Opera Glasses

La traviata

A resource for teachers

Bringing opera into the classroom KS3 & KS4

Opera Glasses is supported by The Gibbs Charitable Trust
Opera Glasses: Bringing opera into the classroom
aims to bring opera into the classroom through free
dress rehearsal tickets, workshops for pupils and
this teachers’ resource. This resource contains some
preparatory information to explore La traviata with your
pupils before you come to see the dress rehearsal.
You will find creative activities to get your pupils
listening and appraising, links to GCSE Music and a
handy lesson plan that you can use to work through
the opera with your pupils. All activities reflect the key
objectives of the Key Stage 3 and 4 National
Curriculum for Music. You can find the extracts
of music suggested on internet based free to play
sites such as spotify, grooveshark, last fm etc.

La traviata will be performed in Italian with surtitles
in English and Welsh.

The running time is approximately 2 hours
40 minutes including two intervals.

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Chapter One
La traviata

What is opera?

**Opera** is a dramatic stage performance set to music. An opera is a theatre piece, like a play but instead of speaking the lines the characters sing them. In most operas there are no spoken words, everything is sung from beginning to end. An opera can take you on a rollercoaster of action, adventure, love, death, deceit and conflict. In many ways, operas are very similar to the soap operas that you see on television.

An orchestra accompanies an opera and they introduce the main themes of the opera during the Overture, which is played at the beginning of the opera.

Voices (highest to lowest):

**Soprano** The voice of Violetta Valéry, the highest female voice.

**Mezzo soprano** The voice of Flora Bervoix, a lower female voice.

**Tenor** The voice of Alfredo Germont, the highest male voice.

**Baritone** The voice of Giorgio Germont, lower than a tenor but higher than a bass.

**Bass** The voice of Doctor Grenvil, the lowest male voice.

Main characters

- **Violetta Valéry**
  Soprano / a courtesan

- **Alfredo Germont**
  Tenor / in love with Violetta

- **Giorgio Germont**
  Baritone / Alfredo’s father

- **Flora Bervoix**
  Mezzo soprano / Violetta’s friend

- **Gastone de Letorières**
  Tenor / Alfredo’s friend, a count

- **Baron Douphol**
  Baritone / Violetta’s escort and rival of Alfredo

- **Doctor Grenvil**
  Bass / Violetta’s doctor
A quick overview

Set in Paris in the summer of 1850 the opera centres on a courtesan, Violetta, her various love affairs, and her battle with tuberculosis.

In the first act she holds a party to celebrate her recovery from her illness and is introduced to a young admirer, Alfredo Germont. Violetta does not believe in love and knowing that, due to her illness her life will be short, is adamant that it will be one dedicated to pursuits of pleasure. Alfredo persists and Violetta is touched.

A few months later, at a country house, Alfredo’s advances have won Violetta over and the two live a modest life together. But all is not well. Giorgio Germont, Alfredo’s father is not happy with the relationship as it is marring his family’s name and his daughter’s ability to wed. He strikes a deal with Violetta, she will leave Alfredo and return to Paris, to save his daughter. Violetta leaves for Paris and returns to her former courtesan life with the Baron. At a friend’s party, Alfredo appears and a battle of cards between Alfredo and the Baron turns sour, ending in him humiliating Violetta by publicly paying for her services.

With only her servant Annina and the Doctor for company, Violetta’s health has deteriorated. She is close to death, but repeatedly rereads a letter from Giorgio Germont and is certain that Alfredo will come to her. In the final moments, father and son arrive. There is a brief glimpse of hope as Alfredo and Violetta embrace, but it is too late and Violetta dies.
Detailed synopsis

Set in Paris in the summer of 1850.

Act I

At Violetta Valéry’s house a party is underway to mark her recovery from a serious illness. A group of latecomers arrive and Violetta is introduced to Alfredo Germont by Gaston de Letorières, who tells her how Alfredo worried about her during her illness and called daily to enquire after her health. Violetta is confused by Alfredo’s concern, as she barely knows him, but nevertheless is charmed and remarks how her escort Baron Douphol had failed to show similar concerns. At dinner Gaston calls on the Baron to propose a toast, but he refuses and Alfredo is persuaded to sing instead; he gives a toast to love. Violetta, in exchange, gives a toast to pleasure, as she is certain she will never be in love.

