



San Francisco Opera's Verdi's *La Traviata*

Curriculum Connections California Content Standards Grade 5 through Grade 12

LANGUAGE ARTS

WORD ANALYSIS, FLUENCY, AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Word origins

La Traviata ("via" means street or way in Italian) — woman who has lost her way, fallen woman

Consumption* — the word "consumption" has multiple definitions:

- 1) medical (illness / tuberculosis)
- 2) economic (the use of goods and services) *refer to "consumption" definition sheet

demimonde – (French) demi *half* + monde *world*

- 1) A class of women kept by wealthy protectors
- 2) A group having little respect or reputation

courtesan (from French *corte* 'court')

flapper — A young woman of the 1920s who flouted convention in her dress and behaviour/behavior.

"It" girl (*British*) A woman who is in vogue, typically as an actress, model, socialite, or the like. The term originally applied to actress Clara Bow, who starred in a film titled *It*.

Belle Epoque (French) Belle *Beautiful* Epoque *Era*

Fin-de-siecle (French) "end of the century"

Vocabulary Lists: Ex. Opera glossary, Music and Composition terms.

READING COMPREHENSION

Story Development: Character desires and motivation; Cause and effect: What made this happen?, sequencing of events, climax, resolution.

Read:

Opera source material: The novel, *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas, *filis* was based on real life people and events. Read stories about Marie du Plessis, Verdi and Giuseppina Strepponi.

Additional Jazz Age stories relevant to this production: *The Great Gatsby*, *Bernice Bobs her Hair*

Creative writing:

Reinterpret the story by creating a new version using your own characters, time period and setting.

Explore different genres of writing: poetry, song text, libretto, script for media arts, biography, autobiography, short story, historical novel, etc.

Explore literary devices such as the use of point of view, internal/external conflict, repetition of phrases and foreshadowing. Alfredo's theme *Un di felice*, first heard in the overture, is repeated throughout the opera.

“Misterioso, altero,
Croce e delizia al cor!”

“Mysterious, unattainable,
The torment and delight of my heart.”

In the aria *Sempre Libera*, Violetta is singing that she must be free. She hears Alfredo singing this phrase from offstage.

LITERARY RESPONSE AND ANALYSIS

Elements of a Story: Character, plot, setting, conflict.

Vocabulary: Reading for understanding using the subtitles on videos and related educator documents.

Genres: Fantasy vs. Reality, non-fiction, novel, play.

Themes:

The redemptive power of love

Love, loyalty, and duty (paternal, filial, friendship, class and love of self)

Self-Respect: Material vs. Moral Wealth & Status

Character actions and motives: how do characters' actions move story along?
What are characters' real motives? Contrasts of character traits drives story forward.

Symbolism/metaphors: The camellia is a symbol of the transience of life. Color can represent character and emotional states.

The language of flowers — How people use flowers to send messages.

Archetypes: The dying “fallen” woman who is more upstanding than the so-called “good” people, ardent young lover, paternal authority figure, entitled rich older man, fair weather friends, loyal servant.

Character Development: Growth & depth beyond expected roles of good and evil. Ex. Violetta proves to the father that she is a moral character.

Figurative Language: Simile, Metaphor, Hyperbole, Personification, Allegory.
Language style and music reflects emotion of characters (Violetta seems to think out loud, and her feverish gaiety masks true feelings. Alfredo's language is much simpler, more straightforward.)

WRITING STRATEGIES

Analysis and Interpretation: *La Traviata* production materials: artist biographies, program and program notes, synopsis, expository writing, critiques/reviews, etc.

Persuasive Writing: Letter writing (Alfredo writing letter to Violetta, Giorgio writing letter to Violetta, Violetta writing letter to Giorgio); copywriting: advertising, fundraising, press release.

Scenes, letters, diary or blog pages can be written from a particular character's point of view; make sure to take relationships between characters into account. Diary pages could focus on how characters convince themselves to do something (Violetta decides to give up Alfredo)—internal debate.

WRITTEN AND ORAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

Debates between characters. Deliver persuasive speeches, identify tactics used.

Facial cues, expressions, gestures can sometimes amplify message being delivered, or can sometimes run contrary to meaning of words (subtext).

LISTENING AND SPEAKING

Oral Speaking: Connection between the written words and oral interpretation (recitative and sung), the phrasing and musicality of speech.

Reflection: What did you see, think, hear and feel? Ex. Verbal & written responses to *La Traviata*.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Giuseppe Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave (composer and librettist): biographies, timelines of work.

