

# Bringing Opera into Your Classroom

*There are several starting points for a study of opera:*

## English

Many operas are based on works of great playwrights such as Shakespeare, Goethe (Gounod's *Faust*), Sir Walter Scott (Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*), and Hugo (Verdi's *Rigoletto* and the musical *Les Misérables*).

## Science

Acoustics is as much an art as a science, yet acoustically sound theaters sometimes happen by accident. A concern of any opera singer is the acoustics of the theater in which the performance takes place. Although they will not be aware of the scientific concerns of "Q" or reverberation time, singers are aware of resonance and projection on stage. Scientifically-minded students might enjoy thinking about theaters from this point of view.

## Shop

The set designer, a type of architect, must work with the set builders to solve some very special and difficult problems. Sets must be sturdy and durable, yet easy to move around the stage for various scenes and break apart to be transported or stored. Properties or "props" (swords, handkerchiefs, cups and saucers, candles, lanterns, etc.) must be obtained or built in accordance to the time period of the opera. Safety is a major consideration, since, depending on the opera and the direction, as many as 150 performers may be on stage at a given time.

## History

Many operas are also based on historical subjects, but in order to make good theater, various fictitious characters are often introduced around the factual ones. An understanding of the historical background is vital to the enjoyment of such opera, just as it is with Shakespearean historical tragedies. For example, knowledge of the French Revolution would help one understand Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* or Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. History students might enjoy studying the revolution and the opera in relation to each other.

## Art

Opera shares with the spoken theater the need for realistic sets, props and costumes. It is difficult to paint sets and drops that look good under theatrical lighting. Set painting is a specialized art, and set and costume design require encyclopedic knowledge of historical architectural and clothing styles. A practical awareness of the added demands of stage movement for singing performers, who must project their voices over an orchestra, is also required.

## Foreign Languages

Since opera was created in Italy and developed in Europe, many operas are not in English, although operas are sometimes sung in translation and many English operas have been written over the last 100 years.

✦ In order to interest your "musically-challenged" students in opera, please keep these areas of study in mind. From costumers, make-up artists, technical directors, set designers, lighting designers, electricians, sound operators, carpenters, to marketing and development directors, and box office staff, none of these positions requires a music background. If the student has an interest in any facet of the theater, it is possible to have an appreciation for opera (and even a career!), without being a musician.