Violetta invites her guests to dance and the party exits to the next room. But Violetta turns pale and faints, her illness returning. The others leave to join the dance, but Alfredo remains, warning Violetta that she must take care of herself and also seizing the chance to reveal his love for her.

She laughs at his advances and takes it as idle chatter. Again, he proclaims his love and, seeing that he is serious, Violetta tells him to look elsewhere for love, as it is something she does not know and cannot offer. Crestfallen, Alfredo leaves, but Violetta gives him a flower, telling him to return it when it has withered.

Dawn approaches and the party ends. Alone, Violetta thinks of how Alfredo’s passion has touched her but she knows that her destiny is settled, her life will be brief and she knows it is foolish to dream.

Act II

A few months later in a country house near Paris. Violetta has fallen in love with Alfredo and she has given up her lavish courtesan life to live a modest life with him in the countryside. Alfredo is not rich, and quietly Violetta has been asking her maid, Annina, to sell her possessions in order to support them. Alfredo is unaware of this, until Annina reveals her reasons for travel, and he sets off to Paris to request money from his father so that he may buy Violetta’s possessions back. An old acquaintance, Flora Bervoix, invites the couple to a party that evening in Paris. Violetta is amused and happily declines the invitation. But, an unexpected visitor arrives; it is Giorgio Germont, Alfredo’s father. He accuses her of ruining his son and endangering his daughter’s hopes of marriage. Insulted and upset, she shows him the receipts of the sale of her belongings – however he still insists that she leave Alfredo to clear his family name. Distraught and seeing her dream slipping away, she tries to bargain with Germont, telling him of her disease and sharing the love she feels for Alfredo. But Germont is unmoveable and eventually Violetta agrees to leave, on the agreement that Alfredo is told the truth upon her death. Violetta plans to return to Paris and Baron Douphol. Alfredo is distraught and cannot accept Violetta’s reasons for leaving. He finds Flora’s invitation and leaves to find her.

Flora’s apartment in Paris. Flora is throwing a lavish party, with Violetta as guest of honour. It is revealed that Violetta has left Alfredo and will be coming with the Baron instead. Alfredo arrives and feigns indifference towards Violetta; the Baron tells Violetta to ignore her lover. The party settles down to a game of cards, which escalates into a battle between Alfredo and the Baron, but luckily is interrupted by dinner. Violetta urges Alfredo to stay behind to talk to her and pleads with him to leave the party. He agrees to, if she will follow, but she tells him she is in love with the Baron and refuses. Alfredo calls the party over and publicly announces he will pay for her services, throwing his winnings from the dual at her. The party is appalled and Giorgio Germont, who arrived just in time to witness the outburst, renounces his son.
Act III
Violetta’s bedroom, a few months later. Violetta is dying, her tuberculosis has taken hold and Dr Grenvil tells Annina she is close to death. Abandoned by her friends and with bailiffs waiting at the door, she is alone. She reads a letter from Giorgio Germont, a duel has taken place between Alfredo and the Baron, and Alfredo has fled to France after wounding the Baron. Giorgio reveals that Alfredo is now aware of the sacrifice Violetta made and will soon be by her side. Time is running out.

Annina announces Violetta has visitors, Alfredo and his father. The lovers embrace, forgive each other and there is a moment of hope that they can now be together. But it soon vanishes, death is fast approaching and Violetta collapses. Full of remorse, Giorgio begs for forgiveness, but it is too late – the doctor proclaims her dead.
The libretto and music

The libretto
The libretto, written by Francesco Maria Piave, is based on the novel La Dame aux Camélias (1848) by Alexandre Dumas fils. The title La traviata translates as The Fallen Woman.

The characters of the novel itself were based in reality on the beautiful Parisian prostitute, Marie Duplessis and Alexandre Dumas fils, son of the novelist. Marie and Alexandre first met at the opera in 1844, had an 11-month affair, separated and shortly after Marie died.

