Le Nozze di Figaro

A Guide for Educators

Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO*

YOUR PHILANDERING BOSS HAS HIS EYE ON YOUR FIANCÉE. YOUR LONG-LOST MOTHER JUST appeared from nowhere. There's blackmail, an awkward teenager flirting with all the ladies, and a jilted wife whose woes are really getting you down. And on top of it all you're supposed to be getting married. What a crazy day! In 1784, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's play *The Marriage of Figaro* took Paris by storm. A gleeful whirlwind of unforgettable characters, witty one-liners, and fast-paced comedic situations steeped in the revolutionary ideals of the age, it was adored by audiences, feared by the aristocracy … and perfect fodder for two artists hoping to make their mark on Vienna's operatic scene. Yet what the Italian outlaw Lorenzo Da Ponte and the Austrian prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote two years later was not merely a musical rendition of Beaumarchais's acerbic play. Rather, they created a dazzling filigree of poetry and music, a timeless work reveling in the foibles and follies that make everyone—from a pigheaded Count to his clever valet—profoundly, hilariously human.

Given the complexity, precision, and perfect timing of *Le Nozze di Figaro's* story, it can hardly be surprising that Beaumarchais was also a watchmaker. The plot wends its way through a veritable maze of romantic entanglements, familial drama, and money-grubbing schemes. Richard Eyre's 2014 production, inspired by the exquisite Moorish architecture of southern Spain, crafts a deft solution to this narrative puzzle. As the wild events of Figaro's wedding day fill the count's castle, the Met's enormous stage rotates to reveal one room after another, slyly uncovering the fiendish machinations, incredible coincidences, and rapid plot twists that lead to the opera's madcap end.

This guide presents *Le Nozze di Figaro* as a complex narrative work in which the many elements of opera—music, poetry, costumes, and scenery—come together to tell a story. The following pages include biographical information on the composer, a short essay discussing the opera's socio-political context, plot summaries for young readers, and a guided listening exercise. The activities and information in this guide are intended to offer students tools for creatively engaging *Le Nozze di Figaro* before, during, and after the Final Dress Rehearsal performance. By inviting students to make connections between the opera, other classroom subjects, and their own life experiences, it will help students develop the confidence to engage with music and other performing arts even after they leave the theater itself.

THE WORK:

LE NOZZE DI FIGARO
An opera in four acts, sung in Italian
Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte
Based on the play *The Marriage of Figaro* by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais
First performed May 1, 1786, at the Burgtheater, Vienna, Austria

PRODUCTION
Antonello Manacorda, Conductor
Sir Richard Eyre, Production
Rob Howell, Set and Costume Designer
Paule Constable, Lighting Designer
Sara Erde, Choreographer

STARRING

Susanna Phillips
COUNTESS ALMAVIVA

Nadine Sierra
SUSANNA

Gaëlle Arquez
CHERUBINO

Adam Plachetka
COUNT ALMAVIVA

Luca Pisaroni
FIGARO

Production a gift of Mercedes T. Bass, and Jerry and Jane del Missier

Revival a gift of the Metropolitan Opera Club

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 several sections with a variety of background material on *Le Nozze di Figaro.*

- **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Le Nozze di Figaro***
- **A Timeline: The historical context of the opera's story and composition**
- **A Closer Look: A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro***
- **Guided Listening: A series of musical excerpts with questions and a roadmap to possible student responses**
- **Student Critique: A performance activity, highlighting specific aspects of this production; and topics for wrap-up discussion following students' attendance**
- **Further Resources: Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print**
- **Glossary: Common musical terms found in this guide and in the concert hall**

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Le Nozze di Figaro,* 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 relationship between Mozart's music and da Ponte's text
- The standard musical structures of *opera buffa*, and how Mozart adapted these structures to create memorable scenes and characters
- The role of contemporary politics in the creation and reception of both Mozart's opera and Beaumarchais's play
- 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

Ken Howard/ Metropolitan Opera

SUMMARY

All that Figaro wants is to marry his girlfriend, Susanna. But when Susanna tells him the Count has been flirting with her, Figaro swears to make the Count regret his behavior. Meanwhile, a local doctor named Bartolo and his housekeeper, Marcellina, have come up with a plan to trick Figaro into marrying Marcellina. The Count realizes this may be a way for him to get Susanna and decides to help them.

Cherubino, a young page at the palace, is overcome with romantic desire for all women. Together, Figaro, Susanna, and the Countess hatch a plan to embarrass the Count. They will dress Cherubino as Susanna and compromise the Count when he is tricked into flirting with Cherubino. Suddenly, the Count appears at the door, suspicious of the voices he has heard in his wife's room. The tension escalates as everyone tries to figure out what is really going on.

While the count looks for a way to stop Figaro's wedding, Marcellina insists that he marry her. In order to buy himself time, Figaro says that he can't marry without his parents' permission. In a surprising turn of events, Figaro learns that he was kidnapped as a child and is actually Marcellina and Bartolo's long-lost son. Marcellina and Bartolo decide to get married.

Figaro and Susanna are overjoyed to finally be married. Yet the Countess and Susanna still want to teach the Count a lesson. They decide to exchange clothing, and the Countess (dressed as Susanna) goes to meet the Count in the garden. The Count thinks he will finally have a chance with Susanna, but when he goes to the garden he finds his own wife, who tells him that he has caused her tremendous pain. The Count apologizes, and the Countess forgives him.

Ken Howard/ Metropolitan Opera

THE SOURCE: *LA FOLLE JOURNÉE, OU LE MARIAGE DE FIGARO (THE CRAZY DAY, OR THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO)*, BY PIERRE-AUGUSTIN CARON DE BEAUMARCHAIS

The three "Figaro" plays by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais were among the most popular comedic plays of the late-eighteenth century, and they remain among the very few theatrical works of that era that are still performed today. The first, *The Barber of Seville,* premiered in 1775. Both the play itself and its leading man Figaro were tremendously popular, and Beaumarchais soon set about writing two more plays featuring the same cast of characters: *The Marriage of Figaro* (first performed in 1784) and *The Guilty Mother* (1792). Stock characters were nothing new in theater, yet Baumarchais's trilogy represented a new kind of serial writing, using these three iterations of the story to let the characters grow and develop over time. *The Barber of Seville,* for instance, is thoroughly optimistic. In it, the dashing young Count Almaviva has fallen in love Rosina, ward of the oafish doctor Bartolo, who secretly hopes to marry Rosina in order to acquire her fortune. So Figaro, the barber of Seville, hatches a daring plan to whisk Rosina out from under Bartolo's nose, and at the end of the opera it seems that she and Count Almaviva will live happily ever after. *The Marriage of Figaro,* by contrast, is decidedly darker. Although *Figaro* takes place only two years after *Barber,* the Count's eye is already wandering and has fallen upon none other than the fiancée of Figaro, who is now the count's valet. Rosina (now "the Countess") can do nothing but watch as her husband makes passes at younger women. Yet *The Marriage of Figaro* is not all drama and despair: Bartolo and his housekeeper Marcellina turn out to be Figaro's long-lost parents, and the opera's denouement occurs not with Figaro's marriage to Susanna, but with the Countess accepting her husband's abashed apology. As Beaumarchais seems to suggest, there can be neither enduring love nor a happy ending without the ability to forgive.

