Nozze di Figaro**
Informational Video, The Royal Opera House (2012)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAvuSGoXXJY>
- **Accessible Arias: Erwin Schrott sings 'Se vuol ballare' from The Marriage of Figaro**
Opera Excerpt, The Royal Opera House (2011)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oxPR1d6ONE>
- **Accessible Arias: 'Dove sono i bei momenti' from Mozart's Marriage of Figaro (Dorothea Röschmann)**
Opera Excerpt, The Royal Opera House (2011)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEQMPNG4sU>
- **The Marriage of Figaro Preview from San Francisco Opera**
Production Preview, San Francisco Opera (2010)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LqzQQcUwXk>
- **The Marriage of Figaro—Interview with Sarah Pring**
Artist Interview, Welsh National Opera (2012)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjJ93XVqDFo>
- **Behind the Scenes: Interview with Rebekah Camm**
Artist Interview, LA Opera (2010)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPRTs4tJ69M>

Articles

- **"The Marriage of Figaro—a musical guide"** by Tom Service for The Guardian
(August 14, 2012)
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/aug/14/glyndebourne-2012-the-marriage-of-figaro-musical-guide>
- **"May 1, 1786: Mozart's Le Nozze di Figaro premieres in Vienna"** for "This Day in History" by History.com
<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/mozarts-le-nozze-di-figaro-premieres-in-vienna>
- **The Revolution in Action** by Margaret Reynolds for The Guardian
(July 10, 2013)
<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jul/10/mozart-nozze-di-figaro-the-revolution-in-action>

Additional Resources: Reflections after the Opera

After every opera performance, the director, conductor, and performers reflect and evaluate the different aspects of their production, so that they can improve it for the next night. In a similar way, these Guiding Questions encourage active reflection, both individually and collectively, on your student's opera experience.

Think about the portrayal of the characters in the production at the Met.

- How were the characters similar or different from what you expected? Try to identify specific qualities or actions that had an impact on your ideas and thinking.
- Did the performers' voices match the character they were playing? Why or why not?
- Did any characters gain prominence in live performance? If so, how was this achieved? (Consider the impact of specific staging.)
- What did the performers do to depict the nature of the relationships between characters? In other words, how did you know from the characters' actions (not just their words) how they felt about the other characters in the story?
- Stereotypically, most opera performers are considered singers first, and actors second. Was this the case? How did each performer's portrayal affect your understanding of (or connection with) their character?

Consider the production elements of the performance.

- How did the director choose to portray the story visually? Did the production have a consistent tone? How did the tone and style of each performer's actions (movement, characterization, staging) compare with the tone and style of the visual elements (set design, costume design, lighting design)?
- How did the set designer's work affect the production? Did the style of the setting help you understand the characters in a new way?
- How did different costume elements impact the portrayal of each character?
- How did the lighting designer's work affect the production?
- Did you agree with the artistic choices made by the directors and designers? If you think changes should be made, explain specifically what you'd change and why.

Additional Resources: The Emergence of Opera

The origins of opera stretch back to ancient Greece, where playwrights used music and dance to augment moments of action in their stories. At this time, it was popular to write plays in Attic, a sing-song language, where half the words were sung and half were spoken. Dance was also a pivotal part of Greek drama; a chorus danced throughout scenes in an effort to highlight the play's themes.

The philosopher Aristotle, in 'The Poetics,' outlined the first guidelines for drama, known as the Six Elements of Drama. Aristotle suggested that a play's action should take place in one day, portray only one chain of events, and be set in one general location. Over the centuries, playwrights and composers took Aristotle's advice more seriously. The tradition of including music and dance as an integral part of theatre continued through Roman times and into the Middle Ages. Liturgical drama, as well as vernacular plays, often combined incidental music with acting.

Opera can also be traced to the Gregorian chants of the early Christian Church. Music was an integral part of worship, and incorporated ancient melodies from Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine cultures. The Church's organization of music throughout the early Middle Ages gave it structure, codifying scales, modes, and notation to indicate pitch and rhythm. The chants were originally sung in single-line melodies (monophony), but over time more voices were added to compliment the main melody, resulting in the beginning of polyphony (many independent voices or parts sung simultaneously).

However, the Church objected polyphony, worried that the intricate weaving of melodies and words obscured the liturgical text. Since conveying the meaning of the text was the primary reason for singing in church, polyphony was viewed as too secular by Church leaders, and was banished from the Liturgy by Pope John XXII in 1322. Harmonic music followed, which developed as songs with one-line melodies, accompanied by instruments. Then, in 1364, during the pontificate of Pope Urban V, a composer and priest named Guillaume de Machaut composed a polyphonic setting of

the mass entitled *La Messe de Notre Dame*. This was the first time that the Church officially sanctioned polyphony in sacred music.

