

Nabucco

A Guide for Educators



The Met
ropolitan
Opera

Kristian Schuller/Metropolitan Opera

TRUE TO ITS BIBLICAL INSPIRATION, *NABUCCO* IS AN OPERA OF UNAPOLOGETICALLY epic proportions: rulers challenge their gods, love struggles against empire, and religious revelation goes hand in hand with divine retribution. Verdi's inspired treatment of the Israelites' enslavement and the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's dramatic conversion to Judaism captivated audiences, made the young composer famous, and gave voice to a simmering Italian nationalism that was soon to explode with incendiary force. The opera's most famous number, the chorus of the Hebrew slaves "Va, pensiero," became the unofficial anthem of the Italian independence movement, and the score is filled with musical ideas showing Verdi's ability to innovate operatic convention in the service of character and psychological depth. Foreshadowing his mature works, *Nabucco* shows us the young composer as he is beginning to understand the full scope and power of his artistic vision.

The Met's classic production, directed by Elijah Moshinsky and first seen in 2001, remains faithful to the biblical setting, bringing to life the grandeur of ancient Jerusalem and Babylon. John Napier's sets provide the backdrop, illustrating the plight of characters struggling against the might of an empire, the power of a vengeful god, and the inevitability of historical events.

This guide is intended to help your students appreciate *Nabucco*, which stars the legendary Plácido Domingo in the title role, and its relationship to the political context of Verdi's own time as well as the opera's resonance across the centuries. It also includes information on Verdi's musical craft in creating some of the most dramatic and highly charged music in Italian opera. The information on the following pages is designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of attending a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera.

THE WORK:

NABUCCO

An opera in four acts, sung in Italian
Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Temistocle Solera
Based on biblical sources and the play
Nabuchodonosor by Auguste Anicet-
Bourgeois and Francis Cornu
First performed March 9, 1842
at La Scala, Milan, Italy

PRODUCTION

James Levine, Conductor
Elijah Moshinsky, Production
John Napier, Set Designer
Andreane Neofitou, Costume Designer
Howard Harrison, Lighting Designer

STARRING

Dmitry Belosselskiy
ZACCARIA (bass)

Russell Thomas
ISMAELE (tenor)

Jamie Barton
FENENA (soprano)

Liudmyla Monastyrska
ABIGAILLE (soprano)

Plácido Domingo
NABUCCO (baritone)

Production a gift of Bill Rollnick and
Nancy Ellison Rollnick
Major funding from Mr. and Mrs. Ezra K.
Zilkha, Mercedes and Sid Bass, and Mr.
and Mrs. Paul M. Montrone

Additional funding from Gilbert S. Kahn
and John J. Noffo Kahn, The Eleanor
Naylor Dana Charitable Trust, and the
National Endowment for the Arts.

Revival a gift of the Estate of Francine
Berry.

ABOUT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE



Photo: 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 *Nabucco*.

• **The Source, The Story, and Who's Who in *Nabucco***

• **A Timeline:** The historical context of the opera's story and composition

• **A Closer Look:** A brief article highlighting an important aspect of Verdi's *Nabucco*

• **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

The materials in this guide will focus on several aspects of *Nabucco*:

- The historical context of the opera's setting
- The story's resonance with various historical moments as well as current events
- 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.

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Nabucco*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera. It includes materials 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.



Photo: Marty Sohl/
Metropolitan Opera

SUMMARY

Nabucco, King of Babylon, leads an army to Jerusalem, determined to conquer the city and enslave the Israelites. Abigaille, Nabucco's daughter, arrives just before the approaching army and offers to save the Israelites—but only if Ismaele, nephew of Jerusalem's king, will return her love. He refuses, for he is already in love with Abigaille's sister Fenena, who is being held hostage by the Israelites and has converted to Judaism. Abigaille swears vengeance as Nabucco arrives and orders the temple burned to the ground.

Back in Babylon, Abigaille discovers she is not actually Nabucco's true daughter, but instead the daughter of slaves. Worried that someone will find out and keep her from ruling Babylon, she plans to steal the throne from Nabucco and Fenena. Just after she declares herself queen, Nabucco enters, and, furious at her treachery, proclaims himself not only king but god. At this, he is struck by a thunderbolt and driven insane. With no one in her way, Abigaille orders the execution of the Israelites, including Fenena. Desperate to save his daughter, Nabucco prays to the god of Israel, promising to convert the entire Babylonian empire to Judaism. His prayers are answered: Nabucco's sanity is restored and he arrives just in time to stop the execution of Fenena and the Israelites. Abigaille, full of remorse, poisons herself and Nabucco frees the Israelites.

