

La
BOHÈME
giacomo puccini



LEARNING GUIDE

TOC

Table of Contents

Pre-Performance Activity pg. 2-7

- Introducing the Opera
- Synopsis + Listening Links
- Who's Who in the Opera

Performance-Day Activity pg. 8-9

- About the Opera
- Puccini: Builder of La Boheme

Classroom Extensions pg.10

- Activate with Arts: Act it Out!
- Reflecting on the Opera Experience

General Information pg. 11-12

- About The Belk Theater
- About Opera Carolina

Pre-Performance

INTRODUCING THE OPERA

The Setting + Historical Context

La Boheme - "The Bohemian"

The word might sound familiar ("Bohemian Rhapsody" or "Boho-chic") but what is a Bohemian?



"To take the world as one finds it, the bad with the good, making the best of the present moment—to laugh at Fortune alike whether she be generous or unkind—to spend freely when one has money, and to hope gaily when one has none—to fleet the time carelessly, living for love and art—this is the temper and spirit of the modern Bohemian in his outward and visible aspect."

– Gelette Burgess

Bohemian is a term for people in major European cities in the late 1800's who chose to live non-traditional lifestyles. They valued the arts, community with other artists, almost frivolous living in the moment, and often voluntary poverty.

Let's Talk About It

Consider these discussion questions:

Why do you think voluntary poverty was part of the Bohemian lifestyle?

Do you think most of the famous artists, writers, and musicians you are familiar with today live in voluntary poverty?

INTRODUCING THE OPERA

The Age of Realism



The life of Giacomo Puccini (1858 – 1924) spans a period frequently known as the age of verismo, or realism. The term refers to the artistic and literary movements in which artists and writers focused on everyday subject matter and treated it in a true-to-life manner.

Opera, however, is rooted in myth or religious mystery, and traditionally it boasts superhuman heroes, grand riches and emotional excess. Verismo arose in the 1890s in Italy and emphasized literary naturalism, contemporary settings, lower-class subjects and violent passions and actions. *La Bohème*, a realistic opera, depicts bohemians who are neither fanciful or fraudulent. They are real.

Realism was not only a movement in the arts; it was a philosophical attitude and a response to the unprecedented scientific and social changes of the 19th century, specifically the Industrial Revolution and scientific discoveries and their influences on society. The Industrial Revolution led to tremendous growth of cities and was responsible for bringing artists in contact with all classes of people. This destroyed the old assumptions that the lower classes were too dull as subjects for art.

Developments in science, philosophy and the social sciences resulted in a revival of determinism, the idea that individuals have no control over their fate. Scientific discoveries threw doubt on religious ideals and discredited idealism in general. Materialism replaced idealism as the prevailing attitude. Puccini portrays his heroines especially as figures who lack the power to control or change their fates. In *La Bohème*, for instance, Mimi's love for Rodolfo is doomed by her ill health and his poverty.

By the early 1900's, discoveries in theoretical physics by Albert Einstein, Max Planck and others, contradicted the main ideas of realism. New developments argued that time and place were not objective facts, but a matter of perspective. Artists in all fields began to reflect this scientific overthrow of realism with a wide variety of new, non-objective, non-representational approaches. Post-realism, or Modernism, includes writers James Joyce and Thomas Mann; painters Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro and Piet Mondrian; and the opera composer Benjamin Britten.

Realism, however, did not die. In fact, it continues to be a major force in commercial art today. Its influence can be felt in advertising, in films and on television programs, and in almost all popular fiction.

Let's Talk About It

Discussion Questions:

Can you think of an example of something from pop-culture that uses the rich and famous as its subject matter vs. something from pop-culture that uses something more realistic?

According to the text, what societal and cultural influences contributed to Verismo emerging as a movement (In other words, why did artists and writers start focusing on realistic characters and settings instead of rich and extravagant ones)?

Pre-Performance SYNOPSIS

Note: The listening pieces have been integrated into the synopsis to allow students to listen to the pieces in context of what is happening in the opera. **Click the video to listen!**

Make sure you have the “Who’s Who in *La Boheme*” handout (on pg. 7) handy so you can explore it while you read the synopsis!

The Story in Short

A tragic love story about a poor, “starving artist” and a beautiful and equally poor seamstress and their group of artist friends.

