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:

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