

SOCIAL STUDIES: Letters from the Librettist

Students will

- Read for information
- Research a time period for multiple events, inventions, and individuals of various cultures
- Draft a letter to the composer discussing current events
- Suggest material for an opera based on research
- Understand the relevance of cultures and historic events within a given time period

Copies for Each Student: *Norma* Synopsis, Activity Worksheet, Letter Example

Copies for the Teacher: Social Studies lesson plan, *Norma* Synopsis, Activity Worksheet, Letter Example

Getting Ready

Prepare internet access for research for guided practice or group work.

Gather pens, pencils and additional writing paper as needed for your students.

Introduction

Explain to your students that like all works of theater, opera is a result of teamwork. The librettist and composer must work together and communicate to ensure the success of an opera or project. Communication was often done through postal mail or personal meetings during Bellini's lifetime. Today, we know a lot about historical events and individuals due to information gathered from personal and official letters. Have the students discuss what they believe librettist/composers wrote about in their letters. You may want to guide the discussion so that the students begin to understand the presence of historic and cultural references to music, inventions, and political movements during the late 18th century and early 19th century. Have your students read the Letter Example and Synopsis. Give an overview of the assignment, and point out the information your students are expected to research and write about. Give each student a copy of the Activity Worksheet or display it on a screen. To align with Texas TEKS, you may provide and tailor research topics according to your grade level:

6th Grade: Societies of the contemporary world.

7th Grade: Texas history, from natural Texas to present.

8th Grade: United States history from the early colonial period through Reconstruction.

U.S. History Studies since 1877: U.S. History from Reconstruction to the present day.

World History Studies: Societies of ancient Greece, Rome, India, Persia, China, and Medieval to Renaissance Europe.

Guided/Independent Practice

Depending on your grade level, the ability of your students, and time constraints, you may choose to have students work as a whole class, in small groups, with a partner, or individually. Read the introduction and directions on the Activity Worksheet or display it on a screen. Have students select topics and begin research, being mindful of the requirements for their letter. This can be done in class or as an outside assignment. Have students draft a letter to Bellini being sure to include the required information from their research. Have students share their letters individually or by groups and tell why they chose their location and events. Letters can also be handwritten and displayed on a class board.

Evaluation

Have students present their ideas to the class for discussion and evaluation. The teacher may want to guide the discussion.

For Further Study

Students may want to do additional research on librettists, composers, or civilizations during a specific time period or other related topics online and in their school library. Their findings can be shared with the class at the beginning of a later lesson.

If time allows

Have students handwrite their letters. You can also have students respond to the letters of their classmates. If time allows, have students create an outline for an opera based on one of their historic events or inventions mentioned in their letter.

TEKS-Social Studies

6th Grade

(16) Culture

The student understands that all societies have basic institutions in common even though the characteristics of these institutions may differ. (A)

(17) Culture.

The student understands relationships that exist among world cultures. (A) (B)

(21) Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (A) (B)

7th Grade

(21) Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (A)

8th Grade

(23) Culture

The student understands the relationships between and among people from various groups, including racial, ethnic, and religious groups, during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. (C)

(24) Culture.

The student understands the major reform movements of the 19th century. (A) (B)

(29) Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (A)

United States History Studies Since 1877

(26) Culture

The student understands how people from various groups contribute to our national identity. (A) (B) (C)

(29) Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (A) (B) (D)

World History Studies

(25) Culture

The student understands how the development of ideas has influenced institutions and societies. (A and B)

(29) Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. (F)

Correlates: Language Arts

Gardner's Intelligences: Verbal-Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Intrapersonal

Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Synthesis, Evaluation (1956)

Remember, Understand, Apply, Evaluate, Create (2001)

Sources

Accessed on 12/10/2015 <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Vincenzo-Bellini>

Accessed on 12/10/15 <http://www.roh.org.uk/people/felice-romani>

Norma

Synopsis

ACT ONE

The High Priest Oroveso and members of a Druidic cult meet at their temple to prepare for the rites of winter solstice. They pray to their god, Irminsul, that Norma, High Priestess and Oroveso's daughter, will declare war on the Romans and end their occupation.

After the Druids leave, Pollione, Proconsul of the Roman forces, arrives. His Celtic aide, Flavio, urges him to go, but Pollione insists on staying to meet Adalgisa, a priestess whom he loves. Flavio is distressed to learn that Pollione plans to abandon Norma, who has secretly borne him two children during the long Roman occupation. He cites the risks of engendering Norma's rage. Pollione acknowledges this, recounting a terrifying dream in which Norma savagely avenges herself for his infidelity.

The Druids return to perform their ritual. Norma warns that their warlike posture is futile and commands them to wait until Rome falls through its own vices. A group of virgin priestesses enters, Adalgisa among them. Norma cuts the sacred mistletoe and makes a burnt offering to the moon goddess. She promises to declare war on the Romans should the god Irminsul appear to her but reserves the right to kill Pollione herself. Privately, however, she longs that his love for her be rekindled.

