

Agrippina

A Guide for Educators



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Paula Kudacki/Metropolitan Opera

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM *AGRIPPINA*

LYING, CHEATING, MURDER ... THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE MOTHERLY LOVE. THE Roman noblewoman Agrippina was a helicopter parent for the ages. Glamorous, conniving, and desperate to see her son crowned emperor, she seduced, swindled, or simply dispatched anyone who stood in her way, and within a few years of her death, she had already become the stuff of legend. Roman writers wove endlessly colorful yarns about her, sprinkling her real-life exploits with deliciously dark details as readily as Agrippina (supposedly) sprinkled her enemies' entrees with poison. All in all, her life could be boiled down to a single question: What *wouldn't* you do for power?

Yet the composer George Frideric Handel and his librettist, Vincenzo Grimani, saw in Agrippina's story much more than ruthlessness and cruelty: Amid the backstabbing and betrayal, they found the seeds of a story that could be very funny, too. Embracing the many competing romances at the story's heart, they crafted a work that is as much soap opera as opera, as much sardonic farce as scorching social critique. "It is an intelligent piece," director Sir David McVicar observes. "It is a scathing piece. It is very funny. And it tells a universal story, which is: People in high office often behave very, very badly to get there." In order to highlight the story's universality, McVicar has transported *Agrippina* from the first century to the twenty-first. As it turns out, the modern Roman Empire would be instantly recognizable, wickedly funny, and terrifyingly real.

This guide presents *Agrippina* as a window onto three different historical times and places: imperial Rome (where the story takes place), 18th-century Venice (where the opera was written), and the present day (when McVicar's production is set). The materials on the following pages include a historical introduction to Agrippina and her family, a musical introduction to Baroque opera, biographical information on Handel and his collaborators, and classroom activities designed to bring *Agrippina's* music and story to life. By delving into the opera's music, poetry, and drama, this guide will forge interdisciplinary classroom connections, inspire critical thinking, and help students investigate how these three eras differ—and how they might be very much the same.

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THE WORK:

AGRIPPINA

An opera in three acts, sung in Italian
Music by George Frideric Handel
Libretto by Vincenzo Grimani
First performed December 26, 1709,
at the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo,
Venice, Italy

PRODUCTION

Harry Bicket, Conductor
Sir David McVicar, Production
John Macfarlane, Set and Costume
Designer
Paule Constable, Lighting Designer
Andrew George, Choreographer

STARRING

Brenda Rae
POPPEA

Joyce DiDonato
AGRIPPINA

Kate Lindsey
NERONE

Iestyn Davies
OTTONE

Matthew Rose
CLAUDIO

This production was originally created
by the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie /
De Munt Brussels and adapted by the
Metropolitan Opera

Production a gift of Dunard Fund USA

Agrippina, HWV 6, edited for the
hallische Händel-Ausgabe by John
E. Sawyer. Used by arrangement with
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ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



Johnathan Tichler/
Metropolitan Opera

The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world.

The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, with its first opera house built on Broadway and 39th Street by a group of wealthy businessmen who wanted their own theater. In the company's early years, the management changed course several times, first performing everything in Italian (even *Carmen* and *Lohengrin*), then everything in German (even *Aida* and *Faust*), before finally settling into a policy of performing most works in their original language.

Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the opera house on 39th Street did not have adequate stage facilities. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September of 1966, was equipped with the finest technical facilities of the day.

Each season the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York. More than 800,000 people attend the performances in the opera house during the season, and millions more experience the Met through new media distribution initiatives and state-of-the-art technology.

This guide includes a variety of materials on Handel's *Agrippina*.

- **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Agrippina***
- **A Timeline:** The historical context of the opera's story and composition
- **A Closer Look:** A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Handel's *Agrippina*
- **Guided Listening:** A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses
- **10 Essential Musical Terms:** Musical terminology that will help students analyze and describe Handel's work
- **Student Critique:** A performance activity highlighting specific aspects of this production, and topics for a wrap-up discussion following students' attendance
- **Further Resources:** Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Agrippina*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds and seeks to encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.

In particular, this guide will offer in-depth introductions to:

- The historical figures of Agrippina, Claudius, and Nero, and the ancient sources through which we know about their lives and deeds
- The structure and style of Baroque opera
- The political motivations behind both Vincenzo Grimani's libretto and David McVicar's staging
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

A scene from *Agrippina*
Antoni Bofill / Liceu



SUMMARY

When the Roman empress Agrippina hears that her husband, the emperor Claudio, has died in a shipwreck, she is overjoyed. Now she can finally make Nerone, her son from a previous marriage, Rome's new emperor. There's just one catch: Claudio isn't actually dead. Although his ship did, indeed, sink, Claudio was pulled from the stormy sea by a soldier named Ottone—and in recognition of this heroic act, Claudio has promised to make Ottone emperor of Rome. Suddenly, Nerone seems farther than ever from the throne.

