

LOS ANGELES OPERA

Don't Be Afraid: It's Just Opera!

Art Form: Music

Style: Classical

Culture: Western European

MEET THE ARTIST:

Mezzo-soprano **Suzanna Guzmán** is a Principal artist with the Los Angeles Opera appearing in the operas *Giulio Cesare*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Florencia en el Amazonas*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Peter Grimes*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Faust* and more. She has also appeared as soloist with many other American and international opera companies. These include the Metropolitan Opera, the Kennedy Center, Dresden Opera, Opera de Nice, Grand Theatre de Geneve.

Ms. Guzmán was a featured soloist on the Grammy-nominated album for best classical album: *Carlos Chavez Volume 3* with Southwest Chamber Music, soprano Alba Quezada and Tambuco Percussion Ensemble of Mexico. Her award winning one woman show, *Don't Be Afraid: It's Just Opera!* has been performed for over 200,000 students nationwide.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Suzanna Guzmán's one woman show *Don't Be Afraid: It's Just Opera!* is an exciting and accessible introduction to the dynamic world of opera. She exaggerates and makes fun of operatic stereotypes, tearing down barriers and inviting students into her world. Her show features music from *Gianni Schicchi* and *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, *The Barber of Seville* by Giacchino Rossini and *Carmen* by Georges Bizet. Ms. Guzmán has volunteers help with a 'Picture-Title' (rather than subtitle) translation of an aria from *Madame Butterfly*. Accompanied by a pianist in the role of 'The Maestro,' she teaches the basics of the opera experience as well as highlighting the talented people involved in making a performance work.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Opera In the simplest terms, opera is a story set to music, with orchestral accompaniment. Opera, in the Western Classical tradition, is the result of the efforts of a group of freethinking scholars known as the Florentine Camerata. In the course of researching Greek drama (which they were trying to recreate), they decided that the 'choruses' of these works had been sung. They incorporated this idea into what would become opera. The emotional high-points in the story became *arias*, solo songs that highlight a singer's skills. For the dialogue and to move the story along, they devised a rapid form of chant-like singing called *recitative*, which is minimally accompanied. The first extant opera was composed by Jacopo Peri around 1600 and entitled *Euridice*. Seven years later Claudio Monteverdi composed and presented *L'Orfeo*, at the court of Mantua. It is considered the first great opera. Both *Euridice* and *L'Orfeo* are based on the Greek myth of Orpheus and his quest to retrieve his beloved Euridice from the underworld. By 1637, the first public opera houses appeared in Venice. Theaters sold tickets by touting popular singers, who were the rock-stars of their times. They also incorporated spectacular stage effects such as live animals, explosions, water tanks and complex machinery.

Opera remains popular all over the world. The singers are still the stars and the staging is as lavish as ever.

Some of the most well-known composers of opera include, Giuseppe Verdi, Giacchino Rossini, Giacomo Puccini and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Operatic Voices The operatic voice requires intense training as well as strong natural ability. Singers must train their voices for tone quality, vocal range and the ability to project over an orchestra without amplification. There are several different categories of vocal range that depend on gender. The basic female ranges are called soprano, mezzo-soprano (or medium soprano) and alto. The basic male ranges are tenor, baritone and bass. In operatic voice-typing, these terms are further broken down according to timbre (tone quality) and projection strength. This helps in casting so that the voice matches the role appropriately.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Name and describe the exaggerated things that Ms. Guzmán did to show the way people usually think of opera and its stars.
- What most impressed you about Ms. Guzmán and what she taught you about opera?
- What did you observe about the partnership between the singer and her accompanist? What skills did they use to communicate with each other?
- Which piece did you most enjoy (“In My Own Little Corner” - Cinderella, “O Mio Babbino Caro,” from Gianni Schicchi; “Una Voce Poco Fa,” from Barber of Seville; “Un Bel Di Vedremo,” from Madame Butterfly, “Habanera,” from Carmen)? Give reasons for your choice.
- Opera singers must have talent, but they must also spend years developing that talent through training and practice. What other professions can you think of that require both a natural talent and years of discipline and practice?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

Operas are written in many different languages, including Spanish, German, French, Czech, English, Russian and (especially) Italian. However, when you listen to opera you don't need to understand every word to know what is happening because the music and the singers will give you clues as to their character, mood and intention. Even so, when you attend an opera there are now “Super Titles” telling you the action in English. Ms. Guzmán took you through the story of the opera Madam Butterfly and helped you understand the words of the song by using “Picture Titles.” Here is a summary of the opera as told by Ms. Guzmán:

Madam Butterfly is one of the most famous operas. The story takes place in the late 1800s in Japan. It's about a young Japanese girl who's called “Butterfly.” She's married to an American Navel officer whose ship is visiting Japan. Butterfly's parents and friends don't like this American and warn her that when his ship leaves and he get shipped out, he'll forget her and never come back. But, Butterfly feels her new husband will always love her and be true. Well, her husband does sail away and is gone for three years. She doesn't get any letters from him and her friends tell her he's forgotten all about her and is gone forever, But Butterfly tells her friends that she knows he'll come back to her. Butterfly gives birth to his child. She names the boy Trouble, a name she plans to change to Joy when she reunites with her husband. A great disappointment and conflict occur and is resolved in the final scene.