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SYNOPSIS

Act I: **Aguasfrescas, Count Almaviva's summer home outside Seville**

Figaro, valet to Count Almaviva, is to marry the beautiful chambermaid Susanna. As a wedding gift, the Count has given him a small room in the castle. Figaro is thrilled: It is just large enough for a bed, and its proximity to the Count's quarters will let him arrive quickly whenever the Count rings for him. Susanna, however, is skeptical. The Count has been making unwanted passes at her, and she worries that he will take advantage of the room's convenient location to keep bothering her. After she explains her predicament, Figaro swears he will teach the Count a lesson.

Bartolo, a bumbling local doctor, has come to the castle with his housekeeper, Marcellina. Bartolo has his own reasons for hating both Figaro and the Count, yet it is Marcellina who wishes to lodge a complaint. Many years before, Figaro borrowed two thousand pieces of silver from Marcellina, promising to marry her if he failed to pay back the money. Now she wishes to collect her money … or a husband!

Meanwhile, the young page Cherubino has been fired for flirting with a maid. He rushes to Susanna's room and begs her for assistance, explaining that he can't help how he feels about women. Suddenly, the Count enters the room. Cherubino hides under the bed and overhears the Count asking Susanna to meet him that evening in the garden. The Count's entreaties are interrupted by another knock, forcing him into hiding as well. The newcomer is Basilio, a music teacher who is in cahoots with the Count. Hoping to blackmail Susanna, Basilio insinuates that she is in love with Cherubino. When Susanna denies it, he changes tack: Perhaps Cherubino is actually in love with the Countess.

Furious at the slight to his wife, the Count leaps out of his hiding place—and in the ensuing confrontation inadvertently discovers Cherubino. Horrified that his attempts to seduce Susanna have been overheard, the Count chases the page into the hall, where they run into a large group of servants. The servants sing of their excitement about Figaro and Susanna's upcoming wedding. The Count has no choice but to bless the wedding, but he tells Figaro and Susanna to wait until that evening so he can throw them a large party. Quietly, he asks Basilio to find Marcellina, hoping to use her lawsuit to disrupt Figaro's wedding plans. To get rid of Cherubino once and for all, the Count sends him to join the army that very day.

ACT II: **The Countess's bedroom**

Alone in her chambers, the Countess reflects on how deeply it hurts her to see the Count running after other women. Susanna and Figaro arrive. Figaro has a plan to get the Count to leave Susanna alone: He will write an anonymous letter saying that the Countess has a secret lover; blinded by jealousy, the Count will forget about Susanna. Susanna, however, has an even better plan: They will dress Cherubino as Susanna and send him to meet the Count in the garden in Susanna's stead. Figaro leaves.

The Countess has just begun to dress Cherubino when the Count knocks at the door. Cherubino leaps into the Countess's dressing room to hide; this time, it is Susanna who dives under the bed. The Count asks the Countess if she is hiding anyone, since a crash in the dressing room has made him suspicious. The Countess swears that it is Susanna, but, when the unknown person in the closet refuses to unlock the door, the Count decides to enter by force. He leaves to get an ax and locks the bedroom door behind him, explaining that, if Susanna is indeed in the dressing room, she will still be there when he returns. Once he is gone, Susanna tells Cherubino to jump out the window and run away. She then closes herself in the dressing room.

When the Count returns, he is shocked to discover that Susanna really is behind the locked door. Both Susanna and the Countess berate him for his vile suspicions and for neglecting his wife. Figaro returns. The Count and Countess seem on the verge of reconciling when the Count's eye falls on the draft of Figaro's letter, rousing his suspicions once more. Figaro pretends that he has no idea what the letter is or who wrote it. Just then, the head gardener rushes in. He says that he saw something large fall out of the Countess's window and trample his flower beds, and he thinks it was a man. Figaro nimbly defuses the situation, but when Bartolo, Marcellina, and Basilio arrive to demand Marcellina's money, confusion reigns.

Act III: **Various rooms in the castle**

As the Count frets, the Countess hatches a new plan: Susanna will agree to meet the Count in the garden, but it will be the Countess, dressed in Susanna's clothing, who will meet him there. The Count is thrilled when Susanna finally agrees to a tryst and promises her a large dowry. This suits Susanna well, since the money will allow Figaro to pay off Marcellina. But then the Count overhears her telling Figaro that he has "won his lawsuit without a lawyer." The Count, realizing he has been tricked, swears revenge. Cherubino, meanwhile, knows that he will be in trouble if the Count finds him on the castle grounds. Fortunately, the servant girl Barbarina has a plan: She will dress Cherubino in women's clothes so he can pass undetected.

Figaro, Marcellina, and Bartolo enter. Marcellina and Bartolo declare that Figaro must either pay up or marry Marcellina, as he promised. Desperate for a way out, Figaro announces that he can't marry without his parents' consent—since (he claims) he is the son of a nobleman, kidnapped at birth. He states that he has a birthmark on his arm by which his long-lost mother will one day recognize him. At this, Marcellina's jaw drops. She asks to see the birthmark, then announces the unthinkable: Figaro is her son, and Bartolo is his father! Deliriously happy, Bartolo and Marcellina decide to get married right away.

The Countess has Susanna write a letter to the Count, asking him to meet her (Susanna) in the garden that evening. The Countess seals it with a pin, which the Count must return to Susanna if he agrees to the meeting. The wedding celebrations begin. The servant girls bring flowers to the party, and the Countess asks who the pretty young "newcomer" is. When the Count finds out that it is Cherubino, who is supposed to be in the army, it is up to Barbarina to talk him out of his anger. A few minutes later, the Count receives the letter "from Susanna." He is delighted by Susanna'a apparent change of heart and asks Barbarina to return the pin to Susanna.

