



**GEORGES BIZET**

# THE PEARL FISHERS

OCT  
22-30

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Transcendent beauty from the composer of *Carmen*

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vancouveropera | **STUDY GUIDE**

## 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. The lessons within this guide provide opportunities for students to learn about the opera they will be watching and think critically about art and its meaning.

We recommend 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.

## 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 play 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 all unique languages for creating art and communicating.
2. The arts are an essential aspect of building community and interpersonal relationships.

3. The arts react and respond to the cultures within which they are 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.

## **GETTING READY TO SEE AN OPERA:**

### **Three questions to ask (and have answered) before seeing the Opera.**

#### **1. 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, 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 *opus* means work in Italian, as in a work of art. Opera is more than one work. It is usually written in the language of the composer and the language of the country in it will be heard.

#### **2. 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. Opera has been around for over 400 years therefore opera singers sing without microphones, which hadn't yet been developed at 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. They must also 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, Italian, and 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.

### 3. 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 (the music) and libretto (the text) to prepare for the first rehearsal. The 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 the props, sets and costumes. Lighting designers work with the stage director to add light and shade to the stage. 4 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—are practiced over and over again. The dress rehearsal is the final rehearsal that takes place in front of a live audience in which everything is done as it would be in an actual performance. Finally, opening night arrives. Et voila! There is an opera!

## A NOTE FOR TEACHERS ON ORIENTALISM

Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* is a product of the 19th Century Orientalist movement. This movement is deeply rooted in European Imperialism and was often used in its time to depict the East as a barbaric or lawless place. Vancouver Opera acknowledges this history and has worked with numerous South Asian creators, writers, and artists to create a respectful and accurate depiction of the characters in this opera. We encourage all educators using his guide to learn more about Sri Lankan history and culture.

More resources on Vancouver Opera’s work on this topic can be found at:

[https://medium.com/@vancouver\\_opera](https://medium.com/@vancouver_opera)

## ABOUT *THE PEARL FISHERS*

### COMPOSED BY GEORGES BIZET, LIBRETTO BY EUGENE CORMON AND MICHEL CARRE

Georges Bizet (October 25, 1838 – 3 June 3, 1875), born as Alexandre César Léopold Bizet, was a French composer of the Romantic era. Best known for his operas in a career cut short by his early death, Bizet achieved few successes including *The Pearl Fishers* before his final work, *Carmen*, which has become one of the most popular and frequently performed works in the entire opera repertoire. During a brilliant student career at the Conservatoire de Paris, Bizet won many prizes, including the prestigious Prix de Rome in 1857. He was recognized as an outstanding pianist, though he chose not to capitalize on this skill and rarely performed in public. Later commentators have acclaimed him as a composer of brilliance and originality whose premature death was a significant loss to French musical theatre.

### SYNOPSIS

#### ACT I

A pearl-diving village in the Far East. As the villagers prepare for their dive, they sing of their fear of the sea. Zurga tells them they must choose a leader, and they unanimously swear loyalty to him. Nadir returns to the village after spending a year away. He and Zurga recall that their friendship was almost destroyed when they both fell in love with a Hindu priestess. Nadir swears he has kept the vow they both made to protect their friendship by staying away from her. Nourabad, the High Priest, brings a priestess to the village. She is to sing and pray all night to calm the demons of the deep and to ward off the spirits of the storm. Although she is veiled, Nadir immediately realizes she is Leïla, the priestess he still loves. Zurga, who does not recognize her, imposes an oath of obedience upon her on pain of death. Leïla is to remain veiled and pure. Her reward for keeping the divers safe from harm will be their finest pearl. Nadir, alone, reveals that he and Leïla have met illicitly and that he has followed her to the village. He listens as she begins her incantation and, unable to resist any longer, calls out to her. She breaks off, answering his love.

## ACT II

Nourabad tells Leïla that the divers have returned safely and she can now sleep until morning in the temple. He stresses the importance of her vow. As proof of her ability to keep her promise she tells him how, as a little girl, she once protected a fugitive. The man she saved gave her a necklace, which she wears to this day. In her sleep, Leïla dreams of Nadir, who is in fact making his way into the sacred enclosure. The couple is reunited. As a storm breaks out, they are discovered and denounced by Nourabad, who blames them for the tempest. Zurga protects his friend from the fury of the villagers, who demand his immediate death. Nourabad tears off Leïla's veil. Zurga finally recognizes Leïla and realizes that Nadir has betrayed their oath. He angrily demands death for the guilty couple.

## ACT III

The storm has died away but the village has suffered terrible damage from flooding. Zurga's anger has passed and he sadly reflects on Nadir's fate. Leïla intercedes for Nadir and Zurga relents, but his jealousy reawakens when he realizes how much Leïla loves his rival. He allows Nourabad to take her to be sacrificed together with Nadir. Before she leaves, she gives her special necklace to one of the young divers and asks him to give it to her mother. Zurga seizes the necklace with a cry.