THE SOURCE

Nabucco combines historical fact, passages from the Bible, and the invention of Verdi and his librettist, Temistocle Solera. The text takes many liberties with biblical history, and with the exception of the title role the characters are fictional creations. But the overall story stays close to events as related in Jewish scriptures (primarily Jeremiah, the Second Book of Kings, the Second Book of Chronicles, Daniel, and the Psalms). The story of King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites was well known in Verdi's time and had been adapted for the stage by other artists. Antonio Cortese's ballet *Nabuccodonosor*, presented at La Scala in 1838, bears many structural similarities to Verdi's opera, and an 1836 French play of the same title was another source. (In fact, *Nabucco* was so similar to this play that the opera's producer was charged a royalty fee when Verdi's work premiered in Paris.)



Photo: Marty Sohl/
Metropolitan Opera

SYNOPSIS

Part I: *The Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem*

The Israelites hide in their temple and pray that Nabucco, King of Babylon, and his fearsome army will spare them. The Israelites' high priest, Zaccaria, enters with a hostage, Fenena, who is Nabucco's daughter. After reassuring his people that their prayers will be answered, Zaccaria and the worshippers leave Fenena alone with Ismaele, the nephew of Jerusalem's king. The two profess their love for each other as Abigaille, another daughter of Nabucco and Fenena's sister, enters the temple. Abigaille also loves Ismaele and tells him that she will save the Israelites if he will only return her love. Ismaele refuses; his love belongs to Fenena. Abigaille flies into a rage just as the Israelites stream back into the temple, pursued by Nabucco and his army. Zaccaria threatens to kill Fenena, but Ismaele saves her from harm. Nabucco orders the temple burned to the ground, and the defeated Israelites are taken to Babylon as slaves.

Part II

SCENE I: *Nabucco's palace in Babylon*

Abigaille has discovered a secret document proving she is not truly the daughter of the king, but the child of slaves. Afraid that her sister Fenena will inherit Nabucco's throne, she promises to destroy both father and daughter. The High Priest of Baal (a Babylonian god) enters and the two make plans to steal the crown from *Nabucco* and Fenena.

SCENE II: *Elsewhere in the palace*

Zaccaria prays, asking that God help him convert the Babylonians. Ismaele appears and is accused of betraying his fellow Israelites, but Zaccaria pardons him since he has converted Fenena to Judaism. Just then, Abigaille enters with the High Priest of Baal and declares herself queen of Babylon. As she is about to crown herself, Nabucco appears and, furious at her actions, proclaims himself a god. For this arrogance, a thunderbolt strikes him down, and Abigaille takes the crown for herself.

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-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO

the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian "mezzo"=middle, medium)

CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

COUNTERTENOR

a male singing voice whose vocal range is equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano, or (less frequently) a soprano, usually through the use of falsetto

TENOR

the highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males

BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS

the lowest male voice

Part III

SCENE I: *The Hanging Gardens of Babylon*

Now ruler of Babylon, Abigail considers executing the Israelites. Nabucco enters and, in his crazed state, is easily tricked into signing the Israelites' death warrant. When he learns that Fenena will also be killed, Nabucco tries to find the document proving Abigail is not his daughter and therefore cannot rule. Abigail tears it to pieces in front of him and, despite Nabucco's pleas, refuses to spare Fenena.

SCENE II: *The banks of the Euphrates*

Enslaved and in exile, the Israelites think longingly of their homeland. Zaccaria has a vision in which they are freed from captivity and defeat the Babylonians.

Part IV

SCENE I: *Nabucco's royal apartments*

Nabucco watches helplessly from his locked room as Fenena and the Israelites are led to their death. In desperation, he prays to the God of Israel and promises to convert. His sanity miraculously restored, Nabucco leads his soldiers to save Fenena and take back his crown.

SCENE II: *The Hanging Gardens*

Just as the Israelites are about to be executed, Nabucco enters and pardons them. Abigail, overcome with guilt, poisons herself. She lives just long enough to give Fenena and Ismaele her blessing and to ask forgiveness from the God of Israel. Nabucco frees the Israelites, who join the Babylonians in praising the Lord.