Agrippina is undaunted by this setback. She knows that Claudio and Ottone are both in love with a beautiful noblewoman named Poppea, and she quickly concocts a scheme that will pit the two men against each other until they are both ruined. At first, Claudio, Ottone, and Poppea all fall for Agrippina's lies. But soon Poppea begins to question the stories Agrippina is telling her, and as Poppea uncovers Agrippina's wicked plot, she figures out a way not only to get even but also to ensure a "happily ever after" ending for everyone concerned.



A scene from *Agrippina*
Antoni Bofill / Liceu

THE SOURCE: AN ORIGINAL LIBRETTO BY VINCENZO GRIMANI, LOOSELY BASED ON TACITUS'S *ANNALS OF IMPERIAL ROME*

The Roman writer and politician Tacitus was born around 56 CE, during the reign of Emperor Nero, and died sometime after 117, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. In between, he enjoyed a prestigious political career with appointments across the sprawling Roman empire. His writings on Roman history thus offer modern scholars a remarkable resource: a contemporary perspective on first-century Roman politics by somebody intimately involved in the major events of the day. Tacitus's *Histories*, a monumental work that originally covered the years 68 CE through 96 CE, has mostly been lost; only the years 68 and 69 survive. By contrast, his *Annals of Imperial Rome*, which stretch from 4 CE (during the reign of Rome's first emperor, Augustus) to 68 CE (the date of Nero's death), have come down to modern readers almost completely intact. As such, the exquisitely detailed *Annals*—the name comes from *annus*, the Latin word for “year”—are the primary historical record of Agrippina's dubious exploits.

The image of Agrippina that emerges from the *Annals* is that of a depraved, vindictive, and power-hungry woman. According to Tacitus, she poisoned her stepson, her second and third husbands, and one of Nero's potential rivals; forced a Roman consul to commit suicide; and had the emperor Caligula's ex-wife executed when it looked like Claudius might marry her instead of Agrippina. As proof of Agrippina's no-holds-barred attitude toward getting and keeping power, Tacitus also outlined her romantic conquests, which included her uncle (and later husband) Claudius, her late sister's husband, and her son, Nero.

Baroque opera often featured tales and figures from antiquity, especially ancient Greece and Rome, and Agrippina and Nero's delightfully depraved story was an audience favorite almost from the genre's inception. In 1643, only six years after the world's first public opera performance, Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* detailed Nero's disastrous extramarital affair with the noblewoman Poppaea Sabina. By the time Handel and Grimani set about writing *Agrippina*, more than a dozen other operas about *Agrippina* and Nero had already been composed—including Handel's own German-language opera *Nero*, from 1705.

The story's appeal for librettist Vincenzo Grimani was thus obvious: As the owner of Venice's San Giovanni Grisostomo theater, where *Agrippina* premiered, Grimani had a vested financial interest in the opera's success. Yet there may have been more to Grimani's decision to set this salacious Roman story than pure financial gain. In addition to running a theater, Grimani was an ambassador to the Habsburg Empire, a political powerhouse centered in Vienna and a longstanding enemy of the Papal States, and Grimani took no pains to disguise his antipathy toward Pope Clement XI. It has therefore been suggested that *Agrippina*, an opera about political corruption in ancient Rome, was a barely disguised stab at the pope and his entourage in the 18th-century incarnation of that same city.



A modern sculpture of Tacitus that decorates the parliament building in Vienna, Austria

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

The imperial palace in ancient Rome

Agrippina sits in her dressing room holding a letter. The message is tragic—Agrippina’s husband, the Roman emperor Claudio, has died in a shipwreck—but Agrippina is bursting with joy: Now she has a chance to make Nerone, her son from a previous marriage, the emperor of Rome. She already has a plan to secure Nerone the crown, but she warns him that he must follow her instructions to the letter. Nerone promises to do anything she says.

Agrippina knows that any emperor will need support from Rome’s politicians, so she approaches the courtier Pallante, slyly tells him about Claudio’s death, and says she will marry him if he nominates Nerone as emperor. Pallante happily agrees. Next, Agrippina approaches the courtier Narciso and makes him a similar offer, promising to marry him if he supports Nerone’s bid for the throne. Narciso, too, agrees. Agrippina is now engaged to two different men, but she has no intention of marrying either of them. In fact, she’ll lie to anyone if it means helping her son.

The Capitoline hill

Outside the Capitol (the government building in Rome), Nerone distributes money to the city’s poor. Pallante and Narciso praise his generosity and, declaring that his kindness qualifies him to lead Rome, nominate him for emperor. But just as Agrippina is about to place the crown on Nerone’s head, trumpets are heard, and Claudio’s servant, Lesbo, arrives with shocking news: Claudio is alive! Although his ship did, indeed, sink, Claudio was saved from drowning by the soldier Ottone. Obviously, this means that Nerone can’t become emperor, which annoys Agrippina. But an even greater shock is still to come, when the heroic Ottone enters and announces that Claudio has decided to reward his bravery by naming him Rome’s next emperor.