The pearl fishers prepare for the ritual deaths of Leïla and Nadir at dawn. Zurga stops them with the news that the village is on fire, and the villagers flee to try and save their children. Zurga releases Nadir and Leïla and explains that he set the village alight in order to rescue them. He reveals that he was the fugitive Leïla saved many years ago. The lovers gratefully make their escape and Zurga is left to face the consequences of his actions. (Courtesy of English National Opera)

## LESSON 1 - Learn before you listen

**Big Ideas:** Dance, drama, music and visual arts are each a unique language for creating and communicating. Experiencing art is a means to develop empathy for others' perspectives and experiences.

**Category:** Before Performance/quick

**Objective:** The objective of this lesson is to ensure students are familiar with what is happening in the opera. They should be able to consider the impact of repeated listening to enhance their understanding of a piece of music. In this particular case, students will be exposed to a famous operatic aria.

- Materials:  Roberto Alagna & Bryn Terfel "Au fond du temple saint"
- 8.5" by 11" piece of paper divided into three sections (labelled Hearing Feeling Questioning)

### Lesson:

1. This lesson makes an ideal opening activity for the three or four classes before watching 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:
  - Type of voice (female, male, unsure, soprano, tenor, etc.) - Here's a helpful video in identifying each voice type from the Royal Opera House <https://youtu.be/hLfvkwTnJVM>
  - Instruments they hear (violin, cello, trumpet, piano, etc.)
  - Tempo — fast, slow, both, etc.
  - Form — does the aria have sections they can identify – does anything repeat? • How does it start? How does it end?
  - What emotions could be used to describe the music? • How does it make them feel? • 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 area
5. After the final listening session, lead a group 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 in the final listening session that they didn't hear the first time around? Compare and contrast with a neighbour!

**Extension:** Repeat the listening activity by having students bring in a song that is unknown to others in the class. Encourage students to use 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? Think, Pair and Share!

## LESSON 2 - Learn before you listen

**Big Ideas:** Dance, drama, music and visual arts are each a unique language for creating and communicating. Experiencing art is a means to develop empathy for others' perspectives and experiences.

**Category:** After Performance/quick

**Objective:** The objective of this lesson is to focus on ONE aspect of opera: the music! After becoming familiar with the music excerpt, students will then create their own comic zine to go along with the overture. The idea is to use the overture music as the storyline - telling the dramatic tale of *The Pearl Fishers* in under 5 minutes using drawings, colours and humour!

Materials:

- Materials: [▶ G. Bizet - The Pearl Fishers - Overture](#)
- Zine instructions/how to video: <https://youtu.be/gZtlkQw4GTs>
- 11" X 17" paper preferred • Scissors
- Pens/pencils, crayons, pencil crayons, sharpies, etc.

**Lesson:**

1. Listen to Bizet's overture of *The Pearl Fishers* a few times to get a sense of each melody change.
2. Students will then fold their paper into a zine - instructional video included above!
3. Provide a front and back cover to your comic.
4. Once the zine is complete, have students swap their comics with other students in the class, turn on the Carmen overture, and enjoy reading the epic short story!
5. Students may of course add text/text bubbles for their characters, or simply keep it wordless. Endless options!

**Extension:** Have students expand the comic even more, creating more scenes. If technology is available, create a short stop-motion video in groups. Students can cut out images they've created, OR create new images using clay, playdough, paper, etc. Use the Carmen overture in the background of the short video! Here is a how-to video for stop motion creation: [▶ EASY STOP MOTION TUTORIAL using Stop Motion Studio!!!](#) Most stop motion videos can be created using the FREE app "Stop Motion Studio".

## LESSON 4 - *The Pearl Fishers* through the ages: What would you do?

**Big Ideas:** Dance, drama, music and visual arts are each a unique language for creating and communicating. Experiencing art is a means to develop empathy for others' perspectives and experiences.

**Category:** After Performance/in-depth

**Objective:** *The Pearl Fishers* centers around the relationship between Nadir, Zurga, and Leila. Encourage students to put themselves in the protagonists' shoes and show us how the story could have taken a different turn had Nadir and Zurga been more honest with each other. Students are then encouraged to build a set and then act out their own versions of *The Pearl Fishers*.

- Paper (any size)
- Pencils/crayons/pencil crayons/paints/coloring tools
- Cardboard
- Costumes

### **Lesson:**

1. Discuss the plot of the Opera: should Nadir have lied to his friend on the beach? Did Zurga overreact to finding out about Leila and Nadir?
2. Students will discuss their own perspectives on friendship, love and honesty in small groups and conceive of a new script for the Opera.
3. Provide craft supplies and costumes.
4. Allow the students to act out their scenes.

**Extension:** Have students film their scenes ahead of time and show them to the class.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

 [Luka Loves The Pearl Fishers](#)



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For more information about Vancouver Opera's Education Programs for elementary and secondary students, please visit

**vancouveropera.ca**

or contact:

**Ashley Daniel Foot**

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COVER: CURT OLDS AS CAPTAIN CORCORAN AND EMILY PULLEY AS LITTLE BUTTERCUP IN *HMS PINAFORE*. PHOTO BY ARI DENISON, COURTESY OF EUGENE OPERA.  
DETAIL FROM VO'S *HMS PINAFORE* SEASON ARTWORK BY CIELE BEAU.