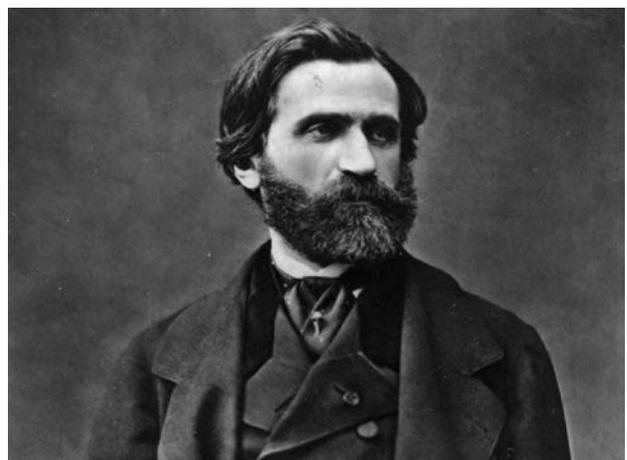


Photo: Marty Sohl/
Metropolitan Opera

WHO'S WHO IN NABUCCO

Character		Pronunciation Guide	Voice Type	The Lowdown
Nabucco	King of Babylon	nah-BOO-koh	Baritone	A fierce warrior and mighty king, Nabucco is brought to ruin by his unseemly pride. After declaring himself a god, he is struck insane until he begs forgiveness from the god of the Israelites.
Abigaille	A Babylonian princess, believed to be Nabucco's eldest daughter	ah-bih-GAH-ee-leh	soprano	Lovesick and bitter, Abigaille is a warrior woman determined to inherit her father's throne. The revelation that she is not in fact Nabucco's true daughter but the child of slaves only strengthens her resolve.
Zaccaria	High Priest of the Israelites	dzah-kah-REE-ah	Bass	Steadfast and pious, Zaccaria urges the Israelites to keep faith in their God.
Ismaele	The nephew of Jerusalem's king	ihs-mah-EH-leh	Tenor	While being held hostage in the Babylonian court, Ismaele falls in love with Fenena. When he saves her life, his fellow Israelites accuse him of treason.
Fenena	Babylonian princess, Nabucco's youngest daughter	feh-NAY-nah	Mezzo-soprano	Held hostage in Jerusalem, Fenena is deeply in love with Ismaele and converts to Judaism.
High Priest of Baal	The chief Babylonian religious official	bahl	Bass	After learning of Fenena's conversion, the High Priest becomes a staunch supporter of Abigaille, plotting to overthrow the king.
Anna	Zaccaria's sister	AHN-nah	Soprano	Anna defends Ismaele against accusations of treachery.
Abdallo	Babylonian soldier	ab-DAH-loh	Tenor	Fiercely loyal to the king, Abdallo helps Nabucco reclaim his throne.

- **1813** Verdi is born just outside of Busseto, a market town in Northern Italy.
- **1818** Rossini's opera *Mosè in Egitto* premieres in Milan. It will be revived several times over the following years and clearly influences the young Verdi in his choice of subject matter for *Nabucco*.
- **1832** Verdi moves to Milan to study composition.
- **1836** *Nabuchodonosor*, a French play by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu premieres in Paris. It is later translated into Italian.
- **1838** Verdi's firstborn daughter, Virginia, dies. Later that year, Antonio Cortese's ballet *Nabuccodonosor* premieres at La Scala.
- **1839** Barely a month before the November premiere of Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, his second child, Ilcico, dies. The opera is a moderate success and establishes the collaboration between Verdi and Temistocle Solera, who will later write the libretto for *Nabucco*.



Giuseppe Verdi around 1850

- **1840** While Verdi is in the midst of composing his second opera, the comedy *Un Giorno di Regno*, his wife Margherita dies at age 26. Devastated by the loss of his family and the disastrous reception of the new opera, Verdi abandons composition, claiming he will never write music again.

- **1841** Verdi is convinced by Bartolomeo Merelli, impresario at La Scala to embark on a new project and begins setting Solera's libretto, based on the biblical story of Nebuchadnezzar. *Nabucco* premieres on March 9 and is an immediate success, making the 28-year-old composer internationally famous.

- **1844** A group of Italian nationalists is executed while trying to free political prisoners and promote Italian independence. They are quickly adopted as martyrs for the cause of unified statehood; their deaths stir up rancor against the authorities, and support for the Italian independence movement strengthens across Europe.

