LA BOHÈME

Giacomo Puccini

STUDY GUIDE

OPERA IN FOUR ACTS
By Giacomo Puccini
Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, based on Henri Murger’s novel Scènes de la Vie de bohème.
In Italian with English Surtitles™

CONDUCTOR Judith Yan
DIRECTOR Renaud Doucet

QUEEN ELIZABETH THEATRE
February 14, 16, 19 & 21 at 7:30PM  |  February 24 at 2PM

DRESS REHEARSAL
Tuesday, February 12 at 7PM

OPERA EXPERIENCE
Tuesday, February 19 and 21 at 7:30PM
CAST IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

MARCELLO, A PAINTER
Phillip Addis

RODOLFO, A POET
Ji-Min Park

COLLINE, A PHILOSOPHER
Neil Craighead

SCHAUNARD, A MUSICIAN
Geoffrey Schellenberg

BENOIT, A LANDLORD
J. Patrick Raftery

MIMI, A SEAMSTRESS
France Bellemare

PLUM SELLER
Wade Nott

PARPIGNOL, A TOY SELLER
William Grossman

MUSSETA, A WOMAN OF THE LATIN QUARTER
Sharleen Joynt

ALCINDORO, AN ADMIRER OF MUSSETA
J. Patrick Raftery

CUSTOMS OFFICER
Angus Bell

CUSTOMS SERGEANT
Willy Miles-Grenzberg

With the Vancouver Opera Chorus as habitués of the Latin Quarter, students, vendors, soldiers, waiters, and with the Vancouver Opera Orchestra.

SCENIC DESIGNER / COSTUME DESIGNER
André Barbe

CHORUS DIRECTOR/ ASSOCIATE CONDUCTOR
Leslie Dala

CHILDREN’S CHORUS DIRECTOR / PRINCIPAL RÉPÉTITEUR
Kinza Tyrrell

LIGHTING DESIGNER
Guy Simard

WIG DESIGNER
Marie Le Bihan

MAKEUP DESIGNER
Carmen Garcia

COSTUME COORDINATOR
Parvin Mirhady

MUSICAL PREPARATION
Tina Chang, Perri Lo *

STAGE MANAGER
Theresa Tsang

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
Peter Lorenz

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
Marijka Asbeek Brusse, Michelle Harrison

ASSISTANT LIGHTING DESIGNER
Sara Smith

ENGLISH SURTITLE™ TRANSLATIONS
David Edwards

Member of the Yulanda M. Faris Young Artist Program *

The performance will last approximately 2 hours and 18 minutes. There will be one 25 min intermission. First performed at Teatro Reggio, Turin, Italy, 1 February 1896. First performed by Vancouver Opera 5 November 1960. A Scottish Opera and Theatre St. Gallen Co-production.
STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

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!

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 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 includes specific learning objectives and can be adapted for use in most arts and humanities coursework. Elementary teachers will be able to modify the activities to meet the needs of their students with little difficulty.

Throughout the secondary arts education curriculum, the Big Ideas are connected to the role the arts plays in society and in our individual lives. The activities within this study guide address the following themes found within the specific Big Ideas at each grade level:

1. Dance, drama, music and visual arts are each unique languages for creating art and communicating.
2. The arts are an essential aspect of building community and interpersonal relationships.
3. The arts reflect and respond to the cultures in which they are created and performed. Creative works are socially constructed and often challenge the status quo.
4. Personal and collective identity is explored, expressed and impacted through arts experiences.

These larger concepts can be linked to the Big Ideas found in the Social Studies and English/French Language Arts curriculum. The study guide has also been prepared in consideration of the First People’s Principles of Learning and whenever possible, activities will include resources that address the learning standards related to Indigenous knowledge and education.

The study guide for La Bohème was prepared by Colleen Maybin, Director, Education and Community Engagement.
GETTING READY

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!

