



San Francisco Opera's

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Getty's Usher House and Debussy's La Chute de la Maison Usher

Curriculum Connections

California Content Standards
Kindergarten through Grade 12

VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

MUSIC

STORYTELLING & MUSIC: WHAT IS AN OPERA?

Character and plot development through musical themes. What is the difference between major and minor keys and how do changes between keys help tell the story?

How do instruments represent characters and emotions? Identify repetition and variation of themes.

Musical moods. Legato vs. staccato, adagio vs. allegro.

How does orchestral music enhance what characters are singing? How does it act as another character?

Call and response between singers and instruments.

How does music associated with a particular character reflect their class or status?

Explore how the composer creates different kinds of music for different moments in the story.

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

Compare the styles of the two pieces? How does the style differ? How do they portray the story with their music differently?

What is a prelude? What is the mood of Debussy's prelude? How does it set the stage for the story?

What is a scherzo? Find examples of scherzi in Debussy's music.

Identify the solos, duets, trios, quartets in the opera.

What kind of music would Debussy's French audience have expected at the time?

What makes music feel scary? Rhythms, minor keys, tempo, pitch (high strings), dynamics

Explore the mad scenes of opera.

Learn more about how Robert Orledge completed Debussy's unfinished opera.

The power of music can be used to change emotional states. How can sound, in general, be used to elicit emotions?

How is orchestra set up in pit? What are instruments in an orchestra? Tuning of different instruments.

Source material for Opera: Novels (Puccini's *La Bohème*, Tan & Wallace's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*); Films (*The Fly*), Real-life events (Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, Adams' *Nixon in China*); Related genres – Musical Theater (*Sweeney Todd*, *Rent*), Rock Opera (*Tommy*), popular song versions of opera.

VOCABULARY

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

Composition: Arias, recitative, prelude, overture, incidental music.

Musical terms: Coda, Cadenza, Transposed, Coloratura

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

Voice ranges: Soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, bass-baritone, countertenor, bass. Identify voice parts of different characters.

What is opera seria? What is opera buffa? What kind of opera is *The Fall of The House of Usher*?

Research “mad scenes” in opera and other forms of the performing arts. These scenes were popular during the Romantic revival of the first half of the 19th century (Giselle)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Research the history of San Francisco Opera, the Adler Fellows program.

Explore the life of Claude Debussy: Biography, timeline of works, signature sound.

Explore the life of Gordon Getty: Biography, timeline of works, signature sound.

Research other musicians working before or at the same time as Debussy; how was he different from everyone else? What kinds of composers came after Debussy?

Research Debussy's “impressionistic” style and his musical innovations.

What were common topics of operas during Debussy's time?

Explore musical instruments used in this opera; have they changed since Debussy's time? How have instruments evolved over time?

Read Getty's forward to the libretto of *Usher House*. <http://gordongetty.com/uploads/Usher-House.pdf>
How is his approach to Poe's text different than Debussy's?

ACTIVITIES

Listen to multiple recordings of *The Fall of The House of Usher* and study different interpretations.

Learn and memorize songs from *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Listen to musical “mad scenes” from various operas; how do composers dramatize those moments?

Create and perform songs for the characters/events of *The Fall of The House of Usher* for instrument and voice.

Graph out characters in the opera; while watching a clip of the opera, fill out chart describing look, movement, voice of each character. How does the director tell the story through these details?

Listen to other musical compositions based on Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher,” such as Alan Parson's Project, or Philip Glass's opera.

Recreate the opera's story using different styles of music. Ex. *The Fall of The House of Usher*: the hip hop opera.

VISUAL ARTS

How are line, color, shape, and texture used in costumes and sets of *The Fall of The House of Usher*?

LINE

Use of line qualities: soft or hard, wavy or angular, silly spirals.

COLOR

Symbolism of color; color associated with particular characters. How do colors of costumes define characters?

Symmetry/contrast in character pairings. Ex. Roderick/Madeline.

Examine contrast of light and dark; use of lighting.

The emotion of color. Ex. red=passionate, blue=calm, yellow=cheerful.

Revealing character traits through the use of color—how do the characters' costumes, including fabrics and colors, reflect their status?

What colors would you use for different moments in the opera?

Explore personal associations with color.

The use of lighting to establish mood and setting.

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. How is texture used to convey status?

SPACE

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

PRODUCTION DESIGN

The use of projections in this production.

ACTIVITIES

Look at designs for the sets of *The Fall of The House of Usher*; would you design the sets in the same ways?

Design sets and costumes for a production of *The Fall of The House of Usher* set in a different time and place of your choosing.

Explore the time period that *The Fall of The House of Usher* is set in and what people wore during that time. Create a doll or draw what your costumes would look like.

Design gowns for Madeline, for both the romantic moments and the death scene. What colors would she wear?

If you were to update the costumes, what time period would you set Usher?

Explore the different ways that you might make the House of Usher collapse and sink into the ground?

Research Scottish clothing and textiles during the period of the opera.