The music
The music is composed by Giuseppe Verdi, 1813 – 1901, an Italian romantic composer, and acclaimed composer of opera. Among others, he is noted for Rigoletto (1851), Il trovatore (1853), La traviata (1853), La forza del destino (1862), Don Carlos (1867), Aida (1871), Otello (1887), and Falstaff (1893).

In 1852, he composed La traviata, embracing the daring and contemporary subject ‘a subject for our own age’. The story of the opera had a personal resonance for Verdi, who lived with soprano Giuseppina Strepponi. Like Violetta she had a dubious past and battled a severe illness. La traviata was scandalous for the time as it broke away from the type of subject considered ‘proper’ for opera. Although the première was performed in 17th century costume, a particularly stout prima donna was cast as the heroine causing the first performance in Venice to be a fiasco.
Chapter Two
How to make an opera

Which opera would you like to perform?
- Have a listen
- Read the libretto & music score
- I need a creative team to create an original production
- Find a conductor

Who is going to come and see my wonderful opera?
- What do I want it to look like?
- Find a director
- Find a designer
- Share a vision
  - Create a model box of the set design
  - Costume design drawings & buy fabric
  - Make the costumes
  - Make the props
  - Build the set

Who will perform the opera?
- Auditions
- Cast of singers: 20 female, 20 male choristers
- Orchestra

How will they learn the music?
- Rehearsals for cast, chorus and orchestra
- Sitzprobe - a ‘sitting rehearsal’ of singers, chorus & orchestra

How will they know how to act?
- Director runs production rehearsals
- Set moved to stage
- Opera company rehearse on the stage
- Dress rehearsals
- Opening night

Set built in a rehearsal room
Set carpenter
Set painter

Sell tickets
Tell the press, newspapers, tv, radio & web

Better do some marketing
Design posters & leaflets
Distribute posters & leaflets

Tour – let's show the rest of the country what we've done!
Tips to help follow an opera

Bringing your pupils to see a dress rehearsal
Let your class know that coming to see the dress rehearsal of an opera is like any other trip to the theatre. Please bear in mind…

• That they must stay seated throughout the performance. There will be one interval for eating, drinking and using the toilets.

• Encourage your pupils to listen carefully to the opera, talking is inappropriate and is off putting for the performers and other audience members.

• Applause is encouraged.

• It is a dress rehearsal so the conductor may stop at any time for corrections.

• Please remember to turn all mobile phones off.

How to help your pupils follow the opera
How can I tell what’s going on?
The dialogue, or as it is know in opera, recitative, moves the action along and lets you know what is happening. The songs, or arias, don’t advance the action but do let you know the emotion of the character or situation.

Sometimes it can be difficult to follow what the singers are saying, especially if they are singing in a foreign language. Don’t worry about not understanding every word as handy surtitles are provided on screens at the side, or above the stage that translate the dialogue.

By working through the lesson plan at the end of this pack, we hope that your pupils will have an understanding of the key characters and plot of the opera. It is helpful to give your pupils useful signposts to each scene, so that they know where they are in the plot and to encourage them to listen to extracts of the music before they come.

Useful vocabulary
Libretto Italian for ‘little book’, the text accompanying the music.

Surtitle The translated text of the opera.

Overture The instrumental beginning to the opera, that introduces the opera’s main themes.

Aria From the Italian work for ‘air’. This is a song for a solo voice and is used to communicate the emotion of a character.

Operetta Light-hearted musical entertainment containing dance, spoken dialogue and practical jokes. A musical.

Chorus at WNO 20 men, and 20 women, singing Soprano, Mezzo, Tenor and Bass, performing ensemble.

Diva A female opera star. Translated as ‘goddess; may imply a demanding or highly-strung star.

Bravo! The Italian word of approval that is often shouted by the audience at the end of a performance.

Vibrato The wavering tone added by a singer while sustaining a note.

Coloratura A very high-pitched soprano that has extreme vocal agility and can perform highly elaborate fast and high singing with accompanying trills.

Become an opera critic!
Pupil Task:
Encourage your pupils to critique the opera including the music as performed by the orchestra, the music as performed by the vocalists (either in groups or individually), the sets, the staging and the directing.