As everyone leaves, Adalgisa stays behind to implore the gods to eradicate her feelings for Pollione, at which point the Proconsul returns and declares his love. Fearing that his dream may be a prophecy, he entreats Adalgisa to accompany him to Rome, where he has been ordered to return the next day. Adalgisa agrees.

Norma reveals her ambivalent feelings toward her children as she waits for them to be brought to her by Clotilde, who cares for them in secret. Aware of Pollione's order to return to Rome and his aloofness toward her, she fears he will abandon them. Hearing Adalgisa approach, Clotilde hides the children. Adalgisa confesses that she has fallen in love and asks Norma to forgive her and release her from her vows. Norma is sympathetic as she remembers her own love. Just as she agrees, Pollione appears. It becomes clear to Norma that it is he who has stirred the young priestess to love, and she furiously condemns him. Adalgisa, shocked to learn of the relationship between Pollione and Norma, vows to remain faithful to the High Priestess.

ACT TWO

Although certain that her children are doomed to suffering as slaves or outcasts, Norma finds herself unable to kill them. Instead, she makes Adalgisa promise to go to Rome with Pollione and raise the children as her own. But Adalgisa insists on confronting Pollione and convincing him to return to Norma.

Oroveso and the Druids are gathered at the temple to secretly plan an attack on the Romans, when a Roman detachment arrives to inform Oroveso of the identity of the Roman Consul who will be replacing Pollione, a man

reputed to be more savage and brutal. Oroveso takes this as a sign to abandon their planned attack and counsels his fellow Druids to feign submission and patiently await their chance to rebel.

Norma anxiously awaits the outcome of Adalgisa's mission and upon learning that it has failed, sounds the signal for war. As she prepares a sacrificial victim, uproar is heard in the inner temple and Pollione, who has been captured, is brought before her. Dismissing the Druids, she attempts to bargain with Pollione. He refuses to renounce Adalgisa, offering his own life instead.

Norma summons her followers and informs them that a priestess has broken her vow and must be sacrificed. However, it is not Adalgisa she indicts but herself. She reveals to Oroveso the existence of her children and exacts his promise to care for them. Pollione, moved, feels his love for her reborn and requests to die with her. Devastated, the Druids witness Norma's ascent to the pyre and, with her, the destruction of their temple.

Synopsis courtesy of Florida Grand Opera

Norma

Our Composer, Vincenzo Bellini

Vincenzo Bellini, (born November 3, 1801, Catania, Sicily [Italy]—died September 23, 1835, Puteaux, near Paris, France), Italian operatic composer with a gift for creating vocal melody at once pure in style and sensuous in expression. His influence is reflected not only in later operatic compositions, including the early works of Richard Wagner, but also in the instrumental music of Chopin and Liszt.

Born into a family of musicians, Bellini produced his first works while still a student at the Naples Conservatory, where he had been sent by his father, an organist. Bellini gained the patronage of an important impresario, who commissioned *Bianca e Fernando* for the Naples opera. The success of this early work led to other commissions. *Il pirata* (1827), written for La Scala, the opera house at Milan, earned him an international reputation. Bellini was fortunate in having as librettist the best Italian theatre poet of the day, Felice Romani, with whom he collaborated in his next six operas. The most important of these were *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830), based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; *La sonnambula* (1831; *The Sleepwalker*); and *Norma* (1831). *La sonnambula*, an opera semiseria (serious but with a happy ending), became very popular, even in England, where an English version appeared. Bellini's masterpiece, *Norma*, a tragedy set in ancient Gaul, achieved lasting success despite an initial failure.

Bellini lived briefly in London in 1833 and then went to Paris. There, composer Gioachino Rossini's influence secured for him a commission to write an opera for the Théâtre-Italien. The result was *I puritani* (1835), the last of Bellini's nine operas; although handicapped by an inept libretto, it is in many ways his most ambitious and beautiful work.

Bellini's fame was closely bound up with the bel canto style of the great singers of his day. He was not a reformer; his ideals were those of Haydn and Mozart, and he strove for clarity, elegance of form and melody, and a close union of words and music. Yet with perseverance he corrected some of the grosser abuses of opera then current. While he subordinated the orchestra accompaniment to the singers and placed upon their voices the responsibility for dramatic expression, his harmony was more enterprising than that of his contemporary Gaetano Donizetti, and his handling of the orchestra in introductions and interludes was far from perfunctory. It is, however, for the individual charm and elegance of his luminous vocal melody that Bellini is remembered.

Norma

Our Librettists, Felice Romani

Italian librettist Felice Romani (1788–1865) wrote 90 librettos for such composers as Bellini, Donizetti, Mercadante, Meyerbeer and Rossini. His well-structured plots and musically favorable texts made him one of the most sought-after Italian librettists of his day.

