



## 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

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## LANGUAGE ARTS

### WORD ANALYSIS, FLUENCY, AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

#### **Phonics and Phonemic Awareness:**

Letter Recognition: Name the letters in a word. Ex. Usher = U-s-h-e-r.

Letter/Sound Association: Name the letters and the beginning and ending sound in a word. R-oderic-k

Match and list words with the same beginning or ending sounds. Ex. Poe and Primus have the same beginning letter "P" and sound /p/; but end with the different letters and ending sounds.

Syllables: Count the syllables in a word. Ex.: Ma-de-line

Match and list words with the same number of syllables. Clap out syllables as beats. Ex.: 1 syllable 2 syllables 3 syllables bass = bass tenor = ten-or soprano = so-pra-no

Phoneme Substitution: Play with the beginning sounds to make silly words. What would a "boprano" sound like? (Also substitute middle and ending sounds.) Ex. *soprano*, *boprano*, *toprano*, *koprano*.

Phoneme Counting: How many sounds in a word? Ex. bell = 3

Phoneme Segmentation: Which sounds do you hear in a word? Ex. bell = b/e/l.

#### **Definitions:**

Find words in *The Fall of The House of Usher* that are unfamiliar and find definitions and roots.

Learn Opera vocabulary: soprano, mezzo-soprano, bass.

#### **Word analysis:**

Examine contrasting vocabulary. Create lists of good vs. evil words from opera; write definitions.

Take lines from Italian libretto and translate the text using Google translate or Babelfish; do the supertitles match exactly? If not, why not?

Find analogies in *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Explore the use of metaphors, ex.: the house.

Concepts of Print: Sentence structure, punctuation, directionality.

Parts of speech: Noun, verb, adjective, adverb, prepositions.

## **Reading Comprehension:**

Story Development: Character desires and motivation;

Cause and effect: What made this happen? Sequencing of events, climax, resolution.

Read: Source material for *The Fall of The House of Usher*, libretto, letter from Poe, biographies, etc.

Read sections of the English translation of the libretto. Write a brief synopsis based on the libretto.

Read the original Edgar Allan Poe novel, *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Types of text: Poetry, fairy tale, song text, libretto, script for media arts, biography, etc.

Reading Skills: Build skills using the subtitles on the video and related educator documents.

## CREATIVE WRITING

Creative writing: Interpret the story and create a new version. Create your own characters.

Write about main characters' before the story starts. Write about Rodericks's childhood.

Write an alternative ending. Where would you begin your new ending?

Explore the emotions and motivations of the various characters.

How could the story have ended differently if characters had worked out their differences constructively?

Write about a good character or an evil character.

Pick a scene and write from the point of view of the house.

Put yourself in the position of one of the characters; make an argument for your philosophy of life.

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, foreshadowing, building of tension.

## LITERARY RESPONSE AND ANALYSIS

### **Elements of a Story:**

Character, plot, setting, conflict.

Identify rising action, climax, falling action.

### **Vocabulary:**

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

Libretto, soprano, tenor, parlando, adaptation, etc.

Hyperesthesia, hypochondria, fantasmagorical, macabre, spectral, Gothic.

Dual meanings of the phrase "House of" – the building or the family.

**Genres:**

Gothic

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

Play 15-minute segments of the opera; students journal after watching the segments.

Students respond to a letter from Roderick asking them for advice.

Chart out the elements of the plot.

Read a synopsis of Act I; how would you complete this story?

Examine the use of letters in operas or other works of art. How do they act as plot devices?

Examine character development: do the characters grow beyond their expected roles?

**Themes:**

Examine the themes of the opera:

Gothic – What are Gothic themes?

Natural vs. supernatural.

Love & Madness - Claustrophobia and paranoia, deception, self-centeredness, envy, grief, bitterness, rage, evil; The spread of madness and how easy it is to get swept away by others. Artist and sensitivity (madness). Madness vs. reality. Madness of reality. Sensitivity and weakness.

Family - familial influence, family feuds, religion. Incest.

Repressed fears and desires, Redemption and Resurrection.

Suspense (vs. violence) and the association of frightening things with impending violence.

Death and The Afterlife

**Character actions and motives:**

Explore each lead character's actions and why they do the things they do.