ACT I

Paris, in the 1830s. In their Latin Quarter garret [a top-floor or attic room, especially a small dismal one, traditionally inhabited by an artist], the near-destitute artist Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm on Christmas Eve by feeding the stove with pages from Rodolfo’s latest drama. They are soon joined by their roommates—Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, who brings food, fuel, and funds he has collected from an eccentric nobleman. As the others depart to revel at the Café Momus, Rodolfo remains behind to finish an article, promising to join them later. There is another knock at the door—the visitor is Mimì, a pretty neighbor, whose candle has gone out in the stairwell. As she enters the room, she suddenly feels faint. Rodolfo gives her a sip of wine, then helps her to the door and relights her candle. Mimì realizes that she lost her key when she fainted, and as the two search for it, both candles go out. Rodolfo finds the key and slips it into his pocket. In the moonlight, he takes Mimì’s hand and tells her about his dreams. She recounts her life alone in a lofty garret, embroidering flowers and waiting for the spring.



The gelida manina

Click the video to listen!

Rodolfo meets Mimì for the first time when she knocks on the door for a light for her candle. When she drops her key in the dark, Rodolfo pretends to look for it and their hands meet. Instantly in love with her, he sings to Mimì of his dreams.

This number is an **aria** (solo song that is often full of emotion) performed by a **tenor** (highest male voice).

Rodolfo’s friends call from outside, telling him to join them. He responds that he is not alone and will be along shortly. Happy to have found each other, Mimì and Rodolfo leave, arm in arm, for the café.

Pre-Performance SYNOPSIS

ACT II

Amid the shouts of street hawkers near the Café Momus, Rodolfo buys Mimì a bonnet and introduces her to his friends.

Opening Chorus

Click the video to listen!

Merchants and children and townspeople are in the busy street market.



This number is sung by the **chorus** (a large group of opera singers)

They all sit down and order supper. The toy vendor Parpignol passes by, besieged by children. Marcello's former sweetheart, Musetta, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the elderly, but wealthy, Alcindoro. The ensuing tumult reaches its peak when, trying to gain Marcello's attention, she loudly sings the praises of her own popularity.



Quando me'n vo

Click the video to listen!

Musetta is Marcello's ex and runs into him at the market. Marcello, baritone or lowest male voice, is visibly shaken by seeing her -he's not over her yet- and she knows it. In this aria, she sings about the joy that all the attention she receives from being so beautiful brings her.

This is a **soprano** (highest female voice) aria.

Sending Alcindoro away to buy her a new pair of shoes, Musetta finally falls into Marcello's arms. Soldiers march by the café, and as the bohemians fall in behind, the returning Alcindoro is presented with the check.

Pre-Performance SYNOPSIS

ACT III

At dawn at the Barrière d'Enfer, a toll-gate on the edge of Paris, Mimì arrives searching for the place where Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter appears, she tells him of her distress over Rodolfo's incessant jealousy. She says she believes it is best that they part. As Rodolfo emerges from the tavern, Mimì hides nearby. Rodolfo tells Marcello that he wants to separate from Mimì, blaming her flirtatiousness. Pressed for the real reason, he breaks down, saying that her illness can only grow worse in the poverty they share. Overcome with emotion, Mimì comes forward to say goodbye to her lover.

O buon Marcello

Click the video to listen!

Mimì sings in duet with Marcello about her despair over Rodolfo breaking up with her because he can't bear losing her to her illness.

This number is a **duet** (a song for two singers)



Marcello runs back into the tavern upon hearing Musetta's laughter. While Mimì and Rodolfo recall past happiness, Marcello returns with Musetta, quarreling about her flirting with a customer. They hurl insults at each other and part, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to remain together until springtime.

ACT IV

Months later in the garret, Rodolfo and Marcello, now separated from their girlfriends, reflect on their loneliness. Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal. To lighten their spirits, the four stage a dance, which turns into a mock duel. At the height of the hilarity, Musetta bursts in with news that Mimì is outside, too weak to come upstairs. As Rodolfo runs to her aid, Musetta relates how Mimì begged to be taken to Rodolfo to die. While the others go to fetch medicine, Mimì and Rodolfo recall their first happy days, but she is seized with violent coughing. When the others return, Musetta gives Mimì a muff to warm her hands, and Mimì slowly drifts into unconsciousness. Musetta prays for Mimì, but it is too late. The friends realize that she is dead, and Rodolfo collapses in despair.

Sono andati

Click the video to listen!

Mimì and Rodolfo have reunited and sing one last duet reflecting on their love for one another and how they first met.



This number is a **duet** (song for two singers).