Agrippina is dumbstruck, but she hides her fury well—so well, in fact, that Ottone pulls her aside and tells her a secret: He is in love with the noblewoman Poppea. Agrippina immediately sees a new opportunity for mischief because she knows that someone else is also in love with Poppea: her husband, the emperor, Claudio.

Poppea’s house

Poppea eagerly awaits Ottone’s return. Although Claudio and Nerone have both declared they love her, Poppea loves only the humble soldier Ottone. Soon, there is a knock at the door. Agrippina enters. She says that Ottone has decided to trade Poppea for political power, offering to let Claudio have her if he (Ottone) can be emperor. Agrippina’s story is a lie, but Poppea believes her, and she even takes Agrippina’s advice on how to deal with Ottone and Claudio. That evening, when Claudio visits Poppea, she sends him away, explaining (as Agrippina instructed) that Ottone has ordered her never to see him again. Furious, Claudio declares he will never let Ottone be emperor—which, of course, is exactly what Agrippina wants.

ACT II

The Capitoline hill

Agrippina, Poppea, Ottone, and Nerone have gathered to celebrate Claudio’s return to Rome. Claudio reflects that the whole world is falling to its knees before Rome’s might and imagines a bright future for his empire. Hearing this, Ottone asks Claudio about his promise to make him emperor. Claudio flies into a rage and accuses Ottone of treachery. Ottone has no idea what Claudio is talking about, and he feels hurt and confused.

Poppea, meanwhile, still can't understand why Ottone would betray her. She is sure there is more to the situation than meets the eye, so when she sees Ottone approaching, she decides to find out the truth. Pretending to be asleep, she begins murmuring about how Ottone traded her for the crown of Rome. Ottone can't believe his ears. He asks Poppea where she heard such vile lies. Together, they realize that Agrippina has tricked everyone, and they figure out that she must be doing it to put Nerone on the throne. Poppea promises to give Agrippina a taste of her own medicine and clear Ottone's name. She soon comes up with a plan, and when Claudio and Nerone each express a desire to see her that evening, she invites them both to visit her at home.

Agrippina realizes that Poppea has stopped following her orders, but she thinks she still has three people—Claudio, Pallante, and Narciso—under her control. One by one, she approaches them and asks them to kill Ottone. Pallante and Narciso have already figured out that Agrippina tricked them, and they avoid answering, but Claudio readily agrees.

ACT III

Poppea's house

Nerone arrives at Poppea's house looking forward to their tryst, but Poppea says she is worried about them being found together and forces Nerone to hide in her closet. A few minutes later, Claudio shows up. Instead of welcoming him, Poppea asks why he hasn't punished the person who tried to keep them apart. Claudio says he did punish Ottone, but Poppea, feigning surprise, replies that it wasn't Ottone demanding her love—it was Nerone. As proof, she opens the closet door to reveal Claudio's stepson.

The imperial palace

Nerone flees Poppea's house and runs to his mother for sympathy. Agrippina, however, is furious when she hears how Nerone allowed his crush on Poppea to jeopardize their plans. Nerone promises to forget Poppea and focus instead on the throne.

Claudio, meanwhile, wonders what is really going on. He knows someone is lying to him, but is it Poppea? Nerone? Ottone? Or could it be Agrippina? Soon he bumps into Narciso and Pallante, who tell him how Agrippina attempted to use the report of Claudio's death to get Nerone crowned emperor. Claudio finally recognizes Agrippina's treachery. He is understandably angry, but Agrippina tells him that if he truly wants to have a peaceful empire, he must banish anger from his own heart. Claudio apologizes to Ottone and declares that Ottone will be emperor and Nerone will marry Poppea. No one is happy with this solution. Ottone explains that he has no interest in becoming emperor; all he wants is Poppea. Claudio finally understands that love is more important to Ottone than power, while Nerone cares only for the throne, so he issues a new decree: Poppea will marry Ottone, and Nerone will be the new emperor of Rome.

VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO

the highest voice type, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO

the voice type lying below the soprano and above the contralto; the term comes from the Italian word "mezzo," meaning "middle"

CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice type, also called "alto"