- **1847** While in London, Verdi meets Giuseppe Mazzini, a leader of the Italian nationalist movement.

- **1859** The phrase "Viva Verdi" begins to appear across Italy as an acronym for "Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia." This pro-nationalist message expressed the desire for the King of Sardinia, Victor Emmanuel, to be made king of a unified Italy.

- **1861** Italian unification is achieved and Victor Emmanuel II is declared King of Italy.

- **1874** A highly respected public figure, Verdi is elected to the Italian Senate, although he rarely engages in any of its activities.

- **1901** Verdi dies at the age of 87 after suffering a stroke. Thousands of mourners gather in the streets of Milan and as part of the funeral celebrations, a young Arturo Toscanini conducts "Va, pensiero" with an ensemble of 800 singers.



THE REAL NEBUCHADNEZZAR

The historical King Nebuchadnezzar II is best remembered for his appearances in the Bible. Reigning for more than 40 years (c. 604–562 BC), he was known not only for maintaining the vast Babylonian empire through near-constant military campaigns, but also as a prodigious builder of cities. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon (located in modern-day Iraq) was a bustling metropolis of almost 200,000 people, stretching over three square miles. Traces of his building projects in the capital can still be seen today, and archeological evidence suggests that Babylon was overflowing with art and rich ornamentation. A reconstruction of the city's Ishtar Gate (built around 575 BC), including some of its original bricks, is housed in Berlin's Pergamon Museum.



Ancient Babylon's Ishtar Gate, in a reconstructed version at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin

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 *Nabucco* and the libretto.

"CHI S'AVANZA -- SALGO GIÀ DEL TRONO AURATO" (CD 1, TRACK 13, 03:06 - TRACK 14)

Abigaille has just revealed a scandalous secret: she is not the daughter of Nabucco, but rather the daughter of slaves! Hungry for power, terrified that Nabucco will refuse her the crown, and furious that her beloved Ismaele has fallen in love with Fenena (Nabucco's real daughter), Abigaille vows to seize power by any means necessary. The High Priest of the Babylonians enters. He announces that the Babylonian people have turned against Nabucco and Fenena, and that the army will help make Abigaille queen. Abigaille exults in her imminent ascent to the throne.

What to listen for:

- How Verdi intersperses the chorus (a large ensemble of singers) and Abigaille's solo song
- The difference between Abigaille's conversational music early in the scene (from "who approaches?" through "I shall be as brave as you have been") and her thrillingly virtuosic aria (beginning on the line "with bloody footprints, I will climb to the golden throne")

TRACK 13

(03:06)

Abigaille stands alone, in silence. Suddenly the orchestra bursts in, playing a short repeated pattern: first in a few instruments, and then growing in volume as more and more instruments join. It is as though the orchestra is itself the sound of footsteps, growing louder as the High Priest and his retinue approach.

(03:17)

The High Priest begins to tell Abigaille what he has seen. As the two converse, each line of text begins at a slightly higher pitch than the last. The result is a constant increase of tension, both musically and dramatically. Low instruments, including trombones and bassoons, play along with the High Priest's melody.

(03:37)

The accompaniment changes, becoming swift and decisive as the priest announces that "everything is ready."

(03:46)

The chorus enters to confirm the priest's words. Their music is repetitive and predictable. But Abigaille cannot wait for their song to finish before declaring, "I accept!" She interrupts their song, and her contrasting music squashes their rousing chorus. Verdi thus makes clear how eager, and how cruelly ambitious, she really is.

TRACK 14

(00:00)

A plot has been hatched, and Abigaille is ready to take action. But before she does she will indulge in an aria of extraordinary virtuosity, reveling in the excitement she feels at the prospect of ascending the throne. In this portion of the scene, Verdi has her repeat both text and music for dramatic effect. Which is the line of text that she repeats most often, and why do you think these are the words on which she fixates?

(00:54)

"The vengeance of Baal will thunder beside you," the chorus sings in thunderous voices, embodying musically what the text proclaims.

(01:20)

Abigaille repeats both the text and music from earlier, now heightened with even more elaborate ornaments.

(02:16)

Abigaille and the chorus join musical forces one more time, just as they will join forces to topple Nabucco.

"S'APPRESSAN GL'ISTANTI D'UN'IRA FATALE" (CD 2, TRACK 4)

A triumphant Abigaille is about to crown herself queen when Nabucco, assumed dead, suddenly enters. He snatches back his crown, and the four main characters (Nabucco, Abigaille, Ismaele, and Fenena) sing that the moment has arrived when all their fates will be decided. The music of this scene is an example of "imitative counterpoint," in which all of the individual voices sing the same music but begin at different times; imitative counterpoint is considered one of the most advanced techniques in a composer's toolbox.