Act IV: **The garden, that evening**

Barbarina has dropped the pin. When she tells Figaro that she is looking for a pin for Susanna from the Count, Figaro thinks his beloved Susanna has betrayed him. Cursing Susanna—and all women—in his anger, he rushes off to look for her.

Susanna and the Countess arrive at the garden, now dressed in each other's clothes. Susanna sings a love song, and Figaro thinks she is singing to the Count. Cherubino arrives and decides to flirt with the woman he thinks is Susanna, but when the Countess reveals her identity to Cherubino, Figaro finally figures out what is going on. He and Susanna leave together. The Count arrives and approaches the woman dressed like Susanna. When he sees Figaro with a woman dressed like the Countess, however, he is furious. At last, the Countess pulls back her veil. The Count, chastened, apologizes for the pain he caused her, and everyone agrees that forgiveness is the key to lasting happiness.

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 *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO*

Character		Pronunciation Guide	Voice Type	The Lowdown
Count Almaviva	A Spanish nobleman	all-mah-VEE-vah	baritone	A self-important nobleman from Seville, Almaviva has no problem stealing the girlfriend of his valet Figaro but hates the idea of anyone else noticing his wife.
Countess Almaviva	The Count's wife	all-mah-VEE-vah	soprano	Only two years ago, the dashing Count wooed and won the love of Rosina, the Countess Almaviva. Now, however, she has no choice but to sit by as he flirts with other women and breaks her heart.
Figaro	The Count's valet	FEE-gah-roe	bass	As the barber of Seville, he previously helped the Count win Rosina. Known for his cleverness and ability to talk his way out of anything, he now finds himself in a situation which requires additional ingenuity.
Susanna	The Countess's maid, Figaro's fiancée	soo-ZAHN-nah	soprano	As if planning her wedding and helping the Countess weren't enough, she also has to avoid the attentions of the count.
Cherubino	A page in the Count's household	keh-roo-BEE-noh	mezzo-Soprano	A teenager, Cherubino is just discovering the wonders of love. This is a "trousers" role, in which a young boy is portrayed by an adult woman.
Bartolo	A doctor	BAHR-toh-loh	bass	The countesses's former protector. He was furious when Figaro helped her run off to marry the count, but now has a way to get back at the meddling valet.
Marcellina	Bartolo's housekeeper	mahr-chel-LEEN-uh	soprano	Marcellina wants to marry the handsome and clever Figaro—until she learns that he is actually her long-lost son!
Basilio	A music teacher	bah-ZEE-lee-yoh	tenor	One of Bartolo's acolytes, he would also love to see Figaro's downfall.
Antonio	The Count's head gardener, Susanna's uncle	ahn-TOHN-ee-yoh	bass	Antonio is a drunk who has a tendency to make things up. But when he sees something fall from the Countess's window, he almost ruins Susanna's careful plan.
Barbarina	Antonio's daughter	bar-bah-REE-nah	soprano	A simple servant girl, she has a clever plan to protect Cherubino from the Count's wrath.

1756 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is born on January 27 in Salzburg, a small city in western Austria. His father, Leopold, is a violinist at the court of the local archbishop. Of the seven children born to Leopold and Anna Maria Mozart, Wolfgang and his older sister Marianne (born in 1751 and affectionately called "Nannerl") are the only two that survive past infancy.

1759 Wolfgang's astonishing musical abilities are clear from a young age. He begins playing harpsichord at age three. At four, he composes a harpsichord concerto that is declared "unplayably difficult" by his father's musician friends—until the child sits down at the harpsichord and plays it. At age six he begins to teach himself violin.

1762-72 Leopold is eager to share his child's miraculous (and highly profitable) talent with the rest of the world. In January 1762, he sets off with his not-quite-six-year-old child for the first of numerous international concert tours. On these journeys, Wolfgang will meet and play for the most important leaders of Europe, winning them over with his stupendous musical gifts and natural charm. (It is said that at age seven, he even proposes marriage to the child Marie Antoinette!) These musical tours also allow Mozart to meet Europe's most important musicians. He composes his first symphony at age nine, and his first opera at twelve.

1772 After years of travel, Mozart and his family once again settle in Salzburg, where the young composer is given a job at the court of the newly-elected Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo. Yet Mozart is never satisfied with the position: Colloredo is a domineering and difficult man, and Mozart, used to the great capitals of Europe, finds Salzburg provincial. He will continue looking for employment elsewhere, with minimal success.

1775 *The Barber of Seville,* a comic play by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, premieres in Paris.

1778 Beaumarchais begins writing *The Marriage of Figaro,* a sequel to *The Barber of Seville*. The play is viewed as politically incendiary, however, and Beaumarchais must wait six years before it finally appears onstage.

1781 Mozart is fired by Colloredo—“with,” he writes to his father, “a swift kick in the backside.” He moves to Vienna, one of the most important musical centers of the day, where he quickly becomes known as the city’s finest keyboard player.

1782 In September, a comic opera based on Beaumarchais’s *The Barber of Seville* premieres in Saint Petersburg. The following August, it is performed to wild acclaim in Vienna, where it is seen by Mozart.

1783 The Austrian Emperor Joseph II founds an Italian-language opera company in Vienna and hires the Venetian poet Lorenzo Da Ponte as chief librettist.

1784 Beaumarchais’s *The Marriage of Figaro* premieres in Paris. At the time, plays rarely receive more than thirty performances before closing. *The Marriage of Figaro* is so popular it is performed over one hundred times. Its fame quickly spreads: On December 14, the play is performed for the first time in English, at London’s Drury Lane Theater.

1786 Mozart and Da Ponte have been looking for a subject for a comic opera, and the memorable characters and superbly crafted comedy of Beaumarchais’s most recent play seem like ideal source material. Their opera *Le Nozze di Figaro* premieres on May 1 in Vienna.

1787 In January, Mozart is invited to direct *Le Nozze di Figaro* in Prague. The performance is so successful that Mozart is invited to write another opera with Da Ponte for the Prague theater. The resulting opera, *Don Giovanni,* will premiere on October 29. The Prague performance of *Figaro* also marks the beginning of the opera’s international popularity. In 1787 it is performed for the first time in Italy, and in 1788 it travels to Germany, where it is performed in German translation.

1791 On December 5, only a few weeks after the triumphant premiere of his opera *The Magic Flute*, Mozart dies in Vienna. He leaves his wife with enormous debts and is buried outside the city walls in a pauper’s grave.