Another early contributor to the emergence of opera was Alfonso the Wise, ruler of Castile, Spain, in the 13th century. Also known as the Emperor of Culture, he was a great troubadour and made noted contributions to music's development. First, he dedicated his musical poems, the "Cantigas de Santa Maria," to Saint Mary, which helped end the church's objection to the musical style. His "Cantigas" are one of the largest collections of monophonic songs from the Middle Ages. Secondly, he played a crucial role in the introduction of instruments from the Moorish kingdoms in southern Spain. These instruments, from the timpani to lute, came from Persia and the Arabic culture of the Middle East. Throughout the European Renaissance (14th – 16th centuries), minstrels and troubadours continued to compose harmonic folk songs which informed and entertained. Some songs were mere gossip; others were songs of love and heroes. These contained a one-line melody accompanied by guitars, lutes, or pipes.

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) continued to reform church music by composing music in his native tongue (German) for use in services. He also simplified the style so that average people in the congregation could sing it. Luther turned to the one-line melodies and folk tunes of the troubadours and minstrels and adapted them to religious texts. His reforms had great impact upon the music of Europe: the common people began to read and sing music.

From the church at this time also emerged the motet, a vocal composition in polyphonic style, with Biblical or similar text which was intended for use in religious services. Several voices sang sacred text accompanied by instruments, and this format laid the groundwork for the madrigal – one of the last steps in preparing the way for opera. Sung in the native language of the people in their homes, taverns, and village squares, madrigals were written for a small number of voices, between two and eight, and used secular (rather than biblical or liturgical) texts.

When refugee scholars from the fall of Constantinople (1453) flooded Italy and Europe, their knowledge of the classics of Rome and Greece added to the development of European musical traditions. Into this world of renewed interest in learning and culture came a group of men from Florence who formed a club, the Camerata, for the advancement of music and Greek theater. Their goal was to recreate Greek drama as they imagined it must have been presented. The Camerata struggled to solve problems that confronted composers, and were interested in investigating the theory and philosophy of music. The Camerata also experimented with the solo song, a forerunner of the opera aria.

Not surprisingly, Greek and Roman mythology and tragedies provided the subject matter of the first librettists. The presence of immortals and heroes made singing seem natural to the characters. Composers used instrumental accompaniment to help establish harmony, which freed them to experiment with instrumental music for preludes or overtures. Development of the recitative and the instrumental bridge enabled writers to connect the song, dance, and scene of the drama into the spectacle which was to become opera. This connector-recitative later evolved into a form of religious drama known as oratorio, a large concert piece which includes an orchestra, a choir, and soloists.

Members of the Camerata – Jacopo Peri, Ottavio Rinuccini, and Jacopo Corsi – are credited with writing the first opera, *Dafne*, based on the Greek myth. Their early efforts were crucial in establishing the musical styles of the new genre in the early 17th century. A sizeable orchestra was used and singers were in costume. *Dafne* became famous across Europe.

The Camerata set the scene, and onto the budding operatic stage came Claudio Monteverdi. He is considered the last great composer of madrigals and the first great composer of Italian opera. He was revolutionary in developing the orchestra's tone-color and instrumentation. He developed two techniques to heighten dramatic tension: *pizzicato* – plucking strings instead of bowing them; and *tremolo* – rapid repetition of a single note. Modern orchestration owes him as much gratitude as does

opera. In his operas, such as *Orfeo* (1607), the music was more than a vehicle for the words; it expressed and interpreted the poetry of the libretto. His orchestral combinations for *Orfeo* were considered to be the beginning of the golden age of Baroque instrumental music.

Monteverdi's experimentation with instruments and his willingness to break the rules of the past enabled him to breathe life into opera. He was far ahead of his time, freeing instruments to communicate emotion, and his orchestration was valued not only for the sounds instruments created but also for the emotional effects they could convey. In his work, music blended with the poetry of the libretto to create an emotional spectacle. His audiences were moved to an understanding of the possibilities of music's role in drama.

Additional Resources:

A Guide to Voice Parts and Families of the Orchestra

Voice Parts

SOPRANO

Sopranos have the highest voices, and usually play the heroines of an opera. This means they often sing many arias, and fall in love and/or die more often than other female voice types.

MEZZO-SOPRANO, or MEZZO

This is the middle female voice, and has a darker, warmer sound than the soprano. Mezzos often play mothers and villainesses, although sometimes they are cast as seductive heroines. Mezzos also play young men on occasion, aptly called "pants roles" or "trouser roles."

CONTRALTO, or ALTO

Contralto, or alto, is the lowest female voice. Contralto is a rare voice type. Altos usually portray older females, witches and old gypsies.

COUNTERTENOR

Also often known as alto, this is the highest male voice, and another vocal rarity. Countertenors sing in a similar range as a contralto. Countertenor roles are most common in baroque opera, but some contemporary composers also write parts for countertenors.

TENOR

If there are no countertenors on stage, then the highest male voice in opera is the tenor. Tenors are usually the heroes who "get the girl" or die horribly in the attempt.

BARITONE

The middle male voice. In comic opera, the baritone is often a schemer, but in tragic opera, he is more likely to play the villain.

BASS

The lowest male voice. Low voices usually suggest age and wisdom in serious opera, and basses usually play kings, fathers, and grandfathers. In comic opera, basses often portray old characters that are foolish or laughable.