TENOR

the highest standard voice type in adult males

BARITONE

the voice type lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS

the lowest voice type

WHO'S WHO IN AGRIPPINA

Character		Pronunciation Guide	Voice Type	The Lowdown
Agrippina	Claudio's wife and Nerone's mother	ah-greep- PEE-nah	Mezzo-soprano	Agrippina is desperate to get her son crowned emperor—whatever it takes.
Claudio (Claudius)	Emperor of Rome, married to Agrippina but in love with Poppea	KLOW*-dee-yoh <i>*rhymes with "plow"</i>	Bass	Claudio may be the most powerful person in the Roman empire, but when it comes to trickery and cleverness, he is no match for his wife, Agrippina.
Nerone (Nero)	Agrippina's son from a previous marriage, in love with Poppea	neh-ROH-nay	Countertenor / Mezzo-soprano	Although his mother is empress, Nerone is not the son of the emperor and thus has no real claim to the throne. But that won't keep him from trying ...
Ottone (Otho)	A soldier, in love with Poppea	oht-TOH-nay	Countertenor	A humble yet heroic soldier, Ottone wants nothing more than to marry his beloved Poppea. But when he accidentally gets on Agrippina's bad side, it will take everything in his and Poppea's power to find their "happily ever after" ending.
Poppea (Poppaea)	A noblewoman, in love with Ottone	pop-PAY-yuh	Soprano	Poppea is beautiful and clever. Even though she initially falls for Agrippina's lies, she soon finds a way to get even and get her man.
Pallante (Pallas)	Courtiers	pahl-LAHN-tay	Bass	Agrippina thinks she can easily manipulate Pallante and Narciso and use them to help make Nerone emperor.
Narciso (Narcissus)		nahr-CHEE-zoh	Countertenor	

- **1685** George Frideric Handel is born on February 23 in Halle, a city in central Germany. His father, a physician at the court of Saxony, hopes Handel will grow up to be a lawyer and actively discourages his son's interest in music. Little Handel, however, is not deterred: According to an early biography, he secretly practices harpsichord in the attic.
- **c.1694** The Duke of Saxony hears Handel, age nine, playing organ, and he convinces Handel's father to procure a musical education for the remarkably talented child.
- **1702** Handel enrolls in law school at the University of Halle. Yet he still hopes to pursue a career in music, and the provincial Halle will soon prove too small for his artistic needs. Around this time, Handel visits Berlin, where he likely meets two Italian opera composers working at the Prussian court.
- **1703** Handel moves to Hamburg, one of the major musical centers in northern Germany. He soon gets a job as a violinist and continuo player at the Hamburg Opera, the only "public" opera (i.e., that operates outside of a court setting) in Germany.
- **1705** On January 8, Handel's first opera, *Almira*, receives its premiere at the Hamburg Opera. Less than seven weeks later, on February 25, his second opera, *Nero*, debuts there, as well. In contrast to the operas he will write later in life, both *Almira* and *Nero* are in German.
- **1706** Handel travels to Italy. He soon takes up residence in Rome, where he enjoys the patronage of the nobility and clergy, as well as collaborations with many of the city's most famous musicians. Although Italy is the operatic capital of Europe, Handel writes no operas while in Rome, since opera performances have been banned by the pope. He does, however, compose a variety of sacred and secular works, many of which feature the same recitative-aria structure he will employ in his operas.
- **1707** Handel's first Italian opera, *Rodrigo*, premieres in Florence.
- **1708** In January, the Hamburg Opera performs two more of Handel's German-language operas. Handel likely returns to Hamburg for the occasion, although Italy remains his primary country of residence.

- **1709** Handel travels to Venice. The birthplace of public opera and one of Europe's wealthiest cities, Venice is the ideal location for a young composer seeking to make his name in the world of opera.

On December 26, *Agrippina* premieres at Venice's San Giovanni Grisostomo theater. The inaugural opera of the carnival season, it is an instant hit. According to Handel's first biographer, John Mainwaring, *Agrippina* enjoys 27 consecutive nights of performances—even though two other opera theaters are also open at the same time—and the auditorium is filled with shouts of "Viva il caro Sassone! ["Long live the dear Saxon!"], a reference to Handel's place of birth.

- **1710** Handel returns to Germany to take up a position as music director at the court of the Elector of Hannover.

- **1711** Handel's newest opera, *Rinaldo*, premieres in London to wild acclaim. Italian opera has been popular in London since around 1705, but most of these performances have been "pastiches," operas cobbled together from a variety of pre-existing works. *Rinaldo*, by contrast, is a newly composed opera by a single composer, and it establishes Handel as the king of Italian opera in London. Over the next three decades, Handel will write no fewer than 38 operas for the London stage.

- **1742** On April 13, Handel's oratorio *Messiah* premieres in Dublin. At this time, most music is composed for a specific occasion; after the intended performance, the composition is typically retired and never heard again. (The works of J.S. Bach, for instance, will languish in obscurity for nearly a century between the composer's death in 1750 and their revival in the middle of the 19th century.) *Messiah*, by contrast, is never retired. From 1743 on, Handel will conduct yearly charity performances of the work in London to great acclaim, and even after Handel's death, the oratorio is regularly performed. *Messiah* thus marks the first piece of classical music to remain in the performing repertoire from the time of its composition through the present day.

- **1759** Handel dies on April 14, only nine days after conducting his last performance of *Messiah*.

AGRIPPINA & NERO: RULERS OF ROME

c. 15 CE The Roman noblewoman Agrippina is born on November 6 in Cologne. As a granddaughter of Rome's first emperor, Agrippina boasts impeccable noble credentials, but as a woman, she will only ever be able to attain power through the men in her life.

28 Agrippina marries the nobleman Domitius.

37 Agrippina's brother Caligula is crowned emperor. On December 15, Agrippina's son Nero is born.

39 Accused of conspiring against Caligula, Agrippina is banished to the Pontian Islands, a small chain of islands some 70 miles west of Naples where the mythological Sirens were said to reside.