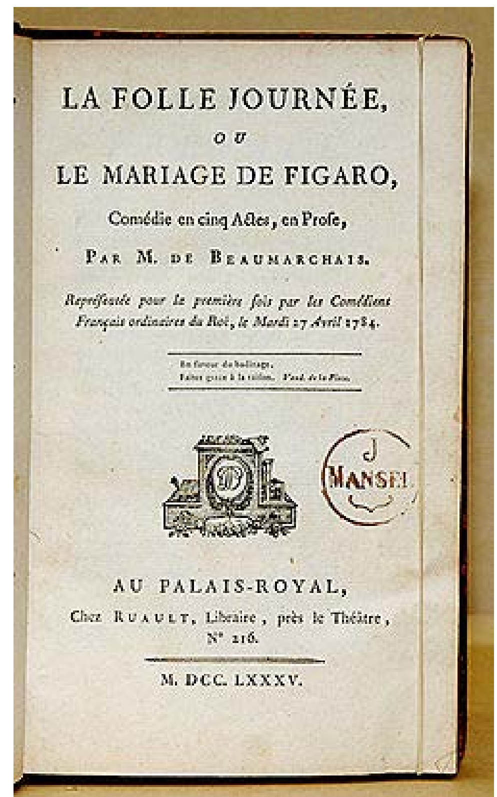
1805 Lorenzo Da Ponte emigrates to America. He will found the department of Italian literature at Columbia University and build the first theater dedicated entirely to opera in the United States.

1816 An up-and-coming young Italian composer named Gioacchino Rossini writes an opera based on *The Barber of Seville*. This opera will eclipse all previous adaptations of the play, and along with Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro,* it will be remembered as one of the two great operas based on Beaumarchais’s work.

FIGARO'S REVOLUTION: POLITICS, HISTORY, AND THE MET'S PRODUCTION

"*Figaro* killed off the nobility," the 18th-century French politician George Danton once declared. Figaro is "a revolution in action," proclaimed Napoleon Bonaparte. And King Louis XVI of France remarked that "the Bastille would have to be pulled down" before *The Marriage of Figaro* could be performed. In fact, Louis's prediction was nearly correct: although *The Marriage of Figaro*, which Beaumarchais actually wrote in 1778, had to wait six long years before the censors would allow it to appear onstage in 1784, the Bastille fell only five years after the play's premiere in Paris. Yet Louis's comment reveals his prescient understanding of the play's dangerous power. Beaumarchais's great comedies were steeped in political ideas that, having simmered for decades, would soon explode into revolutions across Europe.

Figaro appeared at a historical tipping point. Millennia-old social structures, predicated upon highly codified class relationships, were quickly eroding as new ideas about equality and citizenship sent seismic shocks through the political landscape. Kings, queens, and other nobles had long enjoyed unlimited power by reason of their royal birth, but the writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment introduced a radical new idea: that all citizens should have equal access to prosperity and political power. In fact, only one year after *The Barber of Seville's* premiere, a group of rag-tag colonies in North America declared their independence from the British monarchy and founded a country on the "self-evident" principle of equality for all. Thus, a fast-talking valet who could easily outwit a Count was not merely a humorous inversion of the standard social hierarchy. Rather, he represented an idea that could prove downright dangerous. *The Marriage of Figaro* was thus banned not only in Paris, but in Vienna as well. Although Mozart and Da Ponte had been careful to trim much of the overtly revolutionary material from Beaumarchais's original play, it was only at Da Ponte's urging that the Austrian Emperor Joseph II agreed to allow the opera to be performed at all.


LA FOLLE JOURNÉE,
OU
LE MARIAGE DE FIGARO,
Comédie en cinq Actes, en Prose,
PAR M. DE BEAUMARCHAIS.
Représentée pour la première fois par les Comédiens Français ordinaires du Roi, le Mardi 27 Avril 1784.
AU PALAIS-ROYAL,
Chez RUAULT, Libraire, près le Théâtre, N° 216.
M. DCC. LXXXV.

Given how important the political turbulence of the eighteenth century is in the opera's historical context, it might come as a surprise that Richard Eyre's Met production is set in the 1930s. Yet the story's enduring appeal is due in part to its timeless message of equality and justice. Eyre's production takes place on the eve of the Spanish Civil War, as the democratic ideals championed by Figaro were about to be demolished by the brutal, four-decade dictatorship of Francisco Franco—and, in a broader sense, by the horrors of the Second World War. The tyrants of the 1930s and '40s hated Figaro every bit as much as the French kings of the 18th century had: During World War II, the Germans refused to allow *The Marriage of Figaro* to be staged in occupied Paris, and Mussolini banned it in Italy. For when tyranny raises its ugly head, art is always there to offer a message of revolution, resilience, and hope.

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 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 *Le Nozze di Figaro* and the libretto.

"SE VUOL BALLARE"

Everything is going well for Figaro on his wedding day—until he learns that the Count has his eye on Susanna. Infuriated, Figaro swears to teach the Count a lesson. Using the metaphor of a dancing school, Figaro declares that he will make the Count dance to a tune which he (Figaro) will control. In Mozart's operas, orchestral instruments are as important as the singing voices; in all of the excerpts in this exercise, listen to how the instruments and voices work together to create a complex musical texture that perfectly expresses the sentiments of the text.

What to listen for:

- How the tempo speeds up and slows down to reflect Figaro's emotions
- The use of pizzicato (plucked strings) to create a special sound

(00:00) Listen to the strings, which are being plucked instead of played with a bow. This is a technique called pizzicato. Thus, the strings sound like a plucked guitar, which is what Figaro says he will play.

(00:28) The strings begin playing with their bows again. Their quick flurries of notes, which come between Figaro's vocal statements, make the musical texture more excited and agitated—just how Figaro is feeling!

(00:42) Figaro will twice invite the Count to come "learn the capriola" in his school. The first time, the melody is very low. The second time, it is higher, and full of leaps. A capriola is a leap or jump performed while dancing; in fact, the name comes from the Italian word for "goat." Figaro's melody perfectly evokes these high-flying movements.

(00:57) As Figaro's excitement mounts, the strings get faster and and faster. Figaro's melody also speeds up as he repeats the single word "saprò" ("I know how"). At (01:09), when he tells himself to be "careful" (the Italian word "piano" literally means "slow" or "quiet"), he holds a single long note, reigning in the melody just as he must reign in his emotions. Yet the scurrying strings let us know how flustered he still feels.

(01:28) Despite his own admonition to "slow down," Figaro can't hold himself back. He begins singing a new melody, one that is tremendously fast (and difficult!). Listen to the repetitions of the word "rovescerò," which means "I will upset [the Count's] schemes." Like the example of "saprò" immediately above, Figaro is fixated on this action.