How do the contrasting characters traits in *The Fall of The House of Usher* drive the story forward?

What are Roderick's character traits? Edgar Allan Poe?

How do characters' actions move story along?

How could characters have changed their actions to alter the course of the story?

What are characters' real motives?

Explore the dynamics between the doctor and the brother in the Debussy. How does their relation differ from Getty's opera.

Madeline is heard off stage, but not seen - Is she real or imagined? Is Madeline a figment of Roderick's imagination. Is she his "madness"?

The relationship between friend and Roderick – they are childhood friends, but he didn't know that Roderick had a twin. The House disappears in the end and the friend escapes. What does that mean he is the only character remaining to tell the tale? Would anyone believe him?

**Archetypes:**

The sensitive, mad artist

The beauty gone mad

The loyal friend

**Character Development:**

Analyze the characters in the opera. What motivates their actions? What are their main traits?

How does Roderick change over time?

How does the character of Madeline develop over time?

Do you see Edgar Allan Poe as a strong character or a weak character?

Are the characters emotionally strong or weak?

How are characters developed through dialogue and soliloquy? How do characters change over course of opera?

How could the characters have altered their actions for a more favorable outcome? How are characters affected by outside events beyond their control? How do they react?

Examine character development: do the characters grow beyond their expected roles?

Pick your favorite character in the opera and describe him/her. Write a letter from his/her point of view to another character.

Examine the use of works of art in the opera, ex: *The Haunted Palace* (song) and *The Mad Tryst* (novel).

**Figurative Language: Simile, Metaphor, Hyperbole, Personification, Allegory:**

Language style and music reflects emotion of characters, and instrumental sounds or musical phrases can be used symbolize character.

What does the house symbolize in the title itself? The last generation of Ushers, the madness in the house. Is there something rotten with the house or rotten with the family?

The anthropomorphizing of objects blurs the lines between living things and inanimate objects, such as the house.

The “House of Usher” has double meaning, as the word “house” could refer to the genetic line of the Usher family.

Held captive in the house, Madeline feels trapped and claustrophobic.

With *The Mad Tryst*, there is the telling of a story within the story, and the frightening noises happen while he’s telling the story.

**COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

How do scary stories differ across cultures? Compare them to the gothic tale.

Explore other works of literature in which characters go mad.

Compare different types of horror stories.

Compare the difference in how the two operas use the narrator. Getty’s opera has Poe as the story’s narrator. The doctor is given a name in the Getty Opera and he quotes other works of Poe.

Compare and contrast how Debussy and Getty use or depart from the original source material. Getty’s story opens word for word.

Why did Poe incorporate the story of *The Mad Tryst* of Sir Lancelot Canning to into his tale? How does the story parallel what's happening in Roderick's life and his current state of madness? Actions in the story happen simultaneously as Madeline is forcing herself out. Does she represent the dragon in the story?

Metaphor: Madeline shrieks at the moment when the dragon shrieks as it dies.

## WRITING STRATEGIES

### **Analysis and Interpretation:**

Expository writing, critiques/reviews

Poetry, fairy tale, song text, libretto, script for media arts, biography, program, program article, synopsis, etc.

*The Fall of The House of Usher* production materials: artist biographies, program and program notes, synopsis, expository writing, critiques/reviews, etc.

How does Debussy grab attention at beginning of opera with his prelude? How does Poe grab the reader's attention?

Composer/librettist may take liberty in bringing in the characters from another story and in portraying well-known figures from history, such as Poe and his characters.

If you are basing your work off of someone else's but take liberties, what do you owe the initial creator?

Curatorial combination – taking source material and mashing it up. Using poetic license.

### **Persuasive Writing:**

Letter writing, 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—internal debate or use stream of consciousness.

Explore biographies of the historical characters; write biographies of their real-life counterparts. How does their depiction in the opera correspond to historical accounts?

Research the source materials for *The Fall of The House of Usher*. How does the opera differ from the story? What do they share in common?

Write a modern-day version.

Write a different ending for the opera.

Write or draw a deleted scene for the opera; a scene we hear about, but don't see.

Persuasive writing: create posters, advertisements for one of the characters.

Keep journals from the point of view of the characters during the events of the opera.

Write a "me" poem for each of the characters: begin the poem with "I am" and list the characteristics of each person in separate phrases.

