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LESSON 2: OPERATIC CONVENTIONS

 OBJECTIVES

- Explain how an opera is different from a play
- Classify *Aida* as an opera
- Identify characteristics of nineteenth-century opera used in *Aida*

 STANDARDS

SL.6.1

SL.6.2

Music 5-8.6

Music 5-8.8

Dance 5-8.3

Extension:

SL.8.5

 VOCABULARY

Baritone

Bass

Contralto

Duet

Mezzo-soprano

Soprano

Tenor

 PROCEDURE

Initiate a discussion about stage plays students may have seen and some of the conventions they recall, such as dialogue, asides, divisions of acts and scenes, etc.

1. Discuss with students the differences between a play and an opera. Use the Operatic Conventions handout, beginning on page 83, to encourage further exploration of the idea that it is the music that makes the difference.
2. Discuss how people with specially trained voices sing the music in this work so they can be heard in a large theater with no electronic amplification.

3. Play “*Celeste Aida*” (“Heavenly Aida”), found on the DVD at Chapter 4, and remind students of the three main characters of *Aida* introduced in Lesson 1: Amneris, an Egyptian princess; Aida, an Ethiopian princess who is enslaved in Egypt in the service of Amneris; Radames, an Egyptian warrior.
4. Explain to students that each major character has a special voice classification that determines who is able to sing the role.
5. Introduce students to each of the major voice types and the other characters in the opera:

Voice Type	Characteristics	Often plays a	Character in <i>Aida</i>
Soprano	The highest singing voice of a woman or pre-teen	Princess, leading lady	Aida, an Ethiopian princess enslaved in Egypt
Mezzo-soprano	The middle female voice	Mother, villainess, seductress	Amneris, an Egyptian princess
Contralto	The lowest female voice	Wise old woman, witch	There is no contralto character in <i>Aida</i> , but a contralto may perform the mezzo-soprano role of Amneris.
Tenor	The highest male voice	Hero	Radames, an Egyptian warrior
Baritone	The middle male voice	Common man, villain, father	Amonasro, (ah-moh-NAHS-roh) the King of Ethiopia
Bass	The lowest male voice	King or wise leader	There are two bass roles in <i>Aida</i> : Ramfis (RAHM-fis), the high priest; and the King of Egypt.

6. Play the following excerpts:
 - a. “*O patria mia*” (“O my country”)/Chapter 25 where Aida sings about her homeland of Ethiopia
 - b. “*Fu la sorte dell’ armi a’ tuoi funesta*” (“The battle’s outcome was cruel for your people”)/Chapter 15 in which Amneris gets Aida to confess her love for Radames
 - c. the Hymn to Phtah/Chapter 10
7. Have students identify the operatic conventions they hear in each example, using the Operatic Conventions handout as a guide. Point out how an aria stops the action to express an idea; that in a duet, the singers can express different things at the same time; and that in a chorus, the full ensemble sings together. Be sure to communicate the fact that in general, ideas take longer to sing than to speak.
8. Discuss ways dance is used in music-theater and film. Explain that dance is frequently part of an opera, as it is another means of communicating a story.
9. Play the dance of the Moorish slaves/Chapter 14. Ask students to compare this dance to the dancing seen on popular music videos or the dancing seen in traditional ballets.

EVALUATION

During the Lesson

Notice the students’ ability to use and apply new vocabulary in class discussion.

After the Lesson

Have students write a brief essay answering the question: Why have stories that are told in both music and words remained popular through the years?

EXTENSION

Have students prepare a bulletin board that defines operatic characteristics and vocabulary. As the class progresses through the opera, new words and ideas can be added, customizing the board to show how the conventions can be seen in *Aida*.