Alexandre Dumas *fils*: biography, timeline of work.

Marie du Plessis: biography.

ACTIVITIES

Create a character sketch.

Story writing: Adapt existing source material; create story/characters. Or write new endings, deleted scenes.

Write a letter from one character to another; choose a moment in the story.

Create written copy: program, poster design, advertising, biography, etc.

Read and report on program articles and reviews. Write your own review of a performance of *La Traviata*. Compare and contrast two different versions of *La Traviata* available on DVD.

Design a fake facebook or myspace page for a character (exploring avatars—public vs. private persona). Write fake twitter log for characters over the course of 24 hours.

Read newspaper, magazine and web society pages and gossip columns:

- Have students create their own demimonde.
 - Create a society magazine, web magazine, talk show/entertainment program detailing the lives and intrigues of characters.
 - Create diary/blog pages/Twitter blasts/web avatars for the characters in *La Traviata*.
 - Conduct debates between characters.
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MATHEMATICS

MEASUREMENT:

Create a set for *La Traviata* to scale.

Look at maps of Paris and surroundings; measure distances from the city to the country.

Design a menu with recipes (with measurements) for Violetta's party.

NUMBER SENSE

Percentages: what % of her money does Violetta spend on clothes, flowers, food and wine, parties, transportation? How much money will she need to sustain her and Alfredo's lifestyle in the country? What would it cost in today's money?

What type of currency was used in France in the 1850's? What were average wages? How did Alfredo support himself? How much allowance would he need to get from his father each month?

ACTIVITIES

Create a card game for the ACT III party. *See attached reference to *La Traviata* playing cards designed by Erté.

STATISTICS

Research tuberculosis statistics: % of French/European population affected during time of opera, age and social-economic status of afflicted.

Chart mortality rate/lifespan of tuberculosis victims.

Compare infectious diseases and infection rates during different time periods.

SCIENCE

Life Sciences

Identification of body parts important to performing. Ex. Diaphragm, larynx, throat, mouth, etc.

Identification of body parts associated with hearing music, how ears work.

Identification of body parts associated with viewing opera, how eyes work.

Identification of parts of the body affected by tuberculosis. Discuss lung function. What causes tuberculosis? Is there a cure? History of tuberculosis treatment, history of infectious diseases.

Plants: research life cycle of flowers

What are the characteristics of camellias, and their country of origin?

Flower color and plant genetics

Physical Sciences

Sound: Voice, Instruments, Acoustics, Amplification, Recording.

ACTIVITIES

Measure lung capacity with balloons. What percentage of lung capacity do we use? Learn about medical equipment used to measure lung capacity.

Draw diagrams of lungs.

Chart and graph mortality rate/lifespan of tuberculosis victims. Compare during different time periods.

SOCIAL STUDIES

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Self-Identity & Cultural Identity.

Family (Immediate & Extended), Friends & Community.

Time: Past, Present, Future.

Place: Neighborhood, City, State, Continent, World, Universe.

CIVICS

Social Hierarchy: Class, Status. Ex. aristocracy, servants.

Types of Government: Monarchy.

Political events during Verdi's time.

Labor / Economics: What jobs and occupations were available to men and women? What do average workers in different positions earn? What do women earn compared to men?

GEOGRAPHY

La Traviata's setting: The time period and place of the original opera vs. current production.

Mapping Europe/France/Paris during time period of opera.

Location of Verdi's birth. Where else did he live?

HISTORY

What was life like in 19th century Paris? Politics, society, etc.?

Explore 19th century Paris demimonde: How did this time period influence the creation of *La Traviata* and its source material?

Learn about the time period when Giuseppe Verdi lived (1813-1901). What are the differences and similarities to when Verdi lived in Europe and now?

Explore Verdi's role in Italian history: nationalism and unification.

Why would a designer choose to change original setting of opera from 19th century Paris to Jazz Age?

Explore different cultures of partying/consumption: 19th century Paris demimonde, Jazz Age in Paris and New York, 1970's club scenes in New York, modern and contemporary "scenes".

Explore the role of women during this specific time period and throughout history.

Connections between courtesan culture in Asia and in Europe; influence of Asian culture on 19th century Europe.

Origins and evolution of romance and marriage.

History of Opera: How Opera began, history of San Francisco Opera, history of the Adler Fellow Program.

ACTIVITIES

Design a table setting for the party in Act I. Choose where different characters would sit according to their status.

