Franz Lehár

THE MERRY WIDOW
(DIE LUSTIGE WITWE)

STUDY GUIDE

OPERETTA IN THREE ACTS
Libretto by Viktor Léon and Leo Stein,
In German with English SurTitles™
English Dialogue by Sheldon Harnick

CONDUCTOR Ward Stare
DIRECTOR Kelly Robinson
CHOREOGRAPHER Joshua Beamish

QUEEN ELIZABETH THEATRE
October 20, 25, & 27 at 7:30pm  |  October 28 at 2pm

DRESS REHEARSAL
Thursday, October 18 at 7pm

OPERA EXPERIENCE
Thursday, October 25 at 7:30pm

vancouveropera
Franz Lehár

THE MERRY WIDOW
(DIE LUSTIGE WITWE)

CAST IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

VICOMTE CASCADA
Michael Nyby

BARON MIRKO ZETA
Richard Suart

VALENCIENNE
Sasha Djihanian

SYLVAlNE
Nicole Joanne*

OLGA
Dionne Sellinger

PRASKOWIA
Gena van Oosten*

CAMILLE DE ROSILLON
John Tessier

RAOUL DE ST. BRIOCHE
Scott Rumble*

KROMOW
Peter Monaghan*

PRITCHITCH
Daniel Thielmann*

BOGDANOVITCH
Jason Klippenstien

NJEGUS
Sarah Afful

HANNA GLAWARI
Lucia Cesaroni

COUNT DANIL0 DANILOVITCH
John Cudia

With the Vancouver Opera Chorus and the Vancouver Opera Orchestra

CHORUS DIRECTOR /ASSISTANT CONDUCTOR
Kinza Tyrrell

SCENIC DESIGNER
Michael Yeargan

COSTUME DESIGNER
Susan Memmott-Allred

LIGHTING DESIGNER
Gerald King

WIG DESIGNER
Susan Manning

MUSICAL PREPARATION
Kinza Tyrrell, Angus Kellet, Perri Lo*

STAGE MANAGER
Jessica Severin

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
Sarah Jane Pelzer*

ENGLISH SURTITLE™ TRANSLATIONS
Sarah Jane Pelzer*

Member of the Yulanda M. Faris Young Artist Program*

Alumni of the Yulanda M. Faris Young Artist Program#

The performance will last approximately 3 hours. There will be 2 intermissions. First produced at the Theatre an der Wien, Vienna, December 30th 1905. First produced by Vancouver Opera, March 11, 1976. Sets courtesy of Utah Opera. Costumes courtesy of Utah Opera.
STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

This study guide has been designed to be accessible to all teachers regardless of previous experience in music or opera. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the lessons to meet the dynamic needs of their students in music rooms, theatres and classrooms. The lessons are designed to engage students in learning about the opera they will be attending as well as and thinking critically about art and its meaning.

How deeply students go into this material will depend on each teacher. However, we do suggest the following as the minimum commitment to preparing for the performance.

- Students are familiar with the synopsis and at least one piece of music.
- Students can identify the socio-historical context of the opera (when and where it was written).
- Students are given the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their response to the performance.

The lessons are designed to be either Quick or In-Depth and for use Before the Performance and/or After the Performance to provide teachers with the ability to tailor lessons to their classrooms. Each lesson also contains an Overview, specific Objectives and a list of the materials needed for the activity.

CONNECTIONS TO THE CURRICULUM

The study guide has been prepared in accordance with the new BC Curriculum and targets secondary classes. Each activity addresses a “Big Idea” from the new curriculum and includes specific learning objectives. Elementary teachers will be able to modify the activities to meet the needs of their students with little difficulty. Opera is an art-form that benefits from “spoilers”; the more prepared students are in advance of attending the performance, the deeper and richer their experience will be!

The study guide for The Merry Widow was prepared by Colleen Maybin, Director, Education and Community Engagement with content written by Dr. Daniel Viragh.
STUDY GUIDE OUTLINE

THREE QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK (AND HAVE ANSWERED) BEFORE COMING TO THE OPERA

WHAT IS OPERA?