Families of the Orchestra

STRINGS

violins, violas, cellos, double bass

WOODWIND

piccolos, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons

BRASS

trumpets, trombones, French horns, baritones, tubas

PERCUSSION

bass drums, kettle drums, timpani, xylophones, piano, bells, gongs, cymbals, chimes

Additional Resources: Glossary

adagio	Indication that the music is to be performed at a slow, relaxed pace. A movement for a piece of music with this marking.
allegro	Indicates a fairly fast tempo.
aria	A song for solo voice in an opera, with a clear, formal structure.
arioso	An operatic passage for solo voice, melodic but with no clearly defined form.
baritone	A man's voice, with a range between that of bass and tenor.
ballad opera	A type of opera in which dialogue is interspersed with songs set to popular tunes.
bel canto	Refers to the style cultivated in the 18 th and 19 th centuries in Italian opera. This demanded precise intonation, clarity of tone and enunciation, and a virtuoso mastery of the most florid passages.
cabaletta	The final short, fast section of a type of aria in 19 th -century Italian opera.
cadenza	A passage in which the solo instrument or voice performs without the orchestra, usually of an improvisatory nature.
chorus	A body of singers who sing and act as a group, either in unison or in harmony; any musical number written for such a group.
coloratura	An elaborate and highly ornamented part for soprano voice, usually written for the upper notes of the voice. The term is also applied to those singers who specialize in the demanding technique required for such parts.
conductor	The director of a musical performance for any sizable body of performers.
contralto	Low-pitched woman's voice, lower than soprano or mezzo-soprano.
crescendo	Meaning "growing," used as a musical direction to indicate that the music is to get gradually louder.
diatonic scale	Notes proper to a key that does not involve accidentals (sharps or flats)
ensemble	From the French word for "together," this term is used when discussing the degree of effective teamwork among a body of performers; in opera, a set piece for a group of soloists.

finale	The final number of an act, when sung by an ensemble.
fortissimo (ff)	Very loud.
forte (f)	Italian for “strong” or “loud.” An indication to perform at a loud volume.
harmony	A simultaneous sounding of notes that usually serves to support a melody.
intermezzo	A piece of music played between the acts of an opera.
intermission	A break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around.
legato	A direction for smooth performance without detached notes.
leitmotif	Melodic element first used by Richard Wagner in his operas to musically represent characters, events, ideas, or emotions.
libretto	The text of an opera.
maestro	Literally “master”; used as a courtesy title for the conductor, whether a man or woman.
melody	A succession of musical tones (i.e., notes not sounded at the same time), often prominent and singable.
mezzo-soprano	Female voice in the middle range, between that of soprano and contralto.
octave	The interval between the first and eighth notes of the diatonic scale
opera buffa	An Italian form that uses comedic elements. The French term “opera bouffe” describes a similar type, although it may have an explicitly satirical intent.
opera seria	Italian for “serious opera.” Used to signify Italian opera of a heroic or dramatic quality during the 18 th and early 19 th centuries.
operetta	A light opera, whether full-length or not, often using spoken dialogue. The plots are romantic and improbable, even farcical, and the music tuneful and undemanding.
overture	A piece of music preceding an opera.
pentatonic scale	Typical of Japanese, Chinese, and other Far Eastern and folk music, the pentatonic scale divides the octave into five tones and may be played on the piano by striking only the black keys.

pianissimo (pp)	Very softly.
piano (p)	Meaning "flat," or "low". Softly, or quietly.
pitch	The location of a musical sound in the tonal scale; the quality that makes "A" different from "D."
prima donna	The leading woman singer in an operatic cast or company.
prelude	A piece of music that precedes another.
recitative	A style of sung declamation used in opera. It may be either accompanied or unaccompanied except for punctuating chords from the harpsichord.
reprise	A direct repetition of an earlier section in a piece of music, or the repeat of a song.
score	The written or printed book containing all the parts of a piece of music.
serenade	A song by a lover, sung outside the window of his mistress.
singspiel	A German opera with spoken dialogue.
solo	A part for unaccompanied instrument or for an instrument or voice with the dominant role in a work.
soprano	The high female voice; the high, often highest, member of a family of instruments.
tempo	The pace of a piece of music; how fast or how slow it is played.
tenor	A high male voice.
theme	The main idea of a piece of music; analogous to the topic of a written paper, subject to exploration and changes.
timbre	Quality of a tone, also an alternative term for "tone-color."
tone-color	The characteristic quality of tone of an instrument or voice.
trill	Musical ornament consisting of the rapid alternation between the note and the note above it.
trio	A sustained musical passage for three voices.
verismo	A type of "realism" in Italian opera during the late 19 th and early 20 th centuries, in which the plot was on a contemporary, often violent, theme.

vocalise A musical composition consisting of the singing of melody with vowel sounds or nonsense syllables rather than text, as for special effect in classical compositions, in polyphonic jazz singing by special groups, or in virtuoso vocal exercises.

volume A description of how loud or soft a sound is.

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