PHOTO BY SALLY JUBB
COURTESY OF THE ROYAL SCOTTISH OPERA
SYNOPSIS

ACT I - RODOLFO AND MARCELLO’S GARRETT. CHRISTMAS EVE

Marcello, an artist and Rodolfo, a writer, are trying to keep warm while they work. Their friends Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, arrive with food that Schaunard has earned by working for a rich client. They are interrupted by Benoit the landlord, demanding the rent. The friends encourage him to boast of his philandering. Pretending to be outraged, they throw him out.

All except Rodolfo leave to enjoy their Christmas supper at Café Momus. Rodolfo says he has to finish writing an article but that he will join them later. He sets to work alone. There is a knock at the door. It is a girl who lives upstairs. Her candle has gone out and she needs a light. Rodolfo lights the candle.

The girl is overcome with coughing. Rodolfo helps her to a chair. Once recovered, she realises she can’t find her key. Her candle blows out. Rodolfo’s candle goes out too. Together in the moonlit room, the pair search for the key. Rodolfo tells the girl about his life, and the poetry he writes. She explains that her real name is Lucia, but that everyone calls her Mimi. They fall in love. Rodolfo invites Mimi to come with him to meet his friends.

ACT II - THE TERRACE OF CAFÉ MOMUS

Rodolfo introduces Mimi to the others. Musetta, Marcello’s former lover, appears with Alcindoro, her rich benefactor. Seeing Marcello, Musetta tries to arouse his jealousy. When Marcello finally gives in and admits that he still wants her, she sends Alcindoro off on a pretext. When the bill arrives, Musetta leaves it for Alcindoro to pay.

INTERMISSION

ACT III - AT THE BARRIÈRE D’ENFER. DAWN, LATE FEBRUARY

Mimi and Rodolfo have quarrelled. Mimi tells Marcello she is troubled by Rodolfo’s increasing jealousy, then hides when he appears. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he can’t live with Mimi because she is continually flirting with other men, but Marcello makes him reveal the truth: he is desperately worried about her illness. Mimi comes out of her hiding place. She tells Rodolfo that it’s over between them, but they agree to stay together until the Spring. Meanwhile, Marcello and Musetta are breaking up.

ACT IV - RODOLFO AND MARCELLO’S GARRETT. SPRING

Rodolfo and Marcello try to pretend that they don’t miss Mimi and Musetta. Colline and Schaunard bring a meagre meal. Musetta arrives with Mimi, who is dangerously ill. Musetta and Marcello leave together to sell Musetta’s jewellery in order to buy medicine. Colline leaves to pawn his overcoat and takes Schaunard with him.

Alone, Rodolfo and Mimi remember happier times together. The others return with medicine, and a muff for Mimi’s cold hands. But it is too late.

Synopsis courtesy Scottish Opera
ABOUT

GICOMO PUCCINI

Giacomo Puccini was born in Luca, Italy on December 22nd, 1858. He grew up in a very musical family. His father was the fourth generation to hold the post of choir master and organist in the local cathedral. Puccini himself was working as a professional organist by the age of 14 and furthered his musical studies at the conservatory in Milan. Puccini had a long career in opera and wrote some of the most beloved operas of the canon. Along with La Bohème, Puccini wrote Tosca (1900), Madama Butterfly (1904), and Turandot (1926).

Puccini’s operas are filled with high drama, memorable melodies and are very theatrical in design. Though he is highly regarded for his music and his use of the orchestra, the artistry of his work is seen by some as lacking. When compared to other great opera composers such as Mozart, Verdi and Wagner, Puccini’s music is criticized for being less sophisticated and musically interesting.

Despite his professional success, his personal life was as dramatic as his operas. He survived a car accident that nearly killed him in 1903 and endured a long recovery period. His marriage was filled with stories of infidelity and slander. He was diagnosed with throat cancer and died in 1924 from complications that arose during the treatment.