40 Agrippina's husband, Domitius, dies on the Italian mainland. Agrippina is still in exile.

41 Fed up with Caligula's tyranny, a group of soldiers and senators—including Caligula's uncle Claudius—hatches a plan to rid Rome of Caligula once and for all. While a theatrical performance takes place in the palace complex, Caligula is trapped in one of the palace's underground passageways and killed. Claudius takes the throne. Agrippina returns to Rome.

49 Claudius marries Agrippina, who also happens to be his niece. The following year, he officially adopts Agrippina's son, Nero.

53 Nero marries Claudius's daughter Octavia.

54 Claudius dies, allegedly after eating a mushroom that Agrippina had sprinkled with poison. Nero ascends the throne, yet contemporary historians claim that Agrippina is the one with real power, running the empire from the shadows while her son wears Rome's crown.

55 Claudius's biological son Britannicus dies; Nero is suspected of having him poisoned. This same year, Agrippina is accused of conspiring against Nero. She is acquitted.

59 Nero, annoyed by Agrippina's opposition to his love affair with Poppaea Sabina (who is already married to the future emperor Otho), decides to have Agrippina murdered. According to contemporary historians, Nero arranges to have his mother set sail in a faulty boat; when the boat collapses, Agrippina swims safely to shore—only to be murdered by Nero's henchmen when she gets there.

62 Nero falsely accuses his wife, Octavia, of having an affair. He divorces her, marries Poppaea, and then promptly has Octavia executed.

65 Poppaea dies, likely from a miscarriage, although it is rumored that her death is caused by a brutal beating from Nero.

68 Nero is overthrown in a coup. He escapes to his country villa, where he takes his own life.



Agrippina crowns Nero with a laurel wreath.
Relief statue excavated in Aphrodisias, Turkey

The Guided Listening Activities are designed to introduce students to a selection of memorable moments from the opera. They include information on what is happening dramatically, a description of the excerpt's musical style, and a roadmap of musical features to listen for. Guided Listening Activities can be used by students and teachers of varying levels of musical experience.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, teachers will need access to a recording of *Agrippina* and a libretto. The time stamps in the following activity correspond to: George Frideric Handel, *Agrippina*, conducted by René Jacobs, with the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, Alexandrina Pendatchanska, et al. (Harmonia Mundi, 2011).

"MA QUAL DI LIETE TROMBE" ... "ALLEGREZZA, ALLEGREZZA!" "AUGUSTA, AMO POPPEA" [DISC 1, TRACKS 12 AND 13]

Believing her husband, the emperor Claudio, has died at sea, Agrippina sets in motion her plan to put her son Nerone on the throne. When news suddenly arrives that Claudio has been rescued, however, Agrippina's plot begins to crumble—especially when Claudio's savior, the army commander Ottone, announces that Claudio has named him heir to the throne.

What to listen for:

- How Handel constructs the moments when characters are speaking to themselves (in secret asides) versus the moments when they are publicly faking joy at Claudio's survival
- The high pitches and unusual timbre of Ottone's voice (Ottone is sung by a countertenor, a common voice type in opera of Handel's era)

[Track 12]

- (00:00) Trumpets are heard offstage announcing Claudio's arrival on shore.
- (00:15) The trumpets gain in volume as Claudio approaches, soon becoming the accompaniment for Lesbo's excited declaration that Claudio has been rescued by Ottone.
- (00:57) Pallante, Narciso, Agrippina, and Nerone each express their secret despair at Claudio's return in breathless, half-whispered asides to the audience.
- (01:24) The harpsichord flourishes beneath Agrippina's recitative become more ostentatious as the empress puts on a show of public happiness.
- (01:44) The chorus joins in for a brief "hurrah" in response to the news.
- (02:06) A short, hushed choral phrase for the four dissenters (Pallante, Narciso, Agrippina, and Nerone) contrasts their private anguish with the general atmosphere of jubilation.

[Track 13]

- (00:00) Ottone arrives and tells Agrippina how he rescued her husband from the storm. Listen to the unique timbre of Ottone's countertenor voice.
- (01:16) Ottone reveals that Claudio has named him heir to the throne, setting off another round of furious asides from Agrippina, Pallante, Narciso and Nerone.
- (01:58) Nerone's cry of jealousy briefly overlaps with Agrippina's own aside, highlighting the impulsivity of their reactions: Nerone can't even wait for his mother to stop singing before bursting out in angry song!
- (02:33) Back-to-back-to-back reactions show off the variety in voice parts among Agrippina's pawns: Pallante, Narciso, and Nerone.
- (02:41) Ottone confesses his love for Poppea in an impassioned recitative, and Agrippina vows to help him.