(01:55) Figaro returns to his opening melody, and the strings once again imitate the guitar he "will play."

(02:24) A quick orchestral flourish ends the scene on a decisive note.

"NON SO PIÙ COSA SON, COSA FACCIO"

Cherubino, a typical teenager, can think of nothing but romance. Wherever he goes, whomever he sees, he falls instantly, madly in love—and wants the whole world to know about it!

What to listen for:

- The structure of the aria
- How the music reflects the various feelings that Cherubino describes

(00:00) In the preceding recitative, Cherubino complained that he couldn't help flirting with women. Now, he launches into the aria, which focuses on his emotions. In contrast to recitative, arias have relatively few words, lots of repetition, and thick accompaniment—all of which help to express the character's feelings. In the opening seconds, listen to the throbbing chords in the orchestra, which sound like the rapid beats of a heart in love.

(00:11) Cherubino repeats "every woman makes my heart pound" two additional times. In arias, repetition is a way to give words emphasis.

(00:29) After the steady rhythm of the preceding lines, the slight syncopation on the line "just speaking of love makes me breathless" sounds halting and breathless. In other words, Mozart wrote into the singer's melody the very effect the character describes!

(00:36) Again, listen to the repetition of text. Here it is the word "un desio" ("a love") that is sung over and over.

(00:53) The music from the beginning of the aria returns. In the eighteenth century, most arias were structured according to a format called "da capo" (meaning "from the beginning" in Italian), with an opening section, a contrasting section, and then a complete repeat of the opening section. Normally, arias end after the return of the opening section …

(01:12) … but Mozart adds an extensive "coda" (from the Italian word for "tail") to the end of the aria. Why might Mozart have done this? Whereas the preceding portions of the aria discussed how Cherubino feels when he sees a pretty girl, in this section he declares that he can't stop talking about love. And, indeed, Mozart's composition proves that Cherubino just can't keep quiet!

(01:51) The text of the coda repeats, but now the music is slightly fancier. This is another standard technique of aria composition, called "ornamentation." It makes the repetition exciting and gives the singer a final chance to show off their abilities, ensuring them a big round of applause at the end.

"PORGI AMOR, QUALCHE RISTORO"

Not so long ago, the Count was hatching (with considerable help from Figaro) a daredevil scheme to win the woman he claimed was the love of his life. Now, only two short years later, he seems to have forgotten her entirely. Alone in her room, the Countess begs the god of love to end her pain—either by bringing the Count back to her or by putting her out of her misery.

What to listen for:

- **The long, sinuous lines of the Countess's melody**
- **The use of "melismas" (explained below) to make certain words stand out**
- **How the clarinets and other instruments interact with the vocal melody**

(00:00) **When the second act begins, we see the Countess alone in her room. For more than a minute, there is only music. Listen to the music and imagine what she must be feeling. How might the singer express these feelings through her movements, since she can't yet sing?**

(01:15) **The Countess begins to sing. Notice that her melody is exactly the same as the melody the orchestra played in the introduction. Although her melody is relatively slow, don't think that it's not difficult: It takes a huge amount of vocal power and control to sing legato melodies like this on a single breath!**

(01:35) **On the word "duolo" ("pain"), the Countess sings many notes on a single syllable. This is called a "melisma," and it used to make individual words seem extra expressive.**

(01:38) **Listen to the quick melodies played by the clarinets at (01:48), (02:05), and (02:21). The effect is like a second voice, singing a duet with the Countess. Perhaps she is imagining that the god of love is actually hearing her and whispering musical replies in her ear.**

(02:02) **The text will repeat in its entirety, but now the melody will be different: lighter, breathier, more dreamlike. The accompaniment, too, differs from the first iteration of the aria. Gone are the clarinets that played the musical dialogue. The thick, constant rhythm in the background has thinned out. It is as though the Countess's memories of her love are fading. In fact, the only lines that sound confident and assertive are those requesting death.**

(03:00) **On the word "lascia" ("let [me die]"), the Countess sings a very long melisma. Her pain is so great that it seems only death can offer her solace.**

"VOI SIGNOR, CHE GIUSTO SIETE"

Figaro has just managed to talk his way out of one tough situation when another suddenly arises. Marcellina, Bartolo, and Basilio rush into the Countess's bedroom, where Figaro, Susanna, the Count, and the Countess are all standing. Marcellina demands an immediate decision in her lawsuit, and the Count says he will be the judge. One of the most important elements of opera buffa is the ensemble scene that often ends acts. From a dramatic perspective, it is a perfect opportunity to show off a scene of confusion, with everybody talking to each other, shouting over each other, and wondering to themselves what is going on. From a musical perspective, it lets a composer show off his or her skills writing "counterpoint," in which multiple melodies all occur at the same time—and must not only retain their individual identities but also sound good. Note that ensembles of three, four, or five people are common; here, however, Mozart includes seven!

What to listen for:

- **How the voices are grouped, and how these groups reflect the various alliances and interactions that drive the plot**
- **The particular kinds of singing, such as patter singing (explained below) and coloratura, associated with individual characters**
- **The slow build-up of excitement and tension, a typical feature of finales**

(00:00) **The first group of singers is Marcellina, Bartolo, and Basilio, asking the count to make a decision regarding Figaro's debt and his obligation to marry Marcellina if he can't pay up.**

(00:08) **The general sentiment of Figaro, Susanna, the Count, and the Countess when they see Marcellina et al. arrive is: "Oh no, they are going to ruin everything!" Yet each of the characters is worried for a different reason. Thus, rather than singing the line together, they all start singing at a slightly different time. The effect is that of four people individually wondering what to do.**

(00:17) **Mozart steps back from the multi-voiced music for a few seconds, giving Figaro, the Count, and Marcellina each a solo line so that the action of the scene can become clear.**

(00:36) **Marcellina sings a series of very rapid syllables. This is a style of singing called "patter," in which the goal is to sing as many words as possible in the shortest amount of time. It is typically meant to be humorous, and it is associated with low-class characters.**

(00:40) **The Count, who spent the earlier part of the scene feeling extremely befuddled, is thrilled that he is finally in control of the situation (or so he thinks). Listen to how confident his melody sounds in the midst of the general confusion. Also note the delightful flute melody at (00:46).**

(00:53) **Bartolo sings the same patter melody that Marcellina just sang. He may think his fast-talking is clever, but it just makes him sound silly.**

(01:10) **And now it's Basilio's turn to sing the patter melody.**

(01:29) **The seven singers are split into two distinct groups: first you will hear Susanna, Figaro, and the Countess, then Marcellina, Bartolo, Basilio, and the Count.**