Which parts of the opera did they like or not like? Did they like the way the singers portrayed the characters? What do they think would have been stronger/funnier/better if it had been written differently?
Chapter Three
Lesson Plan

Key Pupil Objectives
• To become familiar with opera as a genre
• To become familiar with the key characters and plot of the opera
• To understand the historical context and influence of music on daily life, culture, politics, etc
• To become familiar with the music and recognise key melodic themes

Additional Task Pupil Objectives
• Composing to reflect a character
• Composing to reflect the emotion of a situation

Main Task (Chapter One as reference material)
Discuss with your class opera as an art form
• The different dimensions of opera: the voice, orchestral music, the visual (scenery, costumes and special effects) and the drama.
• The origins of opera from Greek drama
• The differences between opera and music theatre

Create with your class a key characters chart, also discussing the voice they sing
• Who is the character in relation to others?
• Discuss key character traits.
• What are the relationships between the characters?

Starters
• Introduce your class to the Opera Glasses: Bringing opera into the classroom project.
• Discuss with your class what they already know about opera and if they have any questions.

Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do we already know</th>
<th>Key Vocabulary</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is music in an opera</td>
<td>Music, opera</td>
<td>What is special about the operatic style of singing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It can be difficult to understand</td>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>Why is opera often performed in the language in which it was originally written?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Give each pupil a photocopy of the ‘How to make an opera’ sheet and discuss with them the different stages and people involved in putting together an opera.

Discuss with your class the composer Verdi
• Play to your pupils some extracts from the opera and discuss how they reflect the character’s predicament.

Prelude to Act I ‘Violetta’s theme’ heard for the first time in the Prelude, played just prior to the curtain rising. This theme symbolises Violetta’s suffering from tuberculosis and is heard again in the final act as Violetta nears death.

‘Sempre Libera’ (‘Forever free’) Violetta’s aria at the end of act one reflecting her desire to live a life of freedom.
Additional tasks

Composing to reflect a character
Verdi uses several compositional techniques to reflect Violetta.

**Example:**
Prelude to Act 1 – the theme to reflect Violetta’s battle with tuberculosis.

The first subject over the opening 15 bars reflects her frailty and battle with illness through crystalline divided strings, accents on the weak beats of the bar and the quietest of dynamic markings. When it returns in the prelude to Act 3, signifying the death of Violetta, its off beats can be heard reflecting sobs.

**Pupil task:**
In pairs, begin an improvisational dialogue to create a melodic theme. Taking it in turns improvise a theme that is sad, happy, angry, grief stricken or jealous.

Compose a theme to reflect a character that is seen as both ‘tragic’ and ‘bad’. Try to reflect one aspect of their personality and try to communicate this effectively to the listener.

Composing to reflect the emotions of a situation

**Example:**
Act 2 confrontation between Germont and Violetta.

‘Non sapete quale affetto, Un di, quando le veneri’ and ‘Dite alla giovine’ all reflect a wide range of emotion as Germont accuses Violetta of ruining his son and endangering his daughter’s hopes of marriage. Insulted and upset, she shows him the receipts of the sale of her belongings – however he still insists that she leave Alfredo to clear the family name. Distraught and seeing her dream slipping away she tries to bargain with Germont, telling him of her disease and sharing the love she feels for Alfredo. But Germont is unmoveable and eventually Violetta agrees, on the condition that Alfredo is told the truth upon her death.

Encourage your pupils to reflect how the impassioned music moves swiftly between a range of emotions from pride, hope, anger, sympathy and despair.

**Pupil task:**
In groups, ask your pupils to create a situation in which there could be an emotional argument between two generations such as arguments with parents over fashion, phones, boy/girlfriends, attitudes etc.

Ask two pupils, ideally with contrasting voices, to develop an argument using just six sentences each to go from conflict to resolution. Encourage them to use different tones of voice, dynamics and tempo to see if this changes or enhances the emotion of the sentence. This could be further developed by setting the argument to music and exploring how pitch, repetition and melodic themes can be used to develop and resolve the situation.