Opera is an interdisciplinary experience in which singers and musicians put on a dramatic production. This means that, just as in musicals, music (sung and instrumental), theatre, and visual art (the set design and creation, as well as costumes and lights) come together to tell a story. Because opera was first popular in Italy, many of the words associated with it are from the Italian language. The word “opera” means “work” in Italian, as in “work of art”. Opera is usually written in the language of the composer and the language of the country it will be heard in.

Opera has been around for a while (for a little over four hundred years, in fact!), and therefore opera-singers sing without microphones, which hadn’t yet been developed by the time opera started. Opera singers have developed a special singing technique to be heard over the orchestra without microphones. They sing so loudly that to protect each other’s hearing, they make sure not to face directly towards each other while singing.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO SING OPERA?

If you were a top opera singer, you could make as much as $20,000 per performance! And what’s so hard about being an opera singer, you ask? Opera singers often have as many years of training as physicians. They must learn to have a voice powerful enough to project across a full orchestra, yet flexible enough to taper to a soft piano level when it is called for. Singers must also learn English, French, German, and Italian – even Russian and Czech! They must be able to memorize and sing many different operas (which can be up to 4 hours long!), and to dance and act while singing under hot lights. Critics and journalists are not always kind, and singers must also learn to brush off negative reviews in time to perform the same show the following night.

HOW DOES AN OPERA GO FROM WORDS AND NOTES ON THE PAGE TO FULLY STAGED PERFORMANCE?

The first thing to happen is the assembly of a creative team which includes the music director, stage director, singers, orchestra musicians, and set and costume designers. Everyone works with the score and libretto to prepare for the first rehearsals. Opera singers are expected to arrive at the first rehearsal “off book”, meaning that they must have the entire score memorized in advance! Once the designers have completed their designs, artists and sewers work to create all the props, sets and costumes. Lighting designers work with the stage director to add light and shade to the stage. At first the opera is rehearsed in sections – one scene at a time. During “tech week”, everyone moves into the theatre and all aspects of the opera from the acting to the music to the moving of the sets is practiced over and over again. Finally, opening night arrives. Et voila! There is an opera!
SYNOPSIS

ACT I

The Pontevedrian Ambassador in Paris, Baron Mirko Zeta, is giving a ball at the embassy. His home country is nearly bankrupt, and he hopes that their Parisian guests will help him raise the money they need. He’s oblivious to the flirtation between his “virtuous” wife Valencienne and the handsome French Aristocrat Camille de Rosillon. In fact, Camille has declared his love for Valencienne and writes, “I love you” on her fan. Zeta eagerly awaits the arrival of the guest of honor, Hanna Glawari, a wealthy Pontevedrian widow. He plans to have Danilo Danilovitch, a womanizing aristocrat and the embassy attaché, marry her so that her wealth will stay in Pontevedro. Hanna arrives and is showered with compliments by the Parisian men. Valencienne realizes she has lost her fan with Camille’s incriminating message and rushes out to look for it. Finally Danilo arrives, fresh from a night of partying at Maxim’s. He and Hanna talk, revealing that they were once in love, but that Hanna, whose family was poor, was considered beneath Danilo’s status, and his family prevented them from marrying. Afraid of seeming to be a fortune hunter, he tells her he’s not interested in marriage and will never say, “I love you.” Meanwhile, Zeta’s chief of staff, Kromov, finds Valencienne’s fan and thinks it belongs to his wife, Olga. Zeta, wanting to spare Olga the scandal, convinces him it belongs to Valencienne. He then meets with Danilo and orders him to marry Hanna for the good of Pontevedro. Danilo tells him he will keep all the Parisian men away from her but will not marry her. When the ladies’ choice dance is announced, Hanna selects Danilo, and after some flirtatious bantering the two finally dance.

