



West Bay Opera Association
The Holt Building
221 Lambert Avenue
Palo Alto, Ca. 94306



CLASSROOM STUDY MATERIAL

For before the

WEST BAY OPERA ASSEMBLY PERFORMANCE

Please use the material below to prepare your students for the assembly. Any preparation you provide the students will enhance their enjoyment and appreciation of the performance. A glossary of opera terminology is given below.

What is opera? Opera is a story which is sung to music. The stories are often very dramatic, sometimes sad, and sometimes funny. It is the most complicated of all the arts, because it is a combination of all of them. The performers must have beautiful singing voices and must be able to act as well. Since operas have been written by people all over the world, the singers must learn many different languages. Besides the singing, operas require an orchestra of musicians - - also there must be talented people to create the stage scenery, props, lighting, and sound effects, as well as costumes, makeup, and wigs for all the performers.

In opera, people are often singing about what they are “thinking”. This is very difficult to do in a play. One of the unique things in opera is that several people can be singing at their separate thoughts at the same time. This is impossible in a spoken play.

People started writing what we call “opera” almost 400 years ago! As it became more and more popular, special buildings were built for the productions. Since there was no television or radio, it was a popular meeting place for the townspeople, and most of them could learn the music and sing it in the streets.

These days’ complete operas are occasionally shown on television, and there are subtitles or supertitles in English for those of us who don’t understand the language being sung. Operas are also available on video tape for home enjoyment.

What are the different types of songs in opera?

Aria:	A song sung by one person.
Duet:	A song sung by two people at the same time.
Trio:	A song sung by three people at the same time.
Quartet:	A song sung by four people at the same time.

What are the different types of voices in opera?

Soprano:	A woman's high voice.
Mezzo Soprano	A woman's medium voice/
Contralto:	A woman's low voice.
Tenor:	A man's high voice,
Baritone:	A man's medium voice.
Bass:	A man's low voice.

What kind of stories are in opera? Some operas are very dramatic and may even have a sad ending, and some operas are comedies. Some opera stories are about imaginary gods and goddesses, and more modern ones are often based on the lives of real people and real events.

What is an Accompanist? An accompanist is a person who plays the piano so that a singer can sing along with the music. He/she takes the place of an orchestra.

What is an Overture? An overture is a musical introduction to an opera. There is no singing during the overture, although it often introduces melodies which will be heard later in the opera.

What is Recitative? (Pronounced re-shi-ta-teev) Recitative is singing that sounds half-way between ordinary speech and pure singing. The words are sung in a rising and falling rhythm, as in speaking. In a full opera, it is usually used to enact the story in between the arias or songs. Arias are usually melodic and pretty, but their words are often poetic and usually do not tell the story.

What is the Set? A set is the name given to the make-believe surroundings for a play or opera. The set is created by a set designer. Often it involves special lighting as well which is created by the lighting designer. West Bay Opera cannot bring elaborate sets into your school, so the students must use their imagination. (See costumes.)

What are costumes? Costumes are the clothes worn by singers and actors on stage. Costumes are designed by a costume designer. The set designer and the costume designer work together to design sets and costumes that will be coordinated in style and fit in with the time period in which the story of the opera takes place.

What is a “Pants” role? The role of a young boy is often sung by a mezzo-soprano, since a young boy’s voice would not be strong enough. The mezzo’s voice is slightly lower than that of a soprano.

What is a “patter” song? A patter song is a song with a lot of words sung to very fast music.

What is “coloratura”? A melody decorated with trills, grace notes, and technically difficult passages.

What are Properties or “Props”? Props are objects used on stage by singers or actors other than the set or costumes; for example, a broom or a glass of water. Everything that happens on stage is make-believe. If the prop is something dangerous, like a gun or sword, it will have been made unusable. The sword edge is dulled and the gun barrel will have been filled up with putty.

In what languages are operas sung? Most operas these days are sung in the language in which they were originally written, usually German, Italian, or French. Many Russian and Czech operas are also being performed in current times in their original language. The operas that were written in English are performed in English. West Bay Opera will present their “mini-operas” to you in English, even though they were written in other languages.

What is a supernumerary? A supernumerary (or super) is a person who has a small acting, non-singing, part in an opera and usually serves as a volunteer, without pay, just for the love of being part of the show. In West Bay Opera’s school program which you’re going to see, some of your classmates will be “supers”.

What are supertitles and subtitles? These are the words of the story in English which are projected on to a screen above or to the side of the scenery as the performers sing. This is to help the audience to understand the story more clearly, since most operas are sung in a foreign language. When opera is shown on TV, the words are at the bottom of the screen and are called subtitles. To get the most enjoyment from an opera, the audience should also read the libretto (story) at home before attending the opera.

Do opera lovers like every opera? Definitely not. Just like watching movies and TV shows people like some and not others. There are so many different types of operas that people are bound to have favorite ones and maybe not care for some at all. There are many different styles of music and types of stories from which to choose. So one should be adventurous and listen to a variety.