Create posters and advertisements for the opera, or for a particular character in the opera.

Explore the history of typefaces; design the title in an appropriate typeface.

Create illustrations and storyboards outlining the plot of *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Free-association drawing to music. Ex. Maurice Sendak's *Fantasy Sketches*.

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

Puppetry: Create your own version of *The Fall of The House of Usher* using puppets (paper bags, stick puppets, shadow puppets, marionettes, and bunraku).

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

Listen to audio-only examples prior to viewing the opera. Choose design elements based on the music and text.

Draw silhouettes of characters; draw characters in other styles, like anime.

Create an advertisement for a performance of *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Compare two different staged and/or filmed versions of *The Fall of The House of Usher*; which visualization is more effective and why?

Assign students to be patrons and others to be artists; patrons commission artists to create portraits using certain instructions.

Explore scale in production design; how do imposing sets make people look small? How do you make something that fits on an opera set? What is the scale of a tree on a set?

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.

Illustrated children's books of operas.

Research the art and literature of the period, including Poe's *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Watch animated versions of this story.

THEATRE

Examine storyline, character development through theater games (similar to writing exercises in ELA connections).

Practice movement required for a party scene or other crowd scenes. How do individuals act like individuals in a crowd scene?

Practice walking like Roderick and Edgar Allan Poe. How are their walks different?

Play “status” games. How do people act differently toward you based on your class or job status?

Practice walking like a member of the opposite sex. How do you carry yourself differently?

How do performers move onstage differently than offstage? How do they have to move so that the audience can translate their movements?

How do the performers act when they're singing their thoughts vs. singing to each other?

STAGING

Stage vocabulary: Upstage, downstage, levels, blocking.

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

What is a freeze frame? Term used during a live performance of a play or opera, the actors/actresses will freeze at a particular, pre-determined time, to enhance a particular scene, or to show an important moment in the play/production. The image can then be further enhanced by spoken word or song, in which each character tells their personal thoughts regarding the situation. When does this happen in *Usher*? What scenes do you think are worthy of a “freeze frame”?

How does a scene fill the space on a stage?

Recreate a scene in the opera with 3 or more characters.

What part of the opera would you stage differently?

Identify other forms of staging in the opera.

Explore the mad scene. How does the opera's depiction of “madness” reflect the interests of the romantic period?

Talking to the 4th wall

Design two separate Usher sets with two separate groups – one with a large budget and one with a small budget.

The idea of a double bill. Why would an opera house or a theater do two pieces of work together? Different or the same. If you were a general director, why would it be important to put two versions of the same story back to back.

Stage etiquette & audience behavior.

THEATRE JOBS

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

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

ACTIVITIES

Act out scenes about the themes from the opera: madness, jealousy, friendship and loyalty, etc.

Act out characters and emotions in gestures: shyness, snobbery, bravado, persuasion. How can you exaggerate gestures to show emotion? Other students guess who you are.

Act out scenes from opera in different settings and times (Roderick lives in San Francisco in 1960's).

Students pick characters to portray; determine how they would act out story. Examine how characters play off each other. Partnering.

Create movement and gestures to react to particular lines of the libretto.

Create movement to react to particular musical moments.

Create tableaux of different scenes.

Improvise prologues and epilogues to the story.

DANCE

Dance and Creative Movement in Stage-Blocking. Ex: Madeline's dance.

How is dance incorporated into the opera, into the music of the opera? How are dances used in operas?

How is age and gender communicated through the way performers move in a dance?

What are the roles of choreographers, dance captains and dancers?

ACTIVITIES

Character Dances: Mirror dancing—partners and symmetry.

Match movement with vocabulary. Ex. glide, slither, leap, tremble.

Interpret emotions through dance. Ex. Joy, fear.

Interpreting the instruments through dance—improv to music.

Choose a dance style that best represents each character. Ex. Roderick and Madeline.

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 (The Godfather); Commercials (Nike's 1993 ad Charles Barkley of Seville); Event themes (Nessun Dorma - 1994 World Cup).

Watch DVD of *The Fall of The House of Usher* and other operas. Watch different productions and compare.

Research clips of *The Fall of The House of Usher* found on the Internet.

Explore the use of the story of The Fall of The House of Usher in popular culture (ex: *The Simpsons*)

Why do people constantly remake pieces of work? What movies do you see redone over and over? Theater works? Fairy tales? Literature? Etc.?

ACTIVITIES

Film and Animation: Explore photographic stop motion techniques. Ex. Use digital media to create 1-minute scenes from *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Create a poster to advertise a performance of *The Fall of The House of Usher*. What information needs to be included? What typeface would be appropriate?

Create a fake blog or Facebook page for one of the characters.

Share your opera knowledge by creating a wiki for *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Storyboard the opera.

Create a montage of scenes from the opera to tell the story.

Use digital audio to record student readings, musical performances.

Create a 30-second audio spot, a one-minute podcast, and/or a *The Fall of The House of Usher* activities website.

Explore history of opera recordings—some of the earliest recordings.