ACT II

The following day, Hanna hosts a party at her villa. Danilo arrives late, and Zeta commands him to return to his mission of keeping the Parisian men from Hanna—particularly Camille. Zeta’s secretary, Njegus, reveals that Camille is in love with a mystery woman. Zeta wants to marry her off to Camille, leaving Hanna free for a Pontevedrian suitor. He believes the fan is the key to her identity and asks Danilo to find its owner. When Hanna comes across the fan and sees its inscription, she assumes it is a gift to her from Danilo, but he still won’t say “I love you” and she will not accept him until he does. They are interrupted by Zeta, who is still trying to learn the identity of Camille’s secret lover. The men agree to meet later in the pavilion to discuss the matter and leave. Camille and Valencienne enter, and finally find the missing fan, and this time Valencienne writes, “For my loving husband from his adoring wife” on it. Observed by Njegus, they disappear into the pavilion. When Zeta arrives to meet Danilo, Njegus prevents him from entering the pavilion in order to protect Valencienne’s secret. When Danilo enters and distracts Zeta, Njegus persuades Hanna to secretly take her place. Hanna emerges with Camille, announcing their engagement. A furious Danilo departs for Maxim’s, which Hanna takes as proof of his love.

ACT III

Hanna has decorated one of her salons as a replica of Maxim’s and has imported the waiters and the grisettes. Zeta and the other Pontevedrians appear, and the grisettes—among them, Valencienne—entertain the crowd. Eventually Danilo arrives, and after an entrance by Hanna, he forbids her to marry Camille. When she explains that she was merely safeguarding another woman’s reputation, he is delighted but still won’t declare his love. Hanna informs him that, according to her late husband’s will, she will lose her fortune if she remarries. Danilo, delighted, finally declares his love and asks Hanna to marry him. She accepts and amends her account of the will: upon remarrying, her fortune will pass to the Fatherland. Njegus produces the missing fan, which he found in the pavilion. Valencienne asks Zeta to read the other side of her fan—she is a respectable wife after all. With the couples united, all celebrate!
ABOUT

FRANZ LEHÁR (1870 – 1948)

Lehár grew up in a musical family. His father was a military bandmaster in Prague, Hungary where Lehár grew up. He demonstrated a passion for music early on and became an accomplished violin player when he was young. As an adult, he too joined the military and became a bandmaster like his father. However, he was always an avid composer and took composition lessons without his father’s knowledge. Lehár's music was very popular in his lifetime. Even though he wrote all kinds of classical music, he was most famous for writing operettas. The Merry Widow (Die lustige Witwe) and The Land of Smiles (Das Land des Lachelns) were by far his two most famous and were performed across Europe and in North America. The success of The Merry Widow made him a very wealthy man and he enjoyed a long and successful career as a composer.

THE MERRY WIDOW

The operetta is based on the comedic play, “L’attaché d’ambassade” written in 1861 by Henri Meilhac. Since it’s first performance it has been a staple in the repertoire of both opera and musical theatre companies around the world. There were almost 1200 performances of The Merry Widow last year and is the most performed opera in its native country, Hungary. The initial performances were not as well received though. The producer of the first production in Vienna in 1905 didn’t believe it was going to be a success. They provided the cast with well used sets and costumes in order to save money. However, the audience responded to the operetta very positively and through word of mouth, it became a hit. It was produced in both London and New York City two years later in 1907 with very full houses. By the time it reached Paris in 1909, there had been 20,000 performances and it had been translated into 25 languages. It was also one of the very first productions to provide audiences with merchandise that was linked to the operetta. In New York, there were Merry Widow themed hats, cigarettes and corsets were all available for sale. There was even a Merry Widow cocktail created for audiences to enjoy.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OPERETTA AND OPERA?

In some ways, operetta is the bridge between opera and musical theatre. Musically, operetta “sounds” similar to opera as it relies on the same harmonic and melodic traditions and employs the same musical structure of arias and recitatives. However, in operettas the recitatives are often spoken in the language of the audience. In Vancouver Opera’s production, the arias are sung in German while the recitatives are spoken in English. The themes found in operettas are often lighter in tone that more traditional operas and are influenced by the locations in which they are set. For example, The Merry Widow includes traditional dances from Vienna, Paris, Hungary and the Balkans – areas that are all featured in the story. When performed by an opera company, operettas are performed by singers with no amplification and a live orchestra. The orchestra in The Merry Widow is as large as those used by Lehár’s operatic contemporaries like Puccini, Verdi and R. Strauss. Operettas were very popular at the turn of the 19th century and can be considered as precursors to modern day musical theatre. The bridge between opera and musical theatre was provided by operettas like Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Pirates of Penzance.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

A NOTE ON THE VIDEO

The suggested video of The Merry Widow that is included in the classroom activities includes a mini-documentary about the history of the production and its enduring popularity. It’s a fantastic preview for students before attending the performance in person. It can be find after Act I at approximately 46:00.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pUtRiDx2k8

LESSON ONE: KNOW BEFORE YOU GO!

