

The Conventions of Opera

Lesson Plan

A “convention” is generally accepted behavior. In real life, we have millions of cultural conventions that we mostly take granted. Opera is a stylized art form with certain conventions that might at first seem unusual to your students. However, generally when one enters a theatre, we “suspend our disbelief” and accept the theatrical, musical and dramatic conventions of the opera. Before you go to the opera, consider doing the following activities with your students that will familiarize them with opera’s conventions.

Preview and then share with your students segments of filmed operas - you can find thousands of these on YouTube.

- Challenge your students to describe what they are seeing and hearing. How many people are onstage? Describe the characters they see. Describe the voices they hear and the music. Can they describe the lights and sets? This may be more difficult than you expect, and refers to the fine arts standard of building a student’s artistic perception. Likewise, challenge the students to note those things - the obvious as well as the not so obvious - that you would not see in real life (for one thing, people singing aloud their thoughts and feelings!).
- Continue to show excerpts from operas, and start to give your students opera vocabulary so they can better describe and analyze the conventions and artistic choices they are seeing.
- Have you been watching the main characters? Try watching some of the others. How are they responding to the action? When do they sing? What are they doing when they are not singing?
- Watch the conductor and the orchestra. What musical instruments are making what sounds? Are there specific musical themes for each main character? What instruments play in the themes? Who is the conductor watching?
- Are you following the plot? What do you need to know in order to understand exactly what’s going on? Make a mental note of the ideas presented in the opera that you don’t understand and discuss them in each class the next day.
- In the opera, objects hold particular significance to the characters and to advancing the story: a candle, a key, a hat, a shoe, a coat, etc. Have the students watch the videotape of the opera and discuss the meaning of those symbols to each of those characters.
- Are there other symbolic objects that they notice? Discuss these as well.