Design a table setting for a dinner at which important figures of Verdi's time are gathered: politicians, writers, musicians, artists, etc (find photos to fill in spots at the table). Do the same for the Jazz Age, Warhol New York era, 21st Century scene.

Pick another time period in which to set *La Traviata*. Research and design costumes and sets to reflect trends, society at that time.

Study photos from *The Material World* by Peter Menzel: what kind of possessions define people? What kinds of things are people willing to do to acquire possessions? Does Violetta live in a material world?

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

MOVEMENT

Walking, dancing, jumping, balancing, leaping, lifting, etc. Ex. Move your body in different ways using the example of each character.

Choreograph dances for party scenes in *La Traviata*.

Explore games and activities played in the mid-19th century.

PHYSICALITY OF PERFORMING

Endurance & strength, posture, breathing techniques.

TEAM-BUILDING

Partner dancing, changing partners, partnering exercises, mirroring activities.

Explore social dancing and dance etiquette of 19th century France and of Jazz Age (Charleston, Foxtrot, shimmy, rag).

HEALTH EDUCATION

The unifying ideas of health literacy are as follows:

- Acceptance of personal responsibility for lifelong health
- Respect for and promotion of the health of others
- An understanding of the process of growth and development
- Informed use of health-related information, products, and services

Gender roles & body image.

Taking care of your body. Ex. What do performers have to do to prepare their body for performing?

Study hygiene as it pertains to the spread of TB.

Research development of TB vaccine.

Research substance abuse, addiction and how people use different means to deaden or mask pain or other problems.

Dealing with emotions, stress. Having someone to confide in to deal with stress. Ex. Violetta's maid cares for her.

Conflict resolution. Ex. Alfredo's father demands Violetta leave him.

Family life

Sex education.

Violence and danger. Ex. Duel in Act III.

CAREER TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Jobs at the Opera.

Organizational Chart

Research famous sopranos and tenors who have played the roles of Violetta and Alfredo.

Artistic traditions within families (Alexandre Dumas and Alexandre Dumas *fils*; Placido Domingo (L.A. Opera General Director) and Marta Domingo (production designer of L.A. Opera's *La Traviata*)).

VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

MUSIC

STORYTELLING & MUSIC: WHAT IS AN OPERA?

Key plot points: The composer and librettist determine the placement of arias within the libretto to heighten emotion in the story.

Character and plot development through musical themes.

Instruments representing characters, repetition and variation of themes.

Listen for musical themes and variations; how do variations elicit different responses?

Listen for counterpoint in duets, especially duet between Alfredo and Violetta in Act I.

How do singing voices approximate human emotion? Especially coloratura soprano performance.

Study form of bel canto aria (i.e. Alfredo's Act II aria)

VOCABULARY

Musical Structure: Solos, duets, trios, choral numbers.

Composition: Arias, recitative, overture, incidental music

Musical Instructions: Tempo, legato; pianissimo; crescendo, etc.

Voice ranges: Soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, bass-baritone, countertenor, bass.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

History of San Francisco Opera, the Adler Fellows program.

Research famous sopranos and tenors who have played the roles of Violetta and Alfredo.

Giuseppe Verdi: Biography, timeline of works, signature sound within genres: sonatas, symphonies, masses and requiem, operas.

ACTIVITIES

Listen to multiple recordings of *La Traviata* and study different interpretations.

Learn and memorize songs from *La Traviata*.

Create and perform songs for the characters/events of *La Traviata* using instruments and voices.

Compare structure of bel canto arias to structure of modern-day songs; examine for similar patterns.

Study score of *La Traviata*: [http://imslp.org/wiki/La_Traviata_\(Verdi,_Giuseppe\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/La_Traviata_(Verdi,_Giuseppe))

Explore the fallen woman persona through music. *See additional information on songs written in different time periods by composers such as (Coward, Porter, Ellington, et al. *Lady is a Tramp*, *Love for Sale*, *Sophisticated Lady*, *Poor Little Rich Girl*) and popular songs (Donna Summer's *Bad Girls*, Madonna's *Material Girl*, Lady Gaga's *The Fame*).

VISUAL ARTS

How are line, color, shape, and texture used in costumes and sets of *La Traviata*?

COLOR

Symbolism of color; color associated with particular characters.

Symmetry/contrast in character pairings.

Examine contrast of light and dark; use of lighting.

SHAPE

The use of shape in character design.

Positive & Negative Space—the stage is a frame.

TEXTURE

Texture: Material use in sets and costumes.

