



**BENJAMIN  
BRITTEN**

# A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

**FEB  
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**Magical evening of ethereal melodies**

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**vancouveropera | STUDY GUIDE**

## STUDY GUIDE OBJECTIVES

The experience of attending an opera may be a new one for many students. While no one wants a spoiler for their favorite streamed show, that's not always the case with opera! The more students know what to expect (different languages, complex plots, incredible sets and costumes, live music), the deeper and richer their experience.

This study guide is designed for all teachers.

The lessons in this guide provide opportunities for students to learn about the opera. Lessons can be either quick or in-depth; used either before or after the performance; and adapted to meet the dynamic needs of students. How deeply students go into this material depends on each teacher.

We recommend the following as the minimum commitment to prepare for the performance.

- Familiarize students with the synopsis and at least one piece of music.
- Identify the socio-historical context of the opera (when and where it was written).
- Identify language that was common at the time of composition but may not be as acceptable now.
- Students are allowed to reflect on and discuss their response to the performance

## CONNECTIONS TO THE CURRICULUM

The study guide was prepared per the new BC Curriculum and targeted secondary classes. Each activity includes specific learning objectives adaptable to most arts and humanities coursework.

Elementary teachers can modify the activities to meet the needs of their students with little difficulty. Throughout the secondary arts education curriculum, the big ideas connect 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.
2. The arts are essential to building community.
3. The arts react and respond to culture.
4. Creative works are socially constructed and often challenge the status quo.
5. Personal and collective identity is explored, expressed and impacted through arts experiences.

These larger concepts link to the big ideas found in the social studies and English/French language arts curriculum.

The study guide was 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.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream Study Guide was prepared by Arts Educator Rebecca Paulding with additional material by Jane Potter and Kris Epps*

## WHAT IS OPERA? *A Top Ten List!*

1. Opera is a story told loud! It's a group effort by conductors, musicians, singers, dancers, set designers, costume creators, lighting experts, directors, theatre staff, make-up artists, wig makers, carpenters, prop designers, and more, to tell a story, sing, dance, and entertain the audience all the same time.
2. Where on earth did opera come from? Italy, just like gelato!  
The word opera means 'work' in Italian, as in work of art, not homework.
3. Fun fact: Opera has been around for as long as gelato, which is just over four hundred years.
4. Unlike Drake or Taylor Swift, opera singers don't use microphones. Instead, they learn to project their voices over the sound of the live orchestra. To protect each other's hearing, opera singers cannot face directly towards each other while singing. Ear plugs not allowed.
5. Opera singers often have as many years of education as physicians, and must continue training throughout their career.
6. But does it pay the bills? If you were a top opera singer, you could make as much as \$20,000 per performance.
7. Opera singers must train their voice to project across a full orchestra one minute, and then drop to a near whisper the next. Just like your school principal during assemblies.
8. There's no skipping French class if you want to be an opera singer. Composers write in their language, and sometimes in second or third languages too, so opera singers must often learn English, French, German, Italian, and even Russian and Czech if they want to perform worldwide. And in case you're wondering, 'ice cream' in Czech is 'zmizlina'.
9. Operas can be up to four hours long, which may be how long French class feels, but at least you don't have to wear a costume, make-up, possibly a wig, sing and dance under hot lights, and memorize an entire opera, like the performers do.
10. 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.

*This seems like a lot of work...*

It is! But most things worthwhile take work.

Here's How to Stage an Opera in Five Steps:

**One:** Assemble your creative team. You'll need a music director, stage director, singers, orchestra musicians, and set and costume designers.

**Two:** Familiarize everyone with the music (they call it the score) and the words, or text (known as the libretto -see we weren't kidding about all the Italian)

**Fun Fact:** Opera singers must arrive at the first rehearsal "off book," meaning they must have the entire score memorized in advance! No last-second studying here.

**Three:** Artists and sewists are up next, making props, sets and costumes, before the lighting designers work their magic adding light and shade to the stage.

**Four:** Rehearse rehearse rehearse! One scene at a time works best, until "tech week", when everyone moves into the theatre. Now, all aspects of the opera, from the acting to the music to the moving of the sets, are practiced over and over again. Just like rugby practice.

**Five:** Finally, opening night arrives and all that hard work pays off (and hopefully there's gelato for after the show, too). Get ready to do it all again tomorrow night!

*Alright. So what's this opera about anyway?*

**Very Short Version:**

Two couples from Athens run away to the forest. A mischievous fairy/goblin, Puck, uses magic to make both boys fall in love with the same girl. The two couples encounter various other magical creatures and locals as they pursue each other through the forest on this midsummer night. Meanwhile, Puck helps his master, the Fairy King Oberon, play a trick on the fairy queen, Titania. In the end, Puck reverses the magic, and the two couples reconcile and marry.