Write parrot poems from the point of view of the characters. Parrot poems are conversational poems in which partners write each line in turn.

Rewrite libretto using today as a setting. Use contemporary characters: who would be Roderick today? Madeline?

Rewrite a scene from the opera, switching the genders of the characters. How does the scene change? Rewrite a scene, changing the ethnicities. How does it change?

Write a passage expressing several characters' inner thoughts at the same time.

Writing exercise in which feelings are expressed like those in *The Fall of The House of Usher* arias.

Create a storyboard of *The Fall of The House of Usher* as manga.

## WRITTEN AND ORAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

Spelling: Spell the names of the characters in *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Watch different versions of the opera on DVD and write reviews. Read example reviews first.

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

Write a monologue with two scenes based on the alternate points of view held by a single character.

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

Analyze ensembles; how does music allow multiple people to say very different things at the same time? Can you do this in spoken word—improv activity

## LISTENING AND SPEAKING

### **Oral Speaking:**

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

Act out main events of the story, in tableaux or longer scenes. Improvise. Give small groups different scenes, and then act out in succession.

Write two speeches about the same thing; write one to be delivered to a friend, and one to be delivered to a person of authority. How does your language differ?

### **Reflection:**

What did you see, think, hear and feel? Ex. Verbal & written responses to *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Composers Debussy and Getty: Biographies, timeline of works.

Settings of story, opera. Where do characters come from?

## ACTIVITIES

Create a character sketch.

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

Libretto writing: Adapt *The Fall of The House of Usher* (existing source material) or create a new story/characters.

Write a prequel for the opera about Roderick's and Madeline's life.

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 *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Compare and contrast two different versions of *The Fall of The House of Usher* available on DVD.

Create a news report about The Fall of The House of Usher using HyperStudio.

Write a Dear Abby letter from one of the characters in the opera, and Abby's response. Read newspaper, magazine and web society pages and gossip columns:

Write a blog post or 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.

- Have students create their own social scene.
- 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 *Lucia di Lammermoor*.
- Conduct debates between characters.
- Using a letter from one character to another in the opera; edit the letter down to a tweet or Facebook post.

Read and report on the Feature Article from the opera program.

Create a board game for the opera, similar to The Game of Life.



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### **MATHEMATICS**

#### ATTRIBUTES

*Comparisons in The Fall of The House of Usher.*

Sorting and Classifying: What belongs, what does not belong, and why. Ex. Roderick and Madeline are of the House of Usher, while Edgar Allan Poe, Doctor Primus, Le Médecin and Friend are visitors.

#### MEASUREMENT

*The Fall of The House of Usher's* Use of Standard Units of Measurement in Story & Set Design.

2D & 3D Dimensions: Area, Perimeter, Volume, Scale, Proportion, Ratio.

Weight: Physical, Metaphorical, Balance.

Time: Passage of time (real & theatrical time), times of day (morning, afternoon and night; yesterday, today, tomorrow; time of everyday events such as dinner & bed time), estimation, reading time, age of characters.

What currency was used during Debussy's day? How much was it worth compared to today's money?

If you were Roderick, how much would it have cost to run your household? Create a budget for his household, taking into account all expenses.

Count the number of people who need to be paid when putting on an opera; use cast and company listings in the program to calculate.

Estimate how many people are in large ensemble scenes. Taking into account all the people on stage, how much would such a scene cost, in Debussy's time and now, in Getty's time?

Measure distances between places mentioned in the opera. Use map scales to convert inches to miles.

How far is Boston from France?

What's the square footage of the Usher's estate?

Measure how much fabric would have been used to create a dress for Madeline. Try to create your own, or draw a diagram.

## GEOMETRY

As found in *The Fall of The House of Usher's* character, costume & set design.

Identification of Shapes, Repetition & Pattern, Rhythm & Symmetry.

Planes (Square, Rectangle, Triangle, Circle) & 3D (Cube, Pyramid, Sphere). Positive & Negative Space, Interior & Exterior Space.

Calculate area of opera stages today vs. opera stages during Debussy's time.

Build a scale model of The House of Usher. Take proportions into account. Calculate area of Roderick and Madeline's home.

