



WHAT IS OPERA? A TEAM!

CLASSROOM GUIDE



HISTORY

Opera was invented in Florence, Italy about the year 1600, over 400 years ago. A group of artists, musicians, poets and philosophers gathered in a grand room in one of their friend's homes and formed what they called the **Florentine Camerata**. Through their discussions, they created musical experiments that combined sung melody with stories from ancient Greece. They wanted to create art in which the story's words could be understood and the emotions of the characters were clearly reflected in the music. In a simple sense, these Florentines were looking for a way to create powerful and moving art together, combining their talents in music, poetry, philosophy and more – and opera was born! **Opera** is a musical story onstage that includes pretending/acting, a great storyline, dance or movement, visual art, and especially – emotional music. Now there is opera in many languages all over the world, including English, Spanish, German, French, Chinese, Russian, and more. Operas can be created from any kind of story, and are still being composed today – even in Baltimore!



VOCABULARY

Opera

Italian or Latin word meaning “work,” both in the sense of effort or labor done and the result it produces, like an art work.

Camerata

A made-up word to describe friends that met together (like a club) in a “camera,” which is just the Italian word for “room.”



FUN FACTS

One of the members of the Florentine Camerata was Vincenzo Galilei, father of the famous astronomer Galileo Galilei!

The first opera written that we still have today was titled *Euridice*, by Jacopo Peri (music) and Ottavio Rinuccini (words). Jacopo Peri sang the lead role when it was performed in 1600. The opera included chorus, solo, and spoken parts and is derived from the story of Orpheus and Euridice from Greek mythology.



Opera singers Christopher Bozeka (left), Kevin Short (center) and Brian James Myer (right) in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*.



ACTIVITY: WATCH TODAY'S OPERA TEAMS

Here are some clips of opera made by professional teams today. Remember, there is opera all over the world in lots of languages, so sometimes we use supertitles, like movies, to know what is going on.

In this American opera called *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* by Terence Blanchard, the character Charlie is on a journey to overcome a lifetime of trauma and hardship, singing “Bend, Don’t Break,” the same words a dance team/chorus sings later in the show. (3 mins)

“Bend, Don’t Break” solo



“Bend, Don’t Break” dance team/chorus



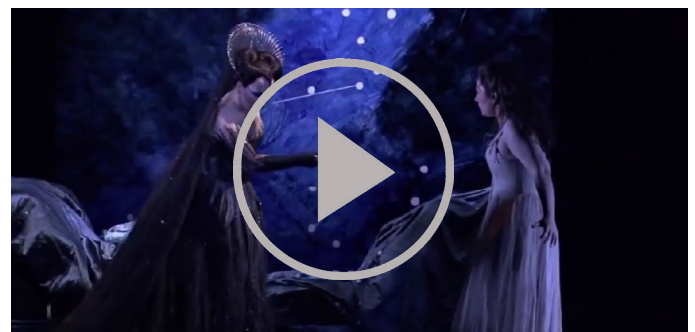
This is a selection from a French opera called *Carmen* that takes place in Spain. It’s a dark tragedy about a very toxic relationship. This is a clip of a proud bull fighter showing off and entertaining the crowd with a story about his dramatic fights. This opera team used a real horse on stage! (5 mins)



This is a clip from an Italian opera called *Gianni Schicchi* – a comedy, making fun of greedy people who are fighting over an inheritance. In this scene, Gianni (pronounced like “Johnny”) arrives to see a group of relatives very upset that they were left no money when their uncle died. Gianni makes fun of them and is about to take his daughter home, when she stops him, saying that she is in love with one of the nephews, Rinuccio. She begs her father to help her find a way to marry Rinuccio and help his relatives at the same time. (5 mins).



This is an opera in German called *The Magic Flute* – a fantasy story with strange characters that tell epic stories about love, truth and deception. In this clip, the evil Queen of the Night is trying to force her daughter to kill someone! She intimidates her with lots of high notes and harsh words – and her daughter is distraught. Pay attention to the wild makeup and costumes! (3 mins)





ACTIVITY: MAKE A MINI OPERA!

Create your *camerata*! (Remember, a *camerata* is just an Italian word for a group of people working together in a room toward the same goal). Today, we would probably just call ourselves a team! Find a group of at least 5 friends that have a range of interests to create your opera.

You will need the following:

- a. **Presenter** – a person/people who will read or present your opera. This can be spoken or sung – solo or in a group! Your choice!
- b. **Writer** – a person/people who will write or chose your opera's story. Take a look in a collection of short stories or poems for inspiration, or reenact a story from your own life.
- c. **Visual Artist** – a person to plan out the lights/camera/action part of your story. What will be in the background? Will there be costumes or lighting changes? Are you going to video record your opera?
- d. **Movement/Dance Choreographer** – a person to include movement or dance in your story. Is there a dance break? Or will the main character move in a certain way to tell the story? This can be as simple as a head turn or arm movement or as complex as a ballet! Or, some operas don't have dance! It's up to you!
- e. **Music Director/Performer** – a person/people to lay down the track! Do you know someone who plays an instrument? Or a DJ that can play wordless tunes underneath the story read/sung by the Presenter? Maybe a person plays drums or is a great beatboxer! There are no rules, make your own music, but make sure it supports the feelings in the story.

Once you have your team players identified – have fun! Try this order of operations to create your mini opera:

- a. **Choose a story with your team that speaks to you all.** Look in a book of stories, a collection of poetry, online, or write your own story. Need help? Look **HERE** for middle and highschool poetry or **HERE** for elementary poetry.
- b. Have the **Presenter** read the story aloud and decide on the important or most emotional parts.
- c. Have the **Musical Director** select and play musical accompaniment (tracks, instruments, humming, anything) and try to intensify the music when those important emotional parts happen in the story.
- d. Run the story and music at the same time, with the **Choreographer** and **Visual Artist** taking notes about how their components can be incorporated.
- e. **Add these elements to the next rehearsal** of your opera (these elements maybe as simple as a group hand clap or step, positioning presenters around the room in a cool way, wearing matching hats, turning the room lights off and using flashlights only, or a backdrop drawn on a whiteboard).
- f. **Next, perform your opera for the class!** Focus on sharing your story in a powerful, effective way so your audience gets the message, whether is a true story, a ghost story, a made-up fantasy or something in between!
- g. **Lastly, talk about it!** What did your audience think the message of your opera was? Was it funny or scary or inspiring? Would you have done something differently the next time? Feel free to keep working on your creation, record it, share it with others, or try a new story! YOU are the creators of you own ARTWORK, also known as OPERA!



POST-SHOW ACTIVITY: FAN MAIL!

Using the words provided in the word bank below, write a fan letter to the performers from *WHAT IS OPERA? A TEAM!* What did you like most? What did the music sound like? Did the singers use props or costumes to help tell the stories? What new things did you learn about opera? You can also draw your favorite part of the performance. Give the letter or drawing to your teacher to send back to Opera Baltimore.

WORD BANK

Pretending
Stories
Dance

Visual Art
Emotional Music
Singing

Opera
Stage
Teamwork

E-mail your fan letters to education@operabaltimore.org