*Hmmm. I still have questions:*

And the Royal Shakespeare Company has answers! Here is their plot summary of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

1. Egeus asks Duke Theseus to uphold an old law that says he can choose his daughter's husband. He chooses Demetrius to marry Hermia.
2. Lysander and Hermia decide to run away together through the woods so that Hermia doesn't have to marry Demetrius. Hermia tells Helena their plan and Helena tells Demetrius.
3. The mechanicals, including a weaver called Nick Bottom, meet in the woods to rehearse a play to celebrate the wedding of Duke Theseus to Hippolyta.
4. In the woods, Oberon and Titania have an argument about a changeling boy that Oberon wants for himself but Titania refuses to give up. Oberon decides to get his revenge on Titania. He sends his servant Puck to find a flower which has the power to make someone fall in love with the first living thing they see when they wake up.
5. Demetrius chases Hermia into the woods, and is followed by Helena. Oberon sees Demetrius and Helena arguing and decides to help her by using the potion on Demetrius. Unfortunately, Puck mistakenly gives it to Lysander who then falls in love with Helena.
6. Puck uses magic to turn Bottom's head into a Donkey head, while he is rehearsing in the forest. Titania sees Bottom when she wakes up and she falls in love with him.
7. Puck tries to fix his mistake with Lysander and puts some potion in Demetrius' eyes as well. Demetrius then also falls in love with Helena which causes more confusion between the four lovers. Oberon and Puck use more magic and love potion to reconcile the lovers and remove the donkey's head from Bottom. Oberon then reunites with Titania.
8. Theseus finds the lovers in the forest and blesses their marriages. The mechanicals then perform their play for Theseus at his wedding to Hippolyta.

## ACT I

Our first scene opens at nightfall in Athens, Greece. The King of the Fairies, Oberon, is quarreling yet again with Tytania, his queen, over a young boy who is under her protection. She refuses to give him up. Oberon sends his crafty yet conniving servant Puck to find a magic flower, whose juice, sprinkled on Tytania's eyelids, will make her fall in love with the first creature she sees upon waking. Oberon plans to steal the boy while Tytania is under the spell.

Meanwhile, Lysander and Hermia have escaped from the city. Hermia's father is to force her into marriage with Demetrius. Wanting the chance to have choice and a better life, they decide to elope and set off into the woods. However, Demetrius, who loves Hermia, chases after her, himself pursued by Helena, who is hopelessly in love with him. But Demetrius scornfully rejects her and runs off into the forest. Oberon witnesses this charade, and orders Puck to seek out Demetrius and make him fall in love with Helena with the help of the magic juice.

In yet another scene, six working men have also left the city to discuss in secret a play they hope to perform at the wedding of Theseus, Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. There is some disagreement over casting, with Bottom, the weaver, and Flute, the bellows-mender, finally agreeing to play the parts of Pyramus and Thisbe, the star-crossed lovers of the play's title. Our author and appointed director of the play, Quince, the carpenter, hands out scripts, and all agree to meet later that night to rehearse.

Exhausted and lost, Lysander and Hermia lie down to sleep. Clever Puck, who thinks he has found Demetrius, sprinkles the juice of the magic flower on Lysander's eyes. In a rush, Demetrius, still chased by Helena, and angrily abandons her. Alone and in despair, she sees the sleeping Lysander and wakes him. Under the effect of the spell, he immediately declares his love. Helena is furious and runs off, thinking he is making fun of her. Lysander follows. Hermia awakes from a terrible dream to find herself completely and utterly alone.

Deep in the forest, the fairies lull their mistress Tytania to sleep. Appearing from the shadows, Oberon slyly puts juice on her eyes, hoping Tytania will "wake when some vile thing is near."

## ACT II

Later that night, Quince and his men meet to rehearse. Bored and searching for mischief, Puck, seeing them at work, decides to amuse himself by turning Bottom into an ass. At the sight of this strange and terrifying transformation, the others run off. Our beloved Bottom embraces his new skin, and sings out loud to keep his courage up. This wakes Tytania, who immediately falls in love with him. With the help of the fairies, she manages to coax Bottom to bed.

As fate would have it, Tytania is in love with an ass, and Oberon couldn't be more delighted. But when Demetrius arrives, still in hot pursuit of Hermia, he realizes the masterful Puck has made a grave mistake. Finally, Demetrius falls asleep, and Oberon pours the juice on his eyes. The arrival of Helena and Lysander wakes Demetrius, who now declares his passion for Helena. When Hermia appears as well, only to be rejected by Lysander, Helena is convinced that the men have planned it all to mock her. The four quarrel furiously. Enraged at Puck, Oberon gives him an antidote to administer to Lysander. Puck leads the lovers away through the forest until they fall asleep and puts the herb on Lysander's eyes. All seems to be sorted and well...for now.

## ACT III

Finally, Oberon releases Tytania from the love spell. Sunrise wakes the four lovers, who are finally reconciled—Demetrius with Helena and Lysander with Hermia. Our beloved Bottom, restored to human shape, wakes from what he thinks was a strange dream. He wanders off while his friends search for him. They're about to give up when he returns with news that their play has been chosen to be performed at court!