What to listen for:

- Both the large-scale imitative counterpoint that plays out across the whole scene, and the smaller instances of imitation between two or three characters
- The dramatic effect of the texture: do the characters seem to be working together? Do they seem to be at odds with one another? Why do you say so?

- (00:00) The main melody of the scene is introduced by Nabucco. Note the simplicity of the orchestral accompaniment: the orchestra provides rhythmic drive, but the musical fireworks of this scene reside in the vocal counterpoint.
- (00:37) Abigaille "imitates" Nabucco's melody, singing the same material from the beginning while Nabucco continues moving forward.
- (01:02) Listen to how the text and melody jump back and forth between Abigaille and Nabucco. This is another example of imitative counterpoint, but on a very small scale.
- (01:13) Ismaele joins the ensemble, "imitating" the melody already sung by Abigaille and Nabucco. This does not de-rail the previous two characters, who each continue on their own musical tracks.
- (01:48) And now it is Fenena's turn to join the imitative counterpoint ensemble.
- (02:23) The chorus and orchestra enter as the final imitative voice in the ensemble. Although the ensemble creates a huge amount of sound, we can occasionally hear an individual character's voice above the fray: why do you think Verdi set up the texture this way?

"VA, PENSIERO, SULL'ALI DORATE" (CD 2, TRACK 10)

The Hebrews, now imprisoned on the banks of the Euphrates river in Babylon, sing a lament of longing for their homeland. This is the most famous piece in *Nabucco*, and one of the most famous songs that Verdi ever wrote.

What to listen for:

- The way the many individual voices move in perfect synchronization; this is called a "homophonic" musical texture (from *homo*, meaning "same," and *phony*, meaning "sound").
- The simplicity and balance of the musical phrases, which lend the song a gentle sweetness despite its sorrowful context

- (00:00) The orchestra paints a backdrop of despair and tedium, broken by the flute, which plays a soaring song reminiscent of a bird. At 00:25, sharp chords indicate the pain of the Hebrews' circumstance, but then fade away into a gently lilting accompaniment.
- (00:59) The chorus begins, floating over a waltz-like rhythm in the orchestra. This is a song not of rebellion but of "precious memory," and the homophonic vocal texture represents the strength that is to be found in togetherness. Note that homophonic music is often associated with hymns and other songs of communal religious devotion.
- (02:33) The text ("Oh, golden harp of our prophets, you hang silent on the willow tree") recalls the famous lines of Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon... we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps on the willows... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"
- (03:18) A single flute can be heard above the voices, like a bird trilling in the distance and reminding the captives of happier times.
- (03:40) As the Hebrews ask for courage, the first melody of the song returns, offering a sense of closure.

"OH, CHI PIANGE? -- DEL FUTURO NEL BUIO DISCERNO" (CD 2, TRACK 11)

As the lament of the chorus dies away, Zaccaria, the High Priest of the Hebrews, arrives. He chastises the Hebrews for their tears, and declares that he foresees not only the liberation of the Hebrews from the Babylonians' clutches, but also the destruction of Babylon itself.

What to listen for:

- How the music illustrates specific images in Zaccaria's speech
- How changes in the musical texture, in Zaccaria's song, and in the orchestra help to develop the dramatic structure of the scene

- (00:00) The rich chords of the Hebrews' lament have died away, and Zaccaria enters, speaking his opening lines to minimal orchestral accompaniment. The contrast suggests that Zaccaria's speech indicates the coming of something new.
- (00:15) "Rise up!" Zaccaria commands. The orchestra supports him with loud chords in the brass, offering a martial tone to his exhortation.
- (00:49) Zaccaria's prophesy begins, supported by a simple but assertive texture (chords played by French horns) in the orchestra.
- (01:23) The music begins to pick up steam, and soon Zaccaria is joined by the full chorus.
- (01:52) Blustering strings create the sound of wind, but then die away as Zaccaria sings that the winds will cease.
- (02:07) Can you hear "the owl" calling from the orchestra as Zaccaria says that "only the owl will be heard"?
- (02:29) Zaccaria begins singing a new, triumphant tune.
- (02:38) The chorus takes over Zaccaria's melody.
- (03:04) Zaccaria and the chorus join forces to sing a reprise of the music from 02:29. The musical excitement and energy continue to build, driving the scene to its celebratory end.