Learn about the use of arches in Gothic architecture. Build a house and explore the stability of Gothic arches – a pointed arch; *especially*: one with a joint instead of a keystone at its apex

## NUMBER SENSE

Counting using the production elements and music of *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Formulas & calculations: Addition, subtraction, multiplication, division.

More, less, or same as.

Concept of zero (absences, disappearances. Ex. rests/silence in music.

Ordering & sequencing.

Recognizing and creating numerical patterns. Ex. beats, ABA pattern in music.

Survey taking: tallying and graphing.

Predictions.

## ACTIVITIES

Design and play a board game based on the opera.

Research remonetizing formula; how do economists determine how much money was worth then vs. now?

Create costume patterns for *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Calculate how much a night at the opera would cost.

What other kinds of businesses do opera patrons support?

What are the statistics on arts organizations stimulating the local economy?

What is the average price of an opera ticket?

How does it compare to the price of other kinds of performances?

How many seats do you need to fill to pay for the cost of producing an opera?

What's the total revenue compared to the cost of producing it?



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### SCIENCE

*The principals of science used in The Fall of The House of Usher.*

THE FIVE SENSES: Sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. What senses do you use while watching opera?

How do the eyes "see"? Explore how optical illusions might be created with the reflection of moonlight on water.

Explore the neuroscience of hallucinations and visions. (ex.: The writing of Dr. Oliver Sacks) What's going on when people hallucinate? Learn about the chemistry of the brain and how mental states can change depending on brain chemistry.

Explore the science/neuroscience of madness.

What other kinds of explanations might you have to describe what went on in Usher House – ex. carbon monoxide poisoning

What parts of the body are involved in listening to music? What goes on in a brain listening to music?

#### PARTS OF THE BODY:

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

Examine the science of men and women and psychological and physical differences.

#### LIFE SCIENCES

Research the life cycle of people, plants. Aging.

What is insanity?

What is *Pareidolia* (when you see faces in objects)?

Artists are encouraged to see things creatively. Research the connection between artists and madness. Is this perception more fact or fiction?

What are the key factors for maintaining positive mental health?

How did Edgar Allan Poe die? Based on the forensic evidence, which theory do you subscribe to and why?

## PHYSICAL SCIENCES

Explore times of day of different scenes in opera; how does lighting affect the mood?

How does light work onstage, sets a mood in opera? What are principles of light?

Explore different kinds of light: Cold, light, warm light.

What are materials used in opera? Identify the materials, and identify their sources.

## THE ELEMENTS

Fire, Water, Earth, Metal, Air, Wood.

## PHYSICS

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

## ACTIVITIES

List references to nature in *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Research Lewis Wharf, the area of Boston, where the story is set. What species of plants and animals can be found there?

Research the architecture of Boston during the time of *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

What kinds of building materials would have been used during this time? How were mansion constructed? Design your own mansion.

Replicate materials used in opera in a 2D manner, as a set designer would do. How do you make paper look like stone, wood?

Metalurgy for making weapons or a shield to use in a battle with a dragon.

Research the scientific discoveries of *The Fall of The House of Usher's* time; what would Madeline have known about the world? Roderick?

What would a scientist be like then? How are they different from scientists today?

What is forensic science? How might a forensics team begin to investigate the cause of Roderick and Madeline's deaths?



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### **SOCIAL STUDIES**

#### PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Self-Identity & Cultural Identity.

Family (Immediate & Extended), Friends & Community.

Time: Past, Present, Future.

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

Draw your own family tree. Compare with the family in *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

#### CIVICS

Social Hierarchy: Class, Status. Ex. royalty, servants. How is class indicated by the music, the costumes and other elements in *Lucia di Lammermoor*?

Types of Government: Democracy.

What is the class structure in *The House of Usher*? Upper social class or aristocracy? Where do you think the family in *The House of Usher* falls, and how did that change with the madness of the house? Do most haunted houses come from aristocratic families?

Political events during Debussy's time. What was the political climate in America during the time of the story?

Labor / Economics: What jobs and occupations were available to men and women?

What do average workers in different positions earn?

#### GEOGRAPHY

*The House of Usher* setting: The time period and place of the opera vs. the play.

Mapping America during time period of opera.

Where is Boston, Massachusetts on the map?