(02:08) **Listen to the very high female voice. It is Susanna, whose melody soars above the general musical mêlée.**

(02:39) **As if coordinating seven individual singers wasn't enough, Mozart also had to weave the orchestra into the ensemble. Listen to the rising scales in the low strings, which add motion and excitement to the already-agitated scene.**

(03:07) **Susanna bursts into a soaring melisma. This is a perfect example of "coloratura," a term which describes very fast, high, agile singing. Coloratura was usually associated with upper-class characters, but here Mozart gives the high-flying notes not to the Countess but to her maid. Perhaps the music implies that, of all the characters onstage, it is Susanna who is the cleverest and classiest. (Or perhaps the reason for Susanna's high-class coloratura is more mundane. Archival documents suggest that Mozart thought a soprano named Nancy Storace was going to sing the role of the Countess at the opera's premiere. When it turned out she was singing Susanna instead, he simply switched the melodies so that Storace would still sing the coloratura notes!)**

(03:26) **Finally, all seven characters are singing the same rhythm at the same time. But even though it might sound like they are all singing the same words, the two groups are still divided. Marcellina, Bartolo, Basilio, and the Count sing, "What a blessing! Everything is going so well!" Susanna, Figaro, and the Countess, on the other hand, sing, "What a disaster! Everything is going to hell!"**

IN PREPARATION

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

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO*
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. They 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: *La Bohème*." 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? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently? The discussion offers an opportunity to apply the notes on students' *Opera Review* sheet, as well as their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *Le Nozze di Figaro* experts.

With its many intrigues and entanglements, *Le Nozze di Figaro* packs all the drama of a multi-season soap opera into a few short hours. Yet the clever characterizations, witty dialogue, and carefully constructed scenes ensure that the audience can follow the many plot twists. Now that your students have seen the opera, ask them how the many elements of the performance—music, acting, costumes, stage sets, wigs, makeup, etc.—work together to tell the story of Figaro's crazy day. The following questions may facilitate your discussion.

- Who was your favorite character? Why?
- Figaro is generally credited with exceptional craftiness, but he is not the only character in Mozart's opera who comes up with a clever plan. Who do you think was the smartest character? Why?
- Comic opera features a mix of solo arias and ensemble scenes. Which kind of music did you like more? Did you find any scenes particularly funny?
- Did the modern costumes help you follow the plot? Why or why not? Which costumes did you like most? If you were to design costumes for *Le Nozze di Figaro*, what would they look like?
- Did you sympathize with any of the characters? Have you ever had an unrequited crush like Cherubino, for instance? Or received unwanted attention like Susanna?
- Was the Countess right to forgive the Count at the end? Why or why not?

Beaumarchais's play *The Marriage of Figaro* is the second part of a trilogy, and your students might also enjoy imagining how the story continues. In other words, if your students were to write the third part of the trilogy, what would happen? Would Figaro and Susanna stay happily married? What about Marcellina and Bartolo, the Count and Countess, and/or Cherubino and Barbarina? Would your students introduce any new characters? And what kinds of things might these characters still need to learn?

Lastly, remember that opera is a multi-media art form: any and all aspects of the performance your students have just seen—including the act of seeing it live—are important factors contributing to the overall experience. Ask them for any final thoughts and impressions. What did they find most memorable?

IN PRINT

Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin Caron de. *The Figaro Trilogy: The Barber of Seville, the Marriage of Figaro, the Guilty Mother.* Translated by David Coward. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
A translation of all three of Beaumarchais's "Figaro" plays, with an excellent introduction that includes biographical information about Beaumarchais and extensive historical contextualization of his works.

Carter, Tim. W.A. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro.* Cambridge Opera Handbooks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
An in-depth study of Mozart's masterpiece. With extensive musical examples and detailed analyses, this book is intended for a scholarly audience, but is nevertheless a good source for those who wish to delve into the music, history, and creation of Mozart's work.

Gay, Peter. *Mozart.* Penguin Lives. New York: Penguin, 1999.
An engaging and approachable biography of Mozart.

Solman, Joseph, ed. Mozartiana: Two Centuries of Notes, Quotes, and Anecdotes about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. New York: Walker & Company, 1990.
A charming collection of stories from Mozart's life, plus numerous quotes by and about the great composer.

ONLINE

Acocella, Joan. "Nights at the Opera: The life of the man who put words to Mozart." *The New Yorker* (January 8, 2007). http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/01/08/nights-at-the-opera
An excellent overview of Lorenzo Da Ponte's colorful life. Your students may particularly enjoy learning that Da Ponte spent his last years in New York and New Jersey!

Amadeus. Directed by Miloš Forman. Orion Pictures, 1984. Available on DVD, and streaming on various online platforms
Winner of eight Academy Awards, this feature film about Mozart's years in Vienna is a must-see for Mozart fans. Although much of the plot—such as the enmity between Mozart and Viennese court composer Antonio Salieri—is fictional, the characters and places are all based in fact, and the movie offers an engaging introduction to both Mozart's life and late-eighteenth century Viennese society in general.

The Metropolitan Opera. "*Le Nozze di Figaro:* 2014–15 New Production." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P93eqeGDFaY
Richard Eyre discusses his production, including the influences behind his stage design and his decision to update the action to the 1930s. Note that the interview contains some mature themes, and thus may not be appropriate for all students.

Smillie, Thomson, and narrated by David Timson. Opera Explained: MOZART - *The Marriage of Figaro.* Naxos Educational CD 8.558078. https://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=8.558078, or https://open.spotify.com/album/24VNsfqWqRbku6D4a4wCXf.
An audiobook-style introduction to Mozart's great opera, including background information and a plot summary with musical excerpts.

act/scene

Acts and scenes are ways of categorizing sections of operas. An act is a large-scale division of an opera, and each opera will typically include from two to five acts. Acts can be subdivided into scenes, which are often differentiated by a change in setting or characters.

adagio

Literally "at ease," adagio is a tempo marking that indicates a slow speed. An adagio tempo marking indicates that the performer should play in a slow and leisurely style.

allegro

Italian for "cheerful" or "joyful," Allegro is the most common tempo marking in Western music, indicating a moderately fast to quick speed.

aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. For example, the earliest arias in opera consist of music sung with different stanzas of text (strophic arias). Another type of aria, da capo arias, became common by the eighteenth century and feature the return of the opening music and text after a contrasting middle section. Nineteenth-century Italian arias often feature a two-part form that showcases an intensification of emotion from the first section (the cantabile) to the second section (the cabaletta).