Big Idea: Dance, drama, music and visual arts each use their own unique sensory language for creative and communicating.

Category: Before Performance/Quick

Overview: The “Vilja-Lied” in The Merry Widow is one of the opera’s most famous arias. It is meant to be a traditional folk song from her native country of Pontevedro. The country is meant to be somewhere in the Balkans but was made up by the author. The lyrics describe a fairy that is the “maid of the woods”. A young man falls in love with her but after a kiss, disappears leaving him lovesick.

Objective: The objective of this lesson is to ensure students are familiar with music from the opera as well as consider the impact of repeated listening to their understanding of a piece of music.

Materials: • A high-quality recording of “Vilja-Lied”. A recording of Canadian soprano Renee Fleming is available on iTunes.

• 8½ x 11 piece of paper divided into four columns (landscape)

Lesson Plan:

1. This lesson makes an ideal opening activity for the three or four classes before attending a performance. Simply have the students listen to the aria straight through while writing down what they are hearing, feeling and questioning each time.

2. To get them started the first time, brainstorm a list of things they “could” listen for including:

   A. Type of voice (female, male, unsure, soprano, bass, etc)
   B. Instruments they hear
   C. Tempo – fast or slow
   D. Form – does the song have sections they can identify?
   E. How does it start? End?
   F. What emotions could be used to describe the music?
   G. How does it make them feel?
   H. What questions do they have? I wonder…?

3. At the end of each listening session, collect the paper and continue with the lesson.

4. Repeat the listening activity at each lesson and encourage the students to add to their list. The questions can be used again to focus on new aspects of the song.

5. After the final listening session, lead a discussion on how their understanding and appreciation of the music changed over time. Did it grow on them? Were they able to anticipate each section? What did they hear at the end that they didn’t hear at the beginning?

Extension: Repeat the listening activity with a song suggested by students that is unknown to the others. Encourage students to bring in music that is meaningful to them and repeat the process. When does a piece of music “stick”? Why is some music easy to listen to repeatedly while other music becomes less interesting over time?
LESSON TWO: BODY LANGUAGE PART 1 – EMBODY THE FEELING

Big Idea: Experiencing art is a means to develop empathy for others’ perspectives and experiences.

Category: Before Performance/ Quick

Overview: Body language is an essential component of communication. Feelings, thoughts, and emotions are shown through our bodies; gestures and movements show others who we are, and what we really feel. Actors rely on body language to express how their characters are responding to what is happening in the story.

Objective: The objective of this lesson is to encourage students to become more aware of how they can communicate through their body language and to read the body language of others.

Materials: • YouTube video of the first twenty minutes of the opera https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pUtRjDx2k8
• Notepaper and pencils

Lesson Plan:
1. Introduce the lesson with a class discussion on body language. Have students stand in poses that reflect specific feelings, thoughts, and emotions.
2. Watch the video from 28:00. This is the moment where Danilo and Hanna (in black) see each other for the first time. They were in love before and haven’t seen each other for a long time (but don’t let your students know that yet!). Have students make notes about the body about the body language of Danilo and Hana. What do they see?
3. Have students do a think-pair-share about what they wrote down, highlight the adjectives they used.
4. Have the entire class assume Hana’s feelings, as she sees Danilo for the first time. Ask them to walk around wordlessly around the room, acting out how she feels as she sees him.
5. Now have the entire class act out Danilo’s gestures, again wordlessly.
6. Explain that Hana and Danilo used to love one another a long time ago, but that they have not seen each other in a long time. How does that change their understanding of how they are communicating with each other?
LESSON THREE: BODY LANGUAGE 2 – BEING IN CHARACTER

Big Idea: Dance, drama, music and visual arts each use their own unique sensory language for creative and communicating.