"VAGHE PERLE, ELETTI FIORI" [DISC 1, TRACK 16]

Poppea knows that she is loved by Ottone, Claudio, and Nerone. And even though she loves only Ottone, she has craftily let both Claudio and Nerone believe that she reciprocates their affections. In "Vaghe perle, eletti fiori," the aria that introduces Poppea to the audience, she celebrates her beauty and her ability to manipulate the men who desire her.

What to listen for:

- How Handel employs the traditional A-B-A da capo aria structure, with extreme vocal ornamentation when the A section repeats
- How the short text repeats over and over, with the words stretched out and savored by Poppea

- (00:00) The aria begins with an instrumental introduction. Quick triplets in the flutes and violins suggest the winding strings of pearls that Poppea's text will describe.
- (00:26) From her opening line, as she praises her "precious pearls," Poppea luxuriates in her leisured lifestyle, taking her time on each word. The instruments get out of her way so she can enjoy this first moment unaccompanied.
- (00:57) Poppea's own triplet ornamentation on her vocal line supports the earlier orchestration in bringing her pearls to musical life.
- (01:32) The repeatedly falling vocal line sounds like a series of sighs, as Poppea imagines her potential conquests.
- (02:09) The melody of the aria's B section passes back and forth between Poppea and the various string instruments accompanying her, like a romantic duet.
- (02:57) Poppea's giddiness spills out in increasingly ornamented runs and trills as she repeats the A section.
- (04:14) The aria reaches its climax as Poppea delivers a mini-cadenza in the fleeting spaces between patches of accompaniment.

"CHE MAI FARÓ?" ... "O MIA LIBERATRICE" ... "NON HO COR CHE PER AMARTI" [DISC 2, TRACKS 5 AND 6]

Agrippina has persuaded Poppea to tell Claudio that Ottone is courting her, hoping to build up Claudio's jealousy against Ottone (whom Poppea actually loves) so he will revoke his promise to make Ottone his heir. When Claudio visits Poppea, she avoids his advances as best she can, but he won't take no for an answer. Agrippina intervenes just in time, and Claudio flees when he hears his wife is approaching. In the aria that follows, "Non ho cor che per amarti," Agrippina deceitfully reassures Poppea that she can be trusted and that her only goal is to be Poppea's loving friend.

What to listen for:

- Handel's comic treatment of Claudio's wooing of Poppea
- How the music of Agrippina's aria mimics the "tangled web" of deceit she weaves as she swears her loyalty to Poppea
- How specific instruments in Handel's orchestration clarify Agrippina's true intentions to the audience

[Track 5]

(00:00) Claudio threatens Poppea with rape, but his servant Lesbo runs in to announce that Agrippina is about to arrive. Bursts of recitative contrast Claudio's frustration, Lesbo's urgent announcement, and Poppea's relief.

(00:32) After Poppea feigns sadness over Claudio's need to escape, Poppea, Claudio, and Lesbo briefly break into a jaunty, intentionally silly trio, with Lesbo repeating over and over that his master needs to flee Poppea's chamber as quickly as possible.

(01:15) In a far more relaxed recitative, Poppea thanks Agrippina for liberating her from Claudio, and Agrippina promises to help Poppea.

[Track 6]

(00:00) In the stately introduction to Agrippina's aria, "Non ho cor che per amarti," in which she vows loyalty and friendship, the strings offer majestic reassurance.

(00:10) But this reassurance is soon undercut though weaving duets, first between a violin and cello and then between two oboes, suggesting the unreliable web of lies that Agrippina has been sneakily constructing.

(00:30) As Agrippina begins to sing, her repeated phrases are interrupted by the dueling instrumental perspectives: the cunning oboes and the sturdy string ensemble.

(01:18) Agrippina emphasizes her love for Poppea, repeating "a te" ("to you") over and over with extra oboe syrup. Her melodies begin to branch around each other just like her layered plots.

(01:50) The music of the introduction repeats in full to separate the A section and B section of this da capo aria.

(02:13) In the brisk B section, the only two words that Agrippina stretches out are "infedeltà" and arti," "infidelities" and "arts" (or "artifices"). Even while she swears that she's being faithful to Poppea, she can't help but relish the keywords of her villainy.

(02:47) Those sneaky oboes announce the repetition of the A section.

(02:54) This time around, Agrippina colors each of her phrases with excessive runs and trills, as if she is amping up her performance to ensure that she convinces Poppea of her sweetness.

(04:00) The music from the instrumental introduction returns one last time, reminding the audience once more of the contrast between who Agrippina really is and who she pretends to be.

"PENSIERI, VOI MI TORMENTATE" ... "QUEL CH'OPRAI È SOGGETTO" [DISC 3, TRACK 1]

Agrippina, her grand plot in peril, worries that the courtiers Pallante and Narciso know too much of her plans, and she fears that the traps laid for the general Ottone and his lover Poppea will backfire. In "Pensieri, voi mi tormentate," Agrippina confesses her anxieties to the audience in a rare moment of honesty, as she prays that her own cunning mind will come to her rescue. Handel here overturns the expectations for a traditional da capo aria, in which a primary (A) theme repeats with variations after a contrasting (B) theme. Here, after the expected A-B-A structure ends, Agrippina continues with a brief, calculating recitative before returning to the original A theme. Handel thus illustrates Agrippina's "restless mind" by allowing her thoughts to drift beyond the scope of the traditional aria structure.