articulation

The smoothness or hardness with which a note is begun and ended. Articulation is a way of indicating the degree to which each note connects to the next, and can be seen while watching the bow of a stringed instrument player. A note can be attacked sharply and made short, or it can flow smoothly into the next note.

baritone

Literally "deep sounding," a baritone is what a typical male voice sounds like—the term refers to a male singer with a low but not extremely low vocal range. A baritone will sing notes that are higher than those sung by a bass and lower than those sung by a tenor. Uncommon until the nineteenth century, baritone roles have grown in popularity in opera since the works of Verdi, who often reserved the voice type for villains.

baroque

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1600 to 1750. 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. The Baroque period saw the rise of modern tonality, an expansion of performing forces, and increased ornamentation. The term "baroque" means bizarre or exaggerated, and was used by critics in the Eighteenth century critics who preferred a simpler and less-ornamented style.

bass

The lowest sounding line in music. Bass also refers to the lowest singing range for the male voice. Opera composers often choose a bass voice to sing one of two opposite types of roles: comic characters or dramatic and serious characters. For example, Mozart and Rossini wrote comic parts for bass voice, using musical repetition and low register for comic effect. Wagner and Mozart wrote serious parts for bass voice, focusing on the gravity that a low register can contribute to the overall musical texture.

bel canto

Referring to the Italian vocal style of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bel canto singing emphasizes lyricism and ornamentation in order to showcase the beauty of the singer's voice. Its focus on lyrical embellishment directly contrasts with a contemporary Germanic focus on a weighty, dramatic style. Bel canto singing is most closely associated with the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti.

cadenza

An ornamented musical elaboration played in a free style by a soloist to display his or her virtuosity. Cadenzas are typically improvised—that is, created by a performer on the spot—though they can also be written out in advance. They most frequently occur near the end of a piece, at a point of harmonic tension when the piece is about to conclude.

chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral or commentary on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

Classical

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1750 to 1830, bordered by the earlier Baroque period and the later Romantic period. Contrasting with the ornamentation common to the preceding Baroque period, Classical music is characterized by simple and elegant melodies, regular harmonic accompaniment, and contrasts between melodic themes. The composers most closely associated with the Classical period include Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

coloratura

A rapid and elaborate ornamentation by a solo singer, particularly common in operas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Requiring vocal agility and a wide and high range, coloratura showcases the virtuosity of a singer by featuring repeating melodic figures, rapid scales, trills, and other embellishments.

conductor

The person who directs the orchestra, setting the tempo, giving interpretive directions to the musicians, and generally holding all the musical elements of a performance together. In orchestra performance, the conductor typically stands on a podium in front of the players and uses a baton to communicate the meter and tempo, and his or her non-baton hand to indicate dynamics, phrasing, and articulation to the musicians. The gestures of a conductor can be likened to a non-verbal language that the musicians understand.

contralto

A deep female voice, with a vocal range that extends lower than that of a mezzo-soprano. Contraltos are known for having a very wide range and for the power and depth of sound with which they can sing. As is the case for roles for basses, many of the earliest roles in opera for contraltos are comic roles, though nineteenth-century composers also wrote dramatic roles for female singers with a lower range.

crescendo

A gradual raising of volume in music achieved by increasing the dynamic level. When music crescendos, the performers begin at a softer dynamic level and become incrementally louder. One of the most famous types of crescendos in opera, the Rossini crescendo, includes an increase in volume together with repeating melodic and rhythmic phrases, higher instrumental registers, and the gradual addition of instruments in order to create a particularly dramatic effect.

diminuendo

A gradual lowering of volume in music achieved by decreasing the dynamic level. During a diminuendo, the performers begin at a louder dynamic level and become incrementally softer.

dynamics

A musical trait pertaining to loudness and softness. During the eighteenth century, composers began indicating their desired intensity of volume in music by writing words such as piano (soft) and forte (loud) into the musical score. Dynamics encompass a spectrum from pianissimo (very soft) to piano (soft) to mezzo piano (moderately soft), all the way up to fortissimo (very loud). Music can shift to another dynamic level either suddenly or gradually, through a crescendo or diminuendo.

ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

finale

The last portion of an act, a finale consists of several musical sections that accompany an escalating dramatic tension. Finales frequently consist of multiple ensembles with different numbers of characters. When it occurs at the end of an early act in the opera, a finale may create a messy situation—and the resolution of this situation will only happen in subsequent acts. One type of finale common in comic operas, a chain finale, features characters entering or exiting from the stage to create unexpected combinations of characters, in turn increasing the opera's dramatic tension.

forte

Meaning "loud" or "strong" in Italian, forte is a dynamic level in music that indicates a loud volume. Adding the suffix "-issimo" to a word serves as an intensifier—since forte means "loud," fortissimo means "very loud."

harmony

The simultaneous sounding of pitches to produce chords, and the relationship between different chords as they succeed one another. Throughout much of Western music, systems of rules govern these progressions to help create our sense of musical tension, expectation, and conclusion. Tonal harmony is based on progressions of chords in relationship to a tonic (or home) key. In the 19th century, as composers sought novel sounds to reflect the originality of their invention, they began to employ chords and progressions of greater dissonance and greater distance from the home key. As such dissonances moved beyond mere sound effects into the musical structure itself, the traditional theory of tonal harmony began to become insufficient as a way to understand and describe musical structure.

intermission

A break between acts of an opera. At the beginning of an intermission, the curtain will fall (that is, close) on stage, and the lights in the auditorium, called the house lights, will become brighter. Intermissions provide audiences with a chance to walk around, talk with one another, and reflect on what they have seen and what could happen next. The break in the performance may also correspond with a change of time or scene in the story of the opera—the next act may take place hours or months later, or be set in a different location. Usually lights will dim and a bell may sound to indicate that the intermission is drawing to a close and the opera is about to resume.

legato

A type of articulation in which a melody is played with smooth connection between the notes. A legato passage does should not include any pauses between notes or any accents at the beginnings of notes, as the notes blend into one another without a break. In contrast, a passage that is played staccato features notes played in a separated manner.