Romani was born in Genoa and studied in Pisa and Genoa. He travelled to France, Spain, Greece and Germany before settling in Milan in around 1812. He first began working as a librettist in 1813 for Mayr. He was propelled into the first rank of librettists in 1830–31, when his collaborations with Donizetti (*Anna Bolena*) and Bellini (*La sonnambula*) were performed in the Milan carnival. Apart from a near-hiatus 1834–49, when his post at the Savoy court in Turin curtailed his work as a librettist, he worked prolifically throughout his life with the major opera composers of the day; many of his librettos were set by more than one composer. His librettos for Rossini included *Il turco in italia* (1814) and *Bianca e Falliero* (1819); for Meyerbeer, *Margherita d'Anjou* (1820) and *L'esule di Granata* (1822); for Bellini, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830) and *Norma* (1831); and for Donizetti, *L'elisir d'amore* (1832) and *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833).

As was the custom of the day, Romani rarely worked closely with the composers using his librettos. Exceptions were Meyerbeer and Bellini, who each worked collaboratively with Romani on plot and structure. Romani's collaborations particularly with the latter became exemplars from the golden age of bel canto opera.

Norma

Social Studies Activity

Bellini and Romani worked together to create *Norma* in the early 19th century. Like any partnership, communication was required to ensure the project was successful. Letters were a very important part of communicating in the early 19th century. They not only provided specific information about a topic, but also contained thoughts about current events and well wishes; just like any communication between colleagues or friends today. Since they did not have the ability to instantly inform someone of an event or thought through email, face-time, or text message, letters would discuss the events of the previous months, weeks, or days until the next physical meeting or letter.

Think about what life was like in the early 1800's. What were some of the major events taking place in the world, in the US, and in Texas at that time? What events had already happened or were developing? Who were the celebrities and famous persons at that time? Research the time period to gather information about events and inventions. Then, draft a letter to your friend and composer, Vincenzo Bellini, to catch-up on current events and discuss the topic of *Norma* as a possible opera. You may choose any location in the world as your home such as Egypt, the U.S., an island in the Pacific, or China. Be sure to mention at least 2 different events and exciting inventions that are taking place at the time of your letter. You may need to do a little research about the composition and history of the opera.

Your Letter

Your drafted letter to the composer must contain the following:

- Date and location
- Greetings
- Mention of your environment and things happening around you
- Mention of a current event in the world
- Mention of a current event in the United States or Texas
- Mention of a new invention or famous person
- Conclusion
- Signature

Complete the activity worksheet to organize your research for your letter.

1. What date will you choose? What is your location when the letter is written?
2. What are some of the major things happening in the world during this time?
 - a. How do you feel about this event?
3. What are some of the major things happening in the United States or Texas at this time?
 - a. How do you feel about this event?
4. What is a newly developed invention? Or an invention that is still receiving a patent?
 - a. How do you feel about this invention? What do you hope will happen?
5. Who is someone you would like to meet and why?

All of this information can be as brief or as detailed as your teacher requests.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Norma

Activity Worksheet: Letters from the Librettist

1. What is the date of your letter? What is your location when the letter is written? Why did you choose this location?

2. List a few major or minor world events that took place during that time. How do you feel about the events?

3. List a few major or minor U.S. and/or Texas events that took place at that time. How do you feel about the events?

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4. Briefly tell about a new invention or an enhancement to a current invention of the late 19th century. What do you hope will be accomplished through this invention?

5. Who is someone you would like to meet from this time period? Why? Does Bellini know this person? Do you imagine that you have already met this person?

Use the answers to the above questions to draft your letter to Bellini. Be sure to write the letter from your point of view if you lived as a poet and librettist in the early 19th century. Your status can be authentic or fictional.

Bonus: Handwrite your letter to Bellini.

Norma
Letter Example

Date

My dearest Vincenzo,

I had received word that you were not feeling well, that your light ever evades you. I pray that this message finds you in a far better state my dear friend. I write to you from the shores of Africa.

Have you heard word of (**current invention**)? I do hope it will prove more successful than his last contraptions. He is quite an interesting character, although odd. I look forward to sharing one with you and toasting our good health, my friend.

How is (**current event**) going for you? Surely the public will come to its senses and realize....

Things are a bit on end here. Oddly enough, we are still feeling the aftermath of the (**event**). I have faith that progress will be made.

I do hope that your compositions are proving fruitful if not challenging. I understand that you have started to consider Norma for an opera. A tale of love, betrayal, and redemption. I believe it will make a fine opera someday. With your music, it shall not doubt be a masterpiece.

Do write back soon. I am eager to begin another project amidst my current discoveries of this vast and beautiful land.

Ever your servant and friend,

Name