What to listen for:

- The A-B-A da capo aria structure, and the return of the A theme following Agrippina's recitative
- The dialogue between the solo oboe and Agrippina's vocal line during each A section
- The contrast between the mournful, pensive A section and the determined B section

- (00:00) Dramatically thunderous strings introduce the aria, illuminating Agrippina's tortured state of mind.
- (00:30) A solo oboe immediately echoes Agrippina's keening vocal line then joins her in counterpoint. Agrippina sings a single word, "tormentate," for eleven measures, as if she cannot shake the overwhelming distress from her mind.
- (01:32) In the final phrase of the aria's A section, it becomes clear that this section of the aria will writhe around only four words ("Thoughts, you torment me").
- (02:09) The brief B section features a jolting change of tone and tempo, as Agrippina tries to shake away her fears, calling on heaven to support her and her son. In a new, jovial major key, the wailing oboe is replaced by buoyant brass.
- (02:39) Agrippina's mind betrays her, however, and her hopeful thoughts still lead her back to the same starting note and minor key where she began. Agrippina's repetition of the initial A theme is even more contemplative than the first iteration, with the oboe continuing to play a significant role as her companion in despair.
- (03:30) Agrippina punctuates her anguish with dissonant trills.
- (04:26) The end of the aria—or what seems like it should be the end—is unexpectedly followed by a recitative in which Agrippina recaps what has gone wrong and puts her faith in her own maniacal genius.
- (05:04) Suddenly, despite the standard A-B-A da capo aria form being long-since completed, Agrippina's original A theme comes back with more ornamentation (for Agrippina and her oboe sidekick) than ever: She still can't escape her anxieties, even as she starts to plan ahead. It's not a full A section, but it's enough to make clear that Agrippina hasn't successfully escaped the labyrinth of her own mind.

Aria

A self-contained piece for solo voice, usually accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting on their emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. Arias are not unique to opera, as they also appear in oratorios, cantatas, and other vocal genres.

Baroque

A designation for music and art produced approximately between the years 1600 and 1750. In music history, the beginning of the Baroque period coincides with the invention of opera as a genre, and its end coincides with the death of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. Originally, the word “baroque” was a term for oddly shaped pearls; it was first applied to music in the 1730s by critics who preferred a simpler, less ornamented style and thus found the intricate counterpoint of 17th-century music to be reminiscent of these bizarre natural gems.

Castrato

A male singer who underwent surgical castration before puberty and thus retained the vocal range of a young boy. Castrati performed both sacred and secular music for nearly 400 years—the earliest recorded castrati joined church choirs in the 1550s; the last known castrato died in 1922—but they reached their zenith in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, when they were commonly cast as the heroic male lead in operas.

Continuo

A form of harmonic accompaniment, also called “basso continuo,” used throughout the Baroque period. Continuo accompaniments are typically notated as a single line of bass notes, with small Arabic numerals indicating chords that will be

improvised by the performer. The instrumentation of a continuo accompaniment is also variable and can consist of one or more instruments; today, the continuo part in opera is typically played by harpsichord and cello, while the continuo part in sacred music is usually played by an organ. As the name implies, “continuo” (the term is related to the English word “continuous”) often occurs throughout Baroque works, but it is most easily heard in Baroque opera during sections of recitative, since recitative is usually accompanied by continuo alone.

Countertenor

The highest male vocal type, with a range equivalent to a female mezzo-soprano or soprano. Countertenors have the deep speaking voices typical of adult males, but they carefully train their falsetto (“head”) range so they can sing remarkably high lines of music. Today, countertenors often sing roles that were originally written for castrati.

Da capo aria

An aria that follows an A-B-A structure, with an opening “A” section; a contrasting “B” section; and a return of the complete “A” section, typically with added (improvised) ornamentation. The term “da capo,” which means “from the head” (or “from the top”), describes this return to the beginning of the piece. The da capo aria is the basic musical building block of Baroque opera.

Ornamentation

An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make the music more impressive and ornate. Ornamentation can either be indicated by the composer or improvised by the performer. In da capo arias, performers typically add a good deal of ornamentation when the A section returns.

Prima donna and primo uomo

Literally “first woman” and “first man,” the terms prima donna and primo uomo refer to the singers with the greatest number of arias in a Baroque opera. For instance, in *Agrippina*, Poppea has 11 discrete arias while Agrippina has only 8; thus, Poppea is the prima donna, while Agrippina, despite being the title character, is relegated to the status of seconda donna (“second lady”). Since opera stars were notoriously high-maintenance, the term prima donna later came to be applied to people who are demanding and self-centered, regardless of their gender or profession.

Recitative

A type of singing that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied by a single instrument (such as a harpsichord), a small ensemble, or the whole orchestra. The term is derived from an Italian verb meaning “to recite.”