Pre-Performance

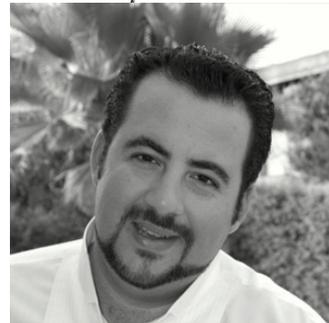
WHO'S WHO IN LA BOHEME

Directions: As you read the Synopsis, draw and label lines between characters to illustrate the relationships between them. For example, you might draw an arrow from Rodolfo to Mimi and draw a heart to show that they are in love.

Musetta



Marcello



Rodolfo



Mimi



Schaunard



Colline



ABOUT THE OPERA

Relay or review the following information:

Opera is a drama (play), that is sung!
Opera uses many different art forms to tell stories.

What to listen for/look for in *La Boheme*

How could each of these art forms help to tell the story in an opera?

Music Lyrics Dialogue Costumes Sets

Look out for each of the above elements in the performance.

Opera vocabulary to know for *La Boheme*

Aria - opera song for one singer that has melody and usually gives insight on the character's feelings

Baritone - the middle male voice

Bass - the lowest male voice

Chorus - a large group of singers who typically portray townspeople, servants, military, etc.

Duet - a song written for two voices

Ensemble - a group of singers (smaller than a chorus)

Soprano - the highest female voice

Tenor - the highest male voice

Don't forget to check out the composer, Puccini, on the next page!



28
operas written

Puccini had an avid interest in technology and became a good friend with famous inventor Thomas Edison.



Giacomo Antonio Domenico Michele Secondo Maria Puccini (1813-1901)

Builder of La Bohème

What a name! He may have a long name, but Giacomo Puccini is one of the first names that comes to mind when you talk about opera. Our composer was born in Lucca, in the Tuscan region of Italy, to a family five generations deep in music, after all of whom he is named. Like many famous composers, Puccini began studying music at an early age; when he was five years old his father died and Puccini was made to continue his studies with his uncle Fortunato, who thought he was a poor student. It wasn't until he saw Verdi's opera *Aida* (1876) at age 20 that he decided to dedicate his life to composing opera.

Puccini set off to school in Milan at the Conservatory (the Milan Conservatory, a big deal) and there wrote his first opera, *Le Villi*, which earned him enough notice to get a second opera commissioned. This second work, *Edgar*, had a lousy

story and mediocre libretto (the text of the opera), which taught Puccini a valuable lesson about choosing librettists wisely. He went on to write new, successful operas, including his most successful works: *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. He was considered the head of the table among the *giovane scuola* (the young school of Italian composers) after completing such international hits. He was even commissioned to write an opera for the Metropolitan Opera: *La Fanciulla del West*.

Puccini was working on his twelfth opera, *Turandot*, at the time of his death from complications of throat cancer. Franco Alfano finished the opera shortly following Puccini's death, and a new ending was composed in recent history (2002) by Italian composer Luciano Berio.

CLASSROOM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

The following standards-linked exercises have been designed as a classroom supplement for teachers of upper grades classrooms and/or homeschool groups.

Pre-Performance

HISTORICAL SETTING + CONTEXT

Students may read the information on pages 2-3 and either discuss the questions that follow in groups or answer the questions in written form individually, depending on the needs of the class. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1)

Pre-Performance

ACTIVATE WITH ARTS: ACT IT OUT!

Teachers are encouraged to use this activity in place of reading the synopsis and filling out the "Who's Who" worksheet. Activate with the Arts activities enhance student engagement and learning through arts-based skills, giving teachers more "bang for their buck" for their instruction time. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.7; CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6)

La Boheme in Three Minutes

Student volunteers silently act out an abbreviated plot.

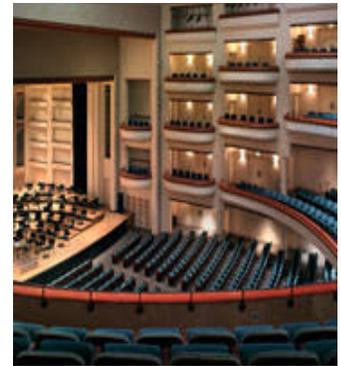
1. Students should be placed in small groups of 6.
2. Students read the provided synopsis and distill it into an 8 sentence or less "speed-synopsis."
3. Each group's narrator reads their script while the rest of the group silently acts it out for the rest of the class.
4. Remind student actors to think about the following as they act out the scene:
 - their body position in relation to the other actors
 - their facial expressions