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the *My Highs & Lows* reproducible handout found in the back of this guide.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *NABUCCO*

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 Student Critique activity incorporates a reproducible sheet. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. The activity directs attention to details of the production that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The activity sheet is called *My Highs & Lows*. It serves to guide students toward a consistent set of objective observations, as well as to help them articulate their own opinions. It is designed to enrich the students' understanding of the art form as a whole. The ratings system encourages students to express their critique: use these ratings to spark discussions that require careful, critical thinking.

The *My Highs & Lows* handout can be found at the back of this guide.

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' *My Highs & Lows* sheet, as well as their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *Nabucco* experts.

At its heart, the story of *Nabucco* is a story about two cultures confronting each other's beliefs and ultimately finding a way to honor the other's humanity. While it's easy to focus solely on the opera's high drama and over-the-top theatricality, *Nabucco* raises serious questions about the nature of this confrontation and conversion. Three of the opera's major characters undergo radical personal transformations: Nabucco, from fearsome warrior to infirm madman, to religious convert; Abigaille, from vengeful villainess to guilt-wracked penitent; and Fenena, from a member of her native religion to a convert, all in the name of love.

Introduce the themes of confrontation and conversion and lead your students in a discussion about the ways in which confronting another belief system can challenge and even change one's own way of thinking. Remind students that conversion can mean many things, and that they do not need to limit their thoughts to religious beliefs. Specifically:

- What does it mean to confront another belief system?
- What do you think brings about the conversions in *Nabucco*? Fear? Desperation? Love?
- Can conversion, or a change of heart, occur without confrontation?
- Can confrontation and conflict be seen as a good thing? When and how?
- Do you think some of the characters' changes of heart are more authentic than others? Which ones and why?
- Do you have any examples of a confrontation or conversion from your own life? What made you change your thinking?

IN PRINT

Berger, William. *Verdi With a Vengeance: An Energetic Guide to the Life and Complete Works of the King of Opera*. New York: Vintage, 2000.

An engagingly written overview of Verdi's life and works from a regular Metropolitan Opera radio commentator, this is the most immediately accessible book on this list.

Budden, Julian. *The Operas of Verdi, Volume Three: From Don Carlos to Falstaff, 3rd revised ed.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Budden's three volumes cover all of Verdi's operas, describing the genesis of each work, the sources, and a full synopsis with musical examples. Budden's work remains the standard reference for Verdi scholarship.

Budden, Julian. *Verdi: Master Musicians, 3rd ed.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

A single volume biography and overview of Verdi's entire career, covering context and musical details. Accessible for non-specialists.

Philips-Matz, Mary Jane. *Verdi: A Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

An exhaustively researched biography of Verdi with full documentation of his life and travels, but less discussion of the works.

ONLINE

<http://www.verdi.san.beniculturali.it/verdi/?lang=en>

An Italian website for the Verdi Centennial in 2013, with extensive photos and articles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFsJt1362s>

A performance of "Va, pensiero" at the opera festival held in Italy's massive Arena di Verona, a 1st-century Roman amphitheater.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BfAZbi5UJg>

An introduction to Washington National Opera's 2012 production of Nabucco

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFweLd6U_bw

A video by the Royal Opera House describing how Nabucco's characters drive the opera's drama

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 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. Its characters are driven by passion to defy reason, morality, and the law. In order to reflect these emotional extremes, composers of verismo opera developed a musical style that communicates raw and unfiltered passions. 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.

December 9, 2016

Conducted by James Levine

Reviewed by _____

THE STARS:	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Plácido Domingo as Nabucco	*****	
Liudmyla Monastyrska as Abigaille	*****	
Russell Thomas as Ismaele	*****	
Jamie Barton as Fenena	*****	
Dmitry Belosselskiy as Zaccaria	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
Fenena and Ismaele are interrupted by Abigaille			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Nabucco arrives			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Abigaille forms a plan			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Zaccaria's prayer			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A coronation			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Nabucco's descent into madness			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Abigaille tricks her father			
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
The Israelites lament their lost homeland			
My opinion of this scene	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Nabucco regains his wits			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Fenena and the Israelites are saved			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
All praise the God of the Israelites			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
Abigaille begs forgiveness before dying			
My opinion of this scene:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5