Simile Aria

An aria that uses a simile or metaphor to describe how a character is feeling. Since simile arias efficiently express an emotional state without relying on particular details of an opera’s plot, Baroque composers often used the same simile aria in multiple operas.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the reproducible handout “Opera Review: *Agrippina*” found in the back of this guide.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *Agrippina*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE IN ATTENDING THE FINAL DRESS REHEARSAL

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. Performance activities help students analyze different aspects of the experience and engage critically with the performance. Students will consider the creative choices that have been made for the particular production they are watching and examine different aspects of the performance.

The enclosed performance activity is called “Opera Review: *Agrippina*.” The reproducible handout for this activity, available at the back of this guide, will invite students to think of themselves as opera critics, taking notes on what they see and hear during the performance and critiquing each singer and scene on a five-star scale. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. When you return to class, students can use their “Opera Review” sheets as they review and discuss their experience.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did they like? What didn't they like? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? This discussion should be an opportunity for students to review their performance activity sheets and express their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production, the singers' performances, and *Agrippina's* music and story.

Agrippina offers a terrific opportunity to explore the relationships between opera, narrative, performance, and history. Begin by asking the class a (seemingly) simple question: When does *Agrippina* take place? Students will likely come up with two answers: the first century (when the historical Agrippina lived), and the 21st century (when Sir David McVicar's production is set). In fact, both of these answers are not only valid but also essential to understanding this performance. The following questions will help clarify the distinction between these two answers and invite students to think more broadly about staging an opera:

- When did the real-life Agrippina live? (For more on Agrippina's life, see the sidebar *Agrippina and Nero: Rulers of Rome*.)
- When was the opera written?
- When Handel and Grimani wrote this opera, when did they intend for the story to take place?
- In Sir David McVicar's production at the Met, when does the story take place?
- Why did McVicar choose to set *Agrippina* in a different era than the one Handel and Grimani imagined? What statement(s) do you think he wanted to make about the modern world?
- Can you think of any politicians today who are putting their children in positions of power? Why might this be antithetical to the norms of a democratic society?
- What if somebody in the year 2420 watched this production? Would they understand the references? Why or why not?

Invite your students to imagine they have been hired to craft a new production of *Agrippina*. When would they set it? Why?

FURTHER RESOURCES

IN PRINT

Barrett, Anthony. *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

A scholarly biography of Agrippina, including an extensive family tree explaining the lineage of the Roman imperial family and a timeline with significant dates from Agrippina's life.

South, Emma. *Agrippina: The Most Extraordinary Woman of the Roman World*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2019.

An accessible biography that also examines the way Agrippina has been represented over the last two millennia.

Tacitus. *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Translated by Michael Grant. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

The primary historical source for Agrippina's exploits, written in the decades following her death.

ONLINE

"HANDEL - AGRIPPINA - Alexandrina Pendatchanska (Alex Penda) 'Non ho cor che per amarti.'" spotlightBG. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88NQaoi7ZKc&list=RD88NQaoi7ZKc&start_radio=1.

Watch Alexandrina Pendatchanska, René Jacobs, and the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin record the aria "Non ho cor che par amarti," with interspersed clips of Pendatchanska performing the aria onstage.

"Joyce DiDonato sings 'Pensieri, voi mi tormentate' (from Agrippina, HWV 6, Act 2)." Warner Classics. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v3MzJ7mqKU>.

Joyce DiDonato sings Agrippina's great aria at the Royal Opera House in London.

Maddocks, Fiona. "Joyce DiDonato: 'I'm trying to balance activism and joy!'" *The Guardian*, September 15, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/sep/15/joyce-didonato-interview-agrippina-royal-opera-house>.

An introduction to *Agrippina* star Joyce DiDonato, who discusses her career and philosophy as she prepares to sing Handel's opera at the Royal Opera House.

Reviewed by _____

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Agrippina*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design, and rate each of the star singers. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about Handel's opera and this performance at the Met!

THE STARS:	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Brenda Rae as Poppea	*****	
Joyce DiDonato as Agrippina	*****	
Kate Lindsey as Nerone	*****	
Iestyn Davies as Ottone	*****	
Matthew Rose as Claudio	*****	
Conductor Harry Bicket	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Agrippina learns of Claudio's death			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Agrippina asks Pallante and Narciso for help			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
An announcement: Claudio is alive!			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Ottone is amazed by his good fortune			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Poppea waits for Ottone			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Agrippina tells Poppea some terrible news			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Poppea rebuffs Claudio			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Agrippina and Poppea look forward to Ottone's punishment			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Everyone celebrates Claudio's return			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Ottone can't understand why Claudio is mad at him			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Poppea and Ottone figure out what Agrippina is up to			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Agrippina realizes her plan might not work out, after all			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Nerone and Claudio visit Poppea at her home			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Nerone decides to forget Poppea			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Agrippina tells Claudio he should forgive everyone			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The grand finale			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5