

INTRODUCTION TO OPERA

This lesson should be given by the teacher at the beginning of the school year.

Objectives: the students will be able to define opera and to understand the following vocabulary: *libretto, librettist, score, composer, recitative, chorus and aria*. They will be able to use these words in appropriate context in discussion. They will also understand the word “*minimal*” as it applies to opera as well as “*repetition*.”

The class will watch two 5-minute segments of professional and children’s opera.

Approximate lesson length: 40 minutes – can be divided into several days.

Materials needed: Utah Festival Opera Highlights DVD and DVD player; chalk and chalkboard.

Cross-curricular objectives: Language Arts

You will need the Children’s Opera Highlights DVD

Process: Ask the students if any of them have ever been to an opera. Say “If I say the word *opera* what do you think of? Get several responses. Explain that many people have never attended opera and that to be enjoyed, it must be understood. Explain that your class is going to learn about opera so they will enjoy creating one of their own.



Explain that an opera is similar to a play, but all of the words are sung. They could think of it like a movie where all the characters sing instead of talk. Ask the students a question by singing it instead of speaking and ask them to respond by singing the answer. Ask them to “sing” to you something funny or sad that happened to them. Have them notice the differences in the way they naturally sing with different emotions. Explain that music and songs bring appropriate moods and excitement to a play. Ask students if they have ever noticed how music plays a part in a movie. The music can tell you if the scene is spooky or exciting, sad or happy.

Opera is a very old art form that started in Europe nearly 400 years ago. Even though opera has changed a lot since then and new operas continue to be written, we still enjoy the old ones. Their opera is something they will enjoy even when they are adults. It will be uniquely their own.

Libretto Libretti

Write the word libretto on the chalkboard. Explain that libretto is the name given to mean the words the singers sing in an opera. Tell the children that a libretto looks just like a play, but instead of the words being read, they will be sung.

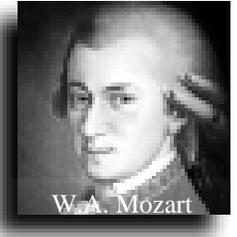
Explain that a librettist is the person who writes the libretto. Write it on the board. Tell them that they will be librettists when they have finished the story because they are going to write it themselves.

Vocabulary

Musical Score
Composer
Aria
Chorus
Recitative
Minimal



Write the word *musical score* on the board. Ask the students what a score is. Show them a completed piece of music from an opera. Write *composer* on the board. Ask the students what a composer is. Tell them that the composer is the person who makes up tunes to which to sing their words. Tell them that they will be composers before they are finished with their music. The students will make up the melodies to the words they will write, and a music specialist will create a musical score with accompaniment for their opera.



Here are more terms you will need to teach the students:

Song: Is a relatively short musical composition for the human voice which features words (lyrics). It is typically for a solo singer, though may also be a duet, trio, or for more voices (works with more than one voice to a part, however, are considered choral). The words of songs are typically of a poetic, rhyming nature. The lines of songs usually have a repeating rhythmic character, as well. Song and Aria are sometimes used interchangeably in children's original opera. The most important thing to remember is that a song or an aria is entirely different from recitative that characteristically has neither rhyme nor rhythm.

Aria: A song that is sung in an opera usually by one person.

Chorus: A song for a large group to sing together. Choruses are extremely important in all opera, especially a children's opera. It will include many of the students singing at once. Choruses are more easily heard and understood by the audience. They can often be the funniest or scariest part of the entire opera. Encourage the students to include many choruses. *Arias and choruses do not have to rhyme, but should have a sense of rhythm.*

Tell the children that they should try to think of these things as they are writing their story. They should watch for important places in the story – usually where the action needs to stop and explain a little more deeply what a character is thinking or feeling, or what is going on – and insert arias or choruses in those places.

Recitative: “Sung as if spoken.” That means that it is sung in a way that most nearly represents the normal conversation between characters on the stage. They are speaking back and forth to each other. Recitative should never rhyme (unless quite by accident), does not need rhythm, and does need to be **very, very short sentences**. Recitative is important but must be kept to a minimum. It can become very boring if there is too much of it.

Minimal: As little as possible! In an opera, long sentences are hard to understand and hard to act out. This is especially true in the recitative sections of the opera. Arias and Choruses can be longer. They should always be thinking of how to say something in the least number of words.

Repetition: In all opera...adult or student composed... repetition is an important tool. Audiences like to hear things sung more than once. They understand the words better the

second time and they like to hear the melodies over again. They should think of places where they can sing an aria or chorus again (or even again and again!) Repetition makes opera fun.

Show the students the two opera videos. The first one, UFO's Highlights from Die Fledermaus and Magic Flute, is of the operas being performed by professionals on the Ellen Eccles Stage in 2002. The second video, UFO's Opera for Children by Children Highlights from 2002, is of children performing on the same stage.

Ask the questions below:

Could you identify the libretto, the score, arias, choruses, and recitative? Did they both have all of those things? Were they both "minimal" in the recitative sections? Did you hear repetition?

Was the children's opera a real opera? Were they the same in all the important ways? (Answer: yes!)

Tell the children that they will be **librettists, and composers** as well as **actors and singers, set designers, and stage directors** before this is over.

At the end of the lesson, compliment the children on their attentiveness. Compliment them on any contributions that they have made during the lesson. Tell them that they have within them the ability to write stories, to make up music and to have a wonderful time and that you are all going to do this together! This is going to be **their** opera.



Assign each student to begin his/her own Opera Journal. Ask them to copy the words that you have written on the board, and to define them; then have them draw a picture illustrating what each term means to them.

Tell the students these books will be for them to keep forever, and **you will not be giving them a grade** on their work in the journal. It is part of their creative exercise. There is no right or wrong way to do the journal. Encourage them to write their own definitions and to draw their own pictures. You may collect these later to determine who did not understand what you were discussing. In a later lesson, go over those items and prepare a way to teach them again without singling out a child.

Evaluation: After the lesson, list the things that were more difficult for the children to understand and to respond to. Make a list of terms that they may not have understood and prepare to use them again the next time you are working on the opera. Notice which children were not paying attention and not involved. Plan to give those children special assignments for the next opera class, such as passing out the books, turning on the overhead projector; something to make them feel important.

Focus on objectives that may be accomplished by integrating the opera into core curricula.

<p style="text-align: center;">USOE Language Arts Core Objectives - Reading</p> <p>Standard 1, Objective 1 The students will assimilate new ideas introduced through pictures and print.</p> <p>Standard 4, Objective 2 The students will build a reading vocabulary</p>