Visual Texture: Pattern and repetition in sets and costumes.

SPACE

Set design: From 2D plans to 3D construction.

ACTIVITIES

Free-association drawing to music. Ex. Figure drawings by Degas, posters by Toulouse-Lautrec.

Study portraiture, both photographic and painted/drawn. How do portraits communicate the character of the sitter? Create self-portraits and portraits of *La Traviata* characters. Make decisions about how person will be portrayed.

Look at works of art from mid-19th century Paris, especially those depicting demimonde. Examine pictures of courtesans and actresses. Look for particular symbolism, colors, ways they are depicted.

Study the development of photography, how does photography affect painting (point of view, atmosphere). Take portraits in style of photographers Félix Nadar, Weegee, Gordon Parks, Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Annie Leibowitz.

Study photos from *The Material World* by Peter Menzel: what kind of possessions define people? What kinds of things are people willing to do to acquire possessions?

Create celebrity collages or illustrations (inspired by Warhol) of characters in *La Traviata*. Express character traits through symbolism, fashion.

If studying the tradition of Day of the Dead, create an altar for Violetta.

Production Design

Listen to the music and read the libretto prior to viewing the opera. Choose design elements based on the music and text.

Design paper dolls of characters. Dress them for different eras.

Create illustrations and storyboards outlining the plot of *La Traviata*.

Design a production: diaramas, scale models, backdrops, props, costumes.

Design character make-up, costume, sets and props for classroom operas.

RELATED WORKS OF ART

Opera & Visual Art: Study the work of visual artists who have designed performing arts productions: Gerald Scarfe, David Hockney, Julie Taymor, Marc Chagall, Maurice Sendak, Oskar Kokoschka, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, William Kentridge, Gianni Versace, Bill Viola.

THEATRE

Explore culture of celebrity, stardom.

STAGING

Stage vocabulary: Upstage, downstage, levels, blocking.

Theater Exercises: Tableaux, pantomime, improvisation, vocal projection.

Stage etiquette & audience behavior.

Opera Production Team: Director, stage manager, choreographer, designer, diction coach, choreographer, lighting, supernumeraries, etc.

In-House Personnel: Marketing, accounting, ticket takers, ushers etc.

Research source material of *La Traviata*: play by Alexandre Dumas fils.

Research famous actresses who have played Camille/Violetta role.

ACTIVITIES

Create tableaux of scenes in *La Traviata*.

DANCE

Dance and Creative Movement in Stage-Blocking. Ex: Party scene in Act I, dance scene in Act III.

Fight Choreography. Ex. Fight in Act III.

ACTIVITIES

Character Dances: Mirror dancing—partners and symmetry.

Create dances/movement based on character's emotion; Use vocabulary to describe movement.

Interpret emotions through dance. Ex. Joy, fear, sadness.

Interpreting the instruments through dance— improv to music.

Create a dance for scenes that need it. Ex. Act I party scene.

Choose a dance style that best represents each character.

Study dances based on *La Dame aux Camellias*: Frederick Ashton's *Marguerite and Armand*; John Neumeier's *La Dame aux Camellias* set to Chopin.

Explore social dancing and dance etiquette of 19th century France and of Jazz Age (Charleston, Foxtrot, shimmy, rag).

MEDIA ARTS

Research how innovations in technology have influenced the development of Opera: Acoustics and Lighting, Audio Recording, Film and Video, the development of Supertitles, Internet.

Learn about technology currently used by SF Opera: Technology used in staging, SFO's Media Suite, podcasts, cinemacasts, simulcasts, opera vision, etc.

Learn about experiments in future technology use involving opera, such as the development of Personal Opera @ MIT Media Lab, *Death and the Powers*.

Use television, films, web content to teach media literacy.

Opera & Popular Culture: Cartoons (Bugs Bunny in *What's Opera, Doc?*, *The Wabbit of Seville*); Television (*Sesame Street*); Movies (*Pretty Woman*); Commercials (Nike's 1993 ad *Charles Barkley of Seville*); Event themes (*Nessun Dorma - 1994 World Cup*).

Films & DVD of *La Traviata* and other operas, related films: *Camille*, *Pretty Woman*, *Gigi*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Sweet Charity*,

ACTIVITIES

Film and Animation: Explore photographic stopmotion techniques. Ex. Use digital media to create 1-minute scenes from *La Traviata*.

Use digital audio to record student readings, musical performances.

Create a 30-second audio spot, a one-minute podcast, and/or a *La Traviata* activities website.