LA BOHÈME

La Bohème was written during the middle of Puccini’s career. The opera premiered at the Teatro Reggio, Turin, Italy on the 1st of February 1896. The libretto was written by Luigi illica and Giuseppe Giacoso based on a book entitled Scenes de la vie de bohème by Henri Murger. Murger’s book came out of his observations of the artists and residents living in the Latin Quarter in Paris. It is a collection of stories that were loosely based on real people. Another opera was created using the same source material. La vie de bohème was written by another Italian composer, Ruggero Leoncavallo. He wrote his version at the same time as Puccini but despite a successful premiere in Venice a year after La Bohème, the work did not stand the test of time and is rarely performed. In contrast, Puccini’s version of the story was extremely popular from the beginning. By 1905, La Bohème had premiered in Australia, Russia, the United States, Brazil and across Europe. It remains one of the most popular operas ever written and is often the first opera audiences attend.

La Bohème was written in the verismo style. Verismo is Italian for realism and the style emerged out of the Romantic era. Verismo operas tell stories about regular people in settings that would be familiar to most audience members. This is a change from the portrayals of the trials and tribulations of royalty and the privileged classes.

The love story between Mimi and Rodolfo has also provided inspiration for other artists. The musical Rent by Jonathan Larson is a rock musical that premiered on Broadway in 1996. In this version, Mimi is dying from AIDS instead of TB, making the work relevant at a time when the AIDS crisis was at its peak. Australian film maker Baz Luhrmann created a spectacular version of Puccini’s score that premiered in Sydney before moving to Broadway in 2002. To maintain the Broadway schedule of eight shows a week the production rotated three casts to ensure singers had enough rest between each performance.

WHAT IS A BOHEMIAN?

The term bohemian is associated with a social and political movement that took place in Paris in the late 1800’s. Bohemians were artists, poets and actors who embraced life of an outsider. They stood in opposition to the establishment by purposely living an alternative lifestyle, sometimes choosing to live in poverty. They resided in a low-rent district of Paris called the Latin Quarter alongside Romani people from Bohemia, now a part of the Czech Republic. In the literature and operas written at that time, Bohemians were portrayed as largely Romantic figures who chose the life of an artist and poverty on principle. Within this idea is also the trope of the starving artist.

Used an adjective, the word bohemian often describes a personal style or living situation that reflects the counter culture of the time. “Hippies” in the 1960’s, “Punks” in the 1970’s and even today’s “Hipsters” all embody an aspect of the Bohemian worldview.
LESSON ONE: KNOW BEFORE YOU GO! (Listening Activity)

Category: Before Performance/ Quick

Overview: Puccini's musical style is late-Romantic and maintains the lush orchestrations and beautiful melodies of that time. This excerpt from La Bohème is an example of this style. This aria is from the second act. Musetta is trying to make Marcello jealous. This performance features soprano Laura Diodarno.

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 "Quando m'en vo' soletta". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gE796VVP1N8

• 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: REPEATED STORIES

Category: Before Performance/ Quick

Overview: Stories that resonate with us are often retold through multiple artforms. Rent tells the same story as La Bohème but in a modern day setting with new music and lyrics. The musical was a huge success and continues to draw large crowds whenever it is staged. What is it about this story that has captured our collective imagination?

Objective: The objective of this lesson is to encourage students to compare and contrast two vastly different productions.

Materials:
- First act of Rent: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo8CmwIKiDw
- First act of La Bohème: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwjjCjudgzI
- Notepaper and pencils

Lesson Plan:
1. Introduce the lesson with a class discussion their experiences of attending a musical and/or an opera. Describe the experience from the moment you enter the doors. What are the traditions built into attending a live performance?
2. Read the synopsis and if required, create a timeline of the events that take place within the story.
3. Watch the opening of Rent. Have students work in partners or small groups to write down everything they notice in relation to:
   A. How the show opens
   B. Costumes
   C. Acting Style
   D. Music
   E. Sets and props
   F. Number of cast members – what are those in the background doing?
   G. How do we know they are meant to be artists? That they don’t have much money?
4. Repeat the activity with the opening of La Bohème.
5. Working together, have the class create a T-chart that compares and contrasts the two performances.
6. To end the class, ask the students to answer the following questions based on the activity and their personal response to it.
   What is it about the story of La Bohème that has made it so popular? Why does it remain relevant even when it is updated? What would a version based in your community be like?