Post-Performance

REFLECTING ON THE OPERA EXPERIENCE

The following questions may be used for classroom discussion or written reflection after the performance. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.3; CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1)

1. What is one thing you learned about opera or this time period in history that you didn't know before?
2. What do you think were the main themes from La Boheme? Use examples from the opera to support your answer.
3. Can you think of anyone who might be considered modern Bohemians? Use what have learned about Bohemians to support your answer.
4. The following questions from the Pre-performance section could be revisited or answered for the first time after the performance:
 - Why do you think voluntary poverty was part of the Bohemian lifestyle?
 - Do you think most of the famous artists, writers, and musicians you are familiar with today live in voluntary poverty?
 - How might the difference in their chosen lifestyles change their artistic perspectives?
 - Can you think of an example of something from pop-culture that uses the rich and famous as its subject matter vs. something from pop-culture that uses something more realistic?



GET THERE

Visiting Center City doesn't have to be a tough trip.

Blumenthal Performing Arts Center
130 N. Tryon St
Charlotte, NC 28202

Ride. Hop on the Lynx Lightrail. Check out the options [here](#).

Drive. Directions from door to door [here](#).

Park. Participating garages are just \$5. Find details [here](#).

THE BELK THEATER

MAKE ANY SEAT IN THE HOUSE THE BEST ONE

Attending an opera in the Belk Theater is an experience not to be forgotten. The performance you are attending is the final dress rehearsal in which the cast performs one last full run through of the opera before opening night. Just like a regular performance, there will be an intermission(s) between acts.

Upon entering the theater, notice the production crew's station in the orchestra level seating (the lowest level of seating). The crew is set up with computers and headsets to allow them to communicate with people backstage to ensure that the performance runs smoothly. During this final rehearsal they will be making sure all cues and technical features of the performance are in place. Also notice the supertitles

(English translations of the lyrics being sung) that are projected onto a screen above the stage.

Please remember that this is a working performance and the performers on stage are very aware of their audience, especially a distracting audience. The polite audience member should always refrain from talking and stay seated during a performance. Nothing shows more respect and appreciation for the performers on stage than giving them your full attention.

Shout Out

Give a shout out to the cast after a beautiful aria or at the end of the evening – literally! Shout "Bravi!" for a job well done to the whole cast, "Brava!" to the diva who aced it, or "Bravo!" to the guy who left it all on the stage.

Opera Carolina

INVESTED IN OUR COMMUNITY AND ITS LIFE



Then, now, & years from now

Let's take a journey back to 1948: the Charlotte Music Club is formed by a handful of arts enthusiasts who realize that Charlotte's artistic landscape –but more importantly, cultural community– would be enhanced by opera performances. Fast forward to today: Opera Carolina is a 71 year-old company that's still blossoming, hitting new highs with each season of glorious music, drama, and all that encompasses the operatic art form. Your resident Opera continues to bring high-quality standards of the operatic repertoire to stages near you, but is also continually striving to perform lesser-known gems.

What does our future hold? A rich commitment to our community –which we take seriously– to continue enriching the lives of citizens from all walks of life; a continual quest to produce excellent opera from all eras on our stage; and, most importantly, to connect our community.

The people

In the early days of Opera Carolina, volunteers designed the sets, built costumes, sang in the chorus, filled leading roles and, of course, sold tickets and held fundraisers to support the company.

Now a fully professional company that not only produces Opera performances on a big scale but also travels programs into local schools and community venues, we never forget the legacy of the original volunteers who made this company the what it is today. Opera Carolina is rooted

in the Carolinas; 90% of our company live and work right here in our region, complementing the international artists who join the resident company to perform on our mainstage. We guess you can say we've got Carolina on our mind.

The House

If the paragraphs before didn't sell you on our commitment to our community, maybe information on the Opera Center will. Opera Carolina now resides in the historic Biberstein house, in the Elizabeth neighborhood. The last remaining historic home in the Uptown radius, Opera Carolina's digs are as much a part of the community as is the company.

Built in 1906, the Biberstein House was designed and lived in by R. C. Biberstein, one of the noted mill architects of the Southeast. Mr. Biberstein is credited with building many of the mills in the Charlotte region, including the Highland Park #3 mill. Mr. Biberstein eventually moved his business into this house, his talents and self-designed home playing a role in the New South Industrial movement. Today, the home is registered as a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark.

The house has since been adapted into offices and is now the proud home of Opera Carolina. The Opera Center hosts the company's administrative offices but also serves as space for auditions, recitals, and more. **Our doors are always open.**