Back in Athens, the four lovers ask Theseus's forgiveness for their disobedience to the law. Theseus decides that they shall be married together with him and Hippolyta. Quince and his rowdy theatre troupe finally give their performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe," and the three couples retire to bed. Oberon, Tytania, and the fairies bless the sleeping household—with playful Puck having the last word.

Music: Benjamin Britten (premiered in 1960) Libretto/Text: Adapted by Britten and Peter Pears, but based on William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

*But wait, Shakespeare didn't write this opera?*

No. The Composer is Benjamin Britten.

*Does the Opera follow the same plot as the play?*

Great Question! Yes, mostly, but Britten did take out some of scenes at the beginning of Shakespeare's play, and starts the action right in the forest, with the Fairy King and Queen arguing.

## *Who was Benjamin Britten?*

Because we know you like a good list, here are ten things you didn't know about Benjamin Britten:

1. Benjamin Britten was born in England in 1913. He had three older siblings, his dad was a dentist, and his mother was a fabulous piano player.
2. Britten wrote his first composition at the age of five. He called it "Did you Know my Daddy has gone to London Today?".
3. By the time he was 15, he had written 534 compositions.
4. By the time he was 17, he had won a full ride to the Royal College of Music in London where he was lucky enough to be taught by some of the most famous composers of the day.
5. Britten met his lifelong love, and professional partner, the tenor Peter Pears, in 1937. They lived and worked together for 40 years.
6. Britten and Pears were both pacifists and conscientious objectors to war and fighting. To avoid the start of WW2 in Europe, the two traveled to the USA in 1939 and lived there until 1942.
7. Britten and Pears founded the Aldeburgh Festival in his hometown of Aldeburgh on the east coast of England in 1948. The festival still happens every year to this day.
8. Britten composed many great works during his lifetime, including the operas Peter Grimes, Albert Herring, A Midsummer Night's Dream and Billy Bud. Britten also composed both vocal and choral works, and a children's piece still used in schools today titled The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra.
9. Britten was given a title by the Queen for his lifelong contribution to music, becoming Baron Britten in 1976.
10. Upon his death by heart failure in 1976, Westminster Abbey in London offered burial, alongside the many other famous artists, scientists, and composers who are interred there. But, as per Britten's wishes, he was buried in the cemetery of his local church in Aldeburgh. Ten years later, Peter Pears was buried in the plot beside him.

### *What is a Countertenor?*

Britten wrote the role of Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to be sung by a Countertenor. A Countertenor is a type of classical male singing voice, whose vocal range is similar to a female mezzo soprano. Take a few minutes to watch this video from Classic FM, where Kangmin Justin Kim explains the history and mystery of that rare voice type! <https://youtu.be/KQjg50s2zPE>

## Lessons

1. Watch this entertaining clip for a visual take on the plot:  
<https://youtu.be/xCI6o-kbqrs>
2. Read the following script, then try and translate it into modern day english, and create a text conversation of a section using <https://ifaketextmessage.com/> or a pen and paper. Keep it clean, and focus on what the two characters are communicating to each other. Be prepared to read yours out loud.

### OBERON and PUCK TEXT ACT 1

#### *OBERON*

Well, go thy way thou shalt not from this grove  
till I torment thee for this injury.  
My gentle Puck, come hither.  
(Puck approaches Oberon.)  
Thou rememberest  
the herb I shew'd thee once;  
the juice of it on sleeping  
eye-lids laid will make or man  
or woman madly dote upon  
the next live creature that it sees.  
Be it on lion, bear,  
or wolf, or bull,  
on meddling monkey,  
or on busy ape.  
Fetch me this herb,  
and be thou here again,  
ere the Leviathan can swim  
a league.

#### PUCK

I'll put a girdle round  
about the earth  
in forty minutes.  
(He flies off.)

#### OBERON

Having once this juice,  
I'll watch Tytania,  
when she is asleep,  
and drop the liquor  
of it in her eyes;  
and ere I take this charm  
from off their sight I'll make  
her render up her page to me.

3. Create a poster for A Midsummer Night's Dream. Make sure the poster cites the composers' names, and the famous original author. Be as creative or as ultra-modern as you desire with the presentation of the poster's artwork. This can be created by hand, or with an online app.

Art materials might include:

- magazines/newspapers (cut out/paste from)
- Oil paints/watercolor paints
- Claymation
- Felt pens/markers
- Recycled materials

4. Using a meme generator, make a meme for the opera A Midsummer Night's Dream.

## Resources

- Metropolitan Opera A Midsummer Night's Dream Synopsis and Guide  
<https://www.metopera.org/user-information/synopses-archive/a-midsummer-nights-dream>
- English National Opera's guide to A Midsummer Night's Dream  
<https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/midsummer-nights-dream-character-guide/>
- Canadian Opera Company's listening guide to A Midsummer Night's Dream  
<http://files.coc.ca/dreamstudyguidelisteningguide.pdf>
- Bard on the Beach's production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, Shakespeare Festival 2022  
<https://bardonthebeach.org/whats-on/a-midsummer-nights-dream/>



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

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