Category: After Performance/In Depth

Overview: As a follow-up to the previous lesson, students are asked to take their analysis of body language one step further, and to apply those lessons to the study of character.

Objective: This lesson asks students to block and play-act certain key moments in the opera, and to use the body language to reflect on how body language affects feelings and character.

Materials:
- YouTube video available at the link below: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pUtRjDx2k8
- Notepaper and pencils

Lesson Plan:
1. Since the students will already have seen the opera, split them into four groups and ask each group to watch one of the four short clips below:
   - A. How Valencienne feels when she must reject Camillo’s advances (6:28-10:53)
   - B. How Hana feels when she is rejected by Danilo (24:40-28:53)
   - C. How the Ambassador feels when he realizes his wife might be cheating on him (1:28:00-1:32:00)
   - D. How Danilo feels when Hana decides to marry Camille (1:31:00-1:41:00)

2. Ask the students to brainstorm how each of the two characters in each pair feels. Write down relevant adjectives for each of the characters involved.

3. In each of the small groups, ask them to block the scene in pairs, each partner performing one definite role.

4. Ask the partners to switch between the roles and enact the opposite role.

5. Have the students return to their groups and ask them to discuss, in groups, how it felt to embody the emotions of their character. How did it impact how they felt about their characters while they were playing them.

6. Groups can then share their thoughts with the whole class.

Extension:
- A. The entire class can watch, as one group acts out a chosen scene.
- B. Students can write a reflective piece on the experience.
LESSON FOUR: MARRIAGE THEN AND NOW

Big Idea: Values are influenced by life experiences and cultural context.

Category: After Performance/Quick

Overview: The Merry Widow provides students with a window into marriage as experienced by women at a specific time and place in history. Hanna begins her journey as a rural farmgirl and becomes a wealthy widow. When she first loved Danilo, they were not a suitable match. Now that she is rich, she is free to follow her heart and be with Danilo. Her decisions, and the response of Danilo and the others, are shaped by the society they exist within.

Objective: Students will consider Hanna’s situation through a critical lens and contrast her experience to their expectations of their own future partnerships. The activity uses an opera that is well over 100 years old to think about the role of marriage in the lives of women throughout history.

Materials:
- The synopsis of The Merry Widow (as a refresher of the plot)
- Access to the opera on Youtube

Lesson Plan:
1. Using the synopsis as a guide, students will map out Hanna’s history with Danilo including the events from the opera.
2. Divide the class into groups of four. This activity is designed so that each member of the group has a role.
   A. Notetaker – keeps track of the conversation, collates all the information from discussions
   B. Reporter – speaks on behalf of the group and presents the findings at the end.
   C. Researcher – looks into questions from within the group using technology and provides answers to others.
   D. Writer – gathers the findings of the group and writes it up for submission.
3. In small groups, students will brainstorm and develop a list of issues faced by Hanna in finding a partner. (Class, finances, societal expectations, gender, etc).
4. Repeat the process by asking students to think about why someone would get married in the time the opera is set in. If questions arise about what it was like in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, provide students with time to seek out the answers. Encourage students to consider the role of gender when thinking about marriage during this period in history.
5. Working together, each group is responsible to submit and present a short essay, a poster board or a mind map that explains their thoughts and findings.
6. After the presentations are completed, have students write a short reflection on their personal response to Hanna’s situation. How would they feel if they were in her shoes? How has marriage changed since then? Is Hanna a victim of her circumstances or does she use her situation to her advantage?

Extension: The Merry Widow illustrates ideas about relationships between men and women that will resonate with students in contemporary society. The question of how to interact with works of art that are grounded in ideas that are no longer acceptable don’t have easy answers. This activity provides a way of looking at other operas through a critical lens. What can we learn about each other through the art of our ancestors?
FURTHER RESOURCES

STUDY GUIDE NOTES


OPERA AUSTRALIA


For more information about Vancouver Opera’s Education Programs for elementary and secondary students, please visit vancouveropera.ca

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