Leitmotif

From the German for "leading motive," a leitmotif is a recurring musical idea, or motive, that represents a particular person, object, idea, emotion, or place. This musical idea is usually a few seconds in length and can occur in the music's melody, harmony, rhythm, or a combination of the three. Leitmotifs are most closely associated with the operas of Richard Wagner, where they are used repeatedly throughout the opera to provide unity; they also less frequently appear in operas of other composers, including Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Strauss.

libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early eighteenth century, a composer would frequently set music to a pre-existing libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

maestro

A title of respect used to address a conductor. The term is often applied to conductors with several decades of experience. However, performers often use this honorific when addressing the conductor.

melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

mezzo-soprano

A female voice with a range between that of a contralto and soprano. A mezzo-soprano's voice is slightly deeper than that of a soprano, so mezzo-sopranos are often cast in supporting roles as older women, including nurses, confidantes, or maids.

opera buffa

A term applied to Italian comic operas from the mid-eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. The plot of an opera buffa often features scenes and characters from everyday life and addresses a light or sentimental subject, concluding with a happy ending.

opera seria

An eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Italian opera employing a noble and serious style. The plot of an opera seria often upholds morality by presenting conflicting emotions such as love versus duty, or by modeling enlightened rulers.

operetta

Featuring spoken dialogue, songs, and dances, an operetta is a short theatrical piece. Shorter in duration than operas, operettas typically feature a light subject matter, incorporate melodies composed in a popular style, and feature spoken dialogue. Most popular from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the genre is the precursor of the American musical.

ornamentation

An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make a melody more expressive or ornate. Ornamentation can be either indicated through symbols written into the music or improvised by the performer.

overture

An instrumental piece that occurs before the first act as an introduction to an opera. After the conductor enters the orchestra pit and takes a bow, the music for the overture begins. Most overtures are a few minutes in duration, and set the mood for the opera—even featuring musical themes that will occur later in the opera.

piano

Abbreviated p in a musical score, piano indicates a soft dynamic level. Musicians may achieve a piano sound by using less bow, less air, or less force. In opera, soft music will often correspond with emotions of sadness or moments in the plot when a character is reflecting on a course of action or emotional state. Pianissimo is "very soft," and can be so quiet that an audience may need to listen carefully in order to discern its melody and harmony.

pitch

The quality of a musical sound corresponding to its perceived highness or lowness. Scientifically, pitch can be measured as the number of vibrations (or repetitions) of a sound wave per second, which is called its frequency. A sound with a low frequency, like a bass drum, will sound low and have a low pitch, while a sound with a high frequency, like a siren, will sound high.

prima donna

Meaning "first lady" in Italian, the prima donna is the leading female role in an opera. The term may apply to the role or to the singer herself, who usually sings in the soprano register and is the star of the show. Since the nineteenth century, the term has also been applied to a singer of any gender with a self-centered and demanding personality.

recitative

A type of vocal writing between speech and song 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 either by keyboard or by the whole orchestra.

rhythm

Rhythm refers to the way music unfolds over time; it is a series of durations in a range from long to short. Along with pitch, it is a basic and indispensable parameter of music. Rhythm is perceived in relation to an underlying beat and within the context of a meter. Western musical notation indicates to the performer the exact duration of each note or rest.

Romantic

A period of music history lasting from approximately 1830 to 1900. Beginning in literature and later adopted by composers, romanticism reflected a newfound focus on individuality, nature, and emotional extremes. Music from the Romantic period often explores music's redemptive power, focusing on the sublimity of nature, love, and the mysterious. Composers began to experiment with shortening and lengthening the standard forms and durations of musical works, and also added more expressive harmonies to convey the originality of their musical vision.

score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that unite to constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

Singspiel

Literally "sung play," a Singspiel is an opera with spoken dialogue. Singspiels are typically in German and are from the Classical or early Romantic eras. The plot of a Singspiel is usually comic in nature, and its music may include songs, choruses, and instrumental numbers that are separated by spoken dialogue.

solo

A piece, musical passage, or line for a lone singer or other performer, with or without instrumental accompaniment. The most common type of solo in opera is the aria, which is composed for a single voice with orchestral accompaniment.

soprano

The highest singing range for the female voice. Roles composed for soprano singers are typically among the leading roles in the opera and require soprano singers to show off their virtuosic flexibility and range.

tempo

Literally "time" in Italian, tempo refers to the speed of a piece of music. Tempo is indicated in a score by a variety of conventional (often Italian) words—such as allegro, adagio, vivace, moderato, grave, and many more—that not only provide direction on the composer's desired rate of speed, but also carry associations of gesture and character. For instance, vivace indicates not only a brisk speed but also a lively spirit. Additional tempo markings may indicate when a composer asks for a section of music to be sped up (such as "accelerando") or slowed down (such as "rallentando").

tenor

The highest natural male vocal range. By the nineteenth century, the tenor had become the most common vocal range for male leading roles in operas. Tenor roles often feature high-pitched notes for male voice in order to showcase the singer's range and power. A related voice type is the countertenor, with a range above that of a tenor and similar to that of a contralto.

theme/motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motif (or motive) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

timbre

Pronounced TAM-bruh, a French word that means "sound color." It refers to the complex combination of characteristics that give each instrument or voice its unique sound. Just as we can recognize each other by the differences in our speaking voices, operatic singing voices are distinguishable by their unique timbres. Listeners can also identify orchestral instruments by their timbre without being able to see them. The creative combination of different instrumental timbres is one of the artistic aspects of orchestration.

trill

A rapid alternation between two pitches that are adjacent to one another. Trills are a type of ornamentation, serving to embellish the melodic line, and appear regularly within coloratura passages. Trills also may appear near the end of a piece in order to prolong the musical tension before the music concludes.

verismo

A movement in Italian theater and opera in the late 19th century that embraced realism and explored areas of society previously ignored on the stage: the poor, the lower-class, and the criminal. Musically, verismo operas react against the forced ornamentation of the bel canto style and instead emphasize a more natural setting of the text to music. Before its exploration on the operatic stage, the verismo aesthetic first developed within the realm of literature.

OPERA REVIEW: *LE NOZZE DI FIGARO*, NOVEMBER 13, 2019

Reviewed by ______________________________

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

As you watch *Le Nozze di Figaro*, 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
Luca Pisaroni as Figaro	*****	
Nadine Sierra as Susanna	*****	
Adam Plachetka as the Count	*****	
Susanna Phillips as the Countess	*****	
Gaëlle Arquez as Cherubino	*****	
Brindley Sherratt as Bartolo	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Figaro measures his new room			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Figaro vows to teach the Count a lesson			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Marcellina wants her money—or Figaro			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Hiding places			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Figaro tells Cherubino what to expect in the army			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The Countess is sad			
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
Cherubino’s song for the Countess			
My opinion of this scene	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Who’s in the closet …?			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Bartolo, Marcellina, and Basilio argue their case			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The Count swears revenge			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The Countess remembers happier days			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Figaro’s family			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The Countess dictates a letter			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
The wedding			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Figaro’s warning about women			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Mistaken identities in the pine grove			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Forgiveness			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5