Extension: Return to this activity after attending the performance and have students return to their initial response. Would they change anything they wrote after experiencing the story in a live performance?
LESSON THREE: TB – THE ROMANTIC DISEASE

Category: After Performance/ In Depth

Overview: The impending death of Mimi floats over the story of La Bohème. The character dies from tuberculosis or TB, a common fate of characters within 19th Century literature. The contagious disease afflicted many writers and artists during that time and as such featured in many of their works. The idea of a long, slow death as part of the artist experience was so strong that TB became known as the Romantic Disease.

Objective: This lesson encourages students to examine how art created over 100 years ago can be reinterpreted in modern day to bring awareness to a societal issue. Using inquiry based learning, students will create a piece of text about the reality of TB today.

Materials: • Access to research tools

Lesson Plan: 1. After attending the opera, students can begin by brainstorming their understanding of how Mimi died, what symptoms she displayed, and how her illness was portrayed in the text on the surtitles.

2. Using this information, students craft two or three questions they have in response to their initial brainstorming. These questions can then be shared with the class for feedback and editing.

3. Each student will then research their question, craft an answer and be prepared to share it with the class.


Health Link BC: https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/hw207301

BC Center for Disease Control: http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/tuberculosis


Extension: Repeat the activity focusing on AIDS and research the major art works that were created in response to the epidemic.

Films: Philadelphia

Theatre: Rent, Angels in America, The Normal Heart

Music: Symphony No.1 by John Corigliano

Visual Art: Keith Haring
LESSON FOUR: WHAT A PRODUCTION!

Activity: Produce your own La Bohème!

Category: After Performance/Quick

Overview: Vancouver Opera’s production of La Bohème is a spectacle on stage. After the performance, students are encouraged to let their creativity loose and create their own Latin Quarter reflecting their personal style and artistic influences.

Objective: Students will create a 2-D set featuring a moment from the opera that they enjoyed or found meaningful.

Materials:
- Video from the director and designer – Andre Barbe and Renaud Doucette  
  https://www.barbedoucet.com/la-boheme-en/
- Activity handout
- 11 x 17 paper
- Access to materials including magazines, tracers, felt pens, fabric, a colour printer etc.

Lesson Plan:
1. Using the synopsis as a reminder, students will identify a moment from the opera they want to recreate.
2. Students then fill in the handout with their ideas and list their materials.
3. Working with the handout as a guide, students use the materials to create their version of the scene.
4. When everyone has completed the activity, their final work can be displayed in order to retell the story of La Bohème. (Figuring out which scene goes where will take some work!)
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<td>Lighting is used to create a mood on stage. Use the entire piece of paper as your stage.</td>
<td>What are characters wearing? How do they show they are Bohemians? What kind of art do they make? Are they in a café? Add coffee mugs, milk containers, and maybe some food. Are they outside? Add native plants, animals etc.</td>
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<td>Washed out dark colours. Colour hot look against a cool backdrop.</td>
<td>Background helps the audience know what they are doing in the scene.</td>
<td>Backdrop and a central section. Use the entire piece of paper as your stage.</td>
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My Ideas

My Ideas

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My Ideas
FURTHER RESOURCES

The Metropolitan Opera produces study guides for their production include further listening activities and information about the opera.

Minnesota Opera created a video synopsis of La Bohème featuring their production from 2010. The video is 2 minutes in length!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzkNXRNVCk

The Guardian newspaper in London, UK published this review of the Scottish Opera production Vancouver Opera is presenting.
https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/may/11/la-boheme-review-theatre-royal-glasgow-scottish-opera-puccini

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

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