It is said that *The Fall of The House of Usher* was inspired by a real house, located on Lewis Wharf in Boston. Find the location on Google Maps.

Location of Debussy and Poe's birth. Where else did they live?

## HISTORY

Research the Camerata, a group that was founded during the Renaissance and created opera.

Explore the life of Debussy. How many operas did he write?

Date when Debussy was born. Time period when Debussy lived. What are the differences and similarities to when Debussy lived in Europe and now?

How was Debussy influenced by American Literature? How did Poe influence American Literature?

How many years apart did Debussy and Getty compose their operas?

Research the life of Gordon Getty and the Getty family

Who is the most important character in *Usher House*? Roderick or Edgar Allan Poe? Explain your choice.

Research development of *The Fall of The House of Usher*. How do new operas get made today?

Research reception of *The Fall of The House of Usher*, the book and the operas.

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

Research the history of opera and opera patrons. Is opera really an elite art form?

## ACTIVITIES

Map settings in which play and opera take place.

Create timelines of events in opera.

Create an organizational chart of the characters in *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Create a backstory for *The Fall of The House of Usher*.



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### PHYSICAL EDUCATION

#### MOVEMENT

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

Choreograph stage fights for appropriate scenes in opera. Explore ways to keep stage fighting safe.

#### PHYSICALITY OF PERFORMING

Endurance & strength, posture, breathing techniques.

How do you make someone appear to be crazy? What movements and facial expressions?

How much emotion do you think is put in to a central role? Act out the scene where Madeline is revealed to Roderick.

What goes into portraying a real, well-known person, such as Edgar Allan Poe?

#### TEAM-BUILDING

Cooperative games encourage collaboration and build trust.

Play number games, where students have to gather in groups of two, three, and so on. The object is to get together as quickly as possible. They can also be instructed to create pictures with their bodies, or move in unison.

Construct relays around relationships between characters.

Explore the famous sextet. What are the key elements of making a successful sextet between the singers, conductor and orchestra?

Construct a venn diagram of important aspects necessary for a successful performance for both an opera company and a sports team.

Explore how you would integrate all the elements of making an opera...where would you start? How would you layer? How would you all work together?

Construct a mini-opera in your classroom.



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## 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

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

Dealing with emotions, stress. Ex. Explore from the point of view of each character.

Gender roles & body image.

Family issues. Family Tensions: How can a brother be so mean to his sister? How can he betray her? Do families sometime not get along?

Conflict resolution. Ex. How do the characters resolve their problems with each other? How don't they?

Examine the scenarios in the opera where people have choices; what kinds of decisions do they make and could they have done better?

### MENTAL & PHYSICAL HEALTH

Your mental health affects your physical health. What effects does violence and horror have on you – is it good or bad? Age? Being desensitized to violence – what are the consequences? Claustrophobia and paranoia.

What symptoms of mental illness do you notice in this opera?

Does madness/dementia normally lead to death?

What triggers Roderick to call his friend?

Why does the friend read a medieval story aloud to calm Roderick? What other avenues can be used to alleviate sadness and despair? What kinds of things do you do to calm yourself?

Keep a mood diary and notice the changes in your mood.

Research Edgar Allan Poe's death. What causes of death have been suggested?

How might Poe have received help today?



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### **CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION**

Jobs at the Opera.

Explore backgrounds and training of people who work at the Opera.

How does the opera support other types of jobs in San Francisco? What are the professionals outside the opera who make the opera happen? Police, fire, caterers, etc.

Organizational chart of San Francisco Opera.

Assign jobs from the opera to students in the classroom. Who would be Edgar Allan Poe? Who would be Dr. Primus or Le Médecin? What would be the most coveted jobs? What would be the most important jobs?

How are jobs different now from then?

Compare jobs that are top-down, vs collaborative (i.e. working in an office vs. working on a fishing boat).  
Following instructions vs. creative skills.

How did people get jobs in Debussy's time?

What are the jobs of the characters in the opera? Examine jobs in Debussy's France during the time of the opera, and in America when Poe was writing the story. Compare with Getty's time.

How would people do work differently in Debussy's? How would they be limited by available technology? What kinds of skills did they need that they don't need today?

What kinds of technology are used today by Getty to record his operas?



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# 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

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## **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.

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## 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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.

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## **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.

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## **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.