Create “Picture Titles” for the different ideas in the story in order to get the main ideas across. Have one or more students narrate the story. The Picture Titles will serve as a storyboard for the action. Make up your own ending for the final scene.

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ☉ Repeat the experience you had in singing “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” and repeat it in your classroom. First, sing it normal volume. Then, stand up sing it with gusto. Discuss the difference. Finally, divide into three groups. The first group sings the first two lines of the song *forte* (strong and loud); the middle group sings the second two lines *piano* (softly) and the third group sings the last two lines very, very loudly (without shouting) *fortissimo*. Hold the last note until the teacher gives a sign to end. Remember the meaning of forte, piano, and fortissimo. Rotate the groups so everyone has a chance to try all three parts. Discuss the experience you had.
- ❖❖ Opera is a story set to music. So, in an opera, the actors sing their words to each other rather than talking. So, if they were to have a conversation, they would sing their phrases. Divide into partners. Number off #1 and #2, then sit or stand facing each other and have a short conversation. First, take turns saying the phrases to each other. E.g. #1 Hi! How's it going? #2 Fine with me. How about you? #1 I've been sick! #2 Hope you're better soon. #1 See ya! #2 Later! Next, try singing the same conversation, making up the tune as you go (improvisation).
- ▶ Many early operas were based on Greek myths. The first great opera was composed by Claudio Monteverdi in 1607. He used a Greek myth as his inspiration, calling his opera, *L'Orfeo*. Eurydice and Orpheus were happy young lovers. However, one day Eurydice was gaily running through a meadow with Orpheus when she was bitten by a serpent. The poison of the sting killed her and she is immediately taken by Pluto to Hades (the underworld).

Orpheus was son of the Olympian god Apollo and was blessed with musical talent. Saddened by the loss of his love, he composed music to express the terrible emptiness he felt. He was so desperate, that he decided talk directly with Pluto, king of Hades. Upon arriving in the underworld, Orpheus found that Pluto's heart was as hard as steel. But Orpheus' music was so moving that Persephone, queen of the underworld convinced Pluto to relent. Pluto gave permission to Orpheus to bring Eurydice back to the surface to enjoy the light of day. There was only one condition--Orpheus was not to look back as he ascended. He was to trust that Eurydice was immediately behind him. It was a long way back and just as Orpheus had almost finished the last few steps, he looked back to make sure Eurydice was still with him. At that very moment, she was snatched back because he broke his promise. When you hear music which mourns lost love, it is Orpheus' spirit who guides the hand of the musicians who play it.

Discuss this story and think about it from three different points of view – Orpheus, Eurydice and Pluto. Can you create a different ending?

Legend:

- ☉ Artistic perception
- ❖❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

VOCABULARY & ARIA LIST: DON'T BE AFRAID: IT'S JUST OPERA!

Vocabulary:

Alto (or contralto) - the lowest female voice classification

Aria - (Italian) A solo song with orchestral accompaniment

Baritone - the male vocal range falling between tenor and bass

Bass - the lowest male vocal range

Brava! - (Italian) a shout of support for a female

Bravi! - (Italian) a shout of support for a male and a female

Bravo! - (Italian) a shout of support for a male

Chorister(s) -member(s) of a choir

Coloratura - (Italian) an ornate, flowery style in classical singing

Diva - in opera, a great soprano singer

Forte - (Italian) loud, strong

Fortissimo - (Italian) very loud, strong

Libretto - the text of an opera (script)

Maestro - (Italian) Literally, master or teacher. Most often applied to orchestral conductors.

Mezzo-soprano - slightly lower in range than the soprano, the mezzo-soprano also has a darker timbre

Orchestra pit - the usually lowered area in front of and/or underneath a stage

Piano - (Italian) soft, quiet

Soprano - the highest female vocal range

Soloist - a person performing alone

Tenor - the highest basic male vocal range

Timbre - tone color (e.g., light, dark, heavy, bright)

Arias:

Largo al Factotum

Opera: *Barber of Seville*

Composer: Gioacchino Rossini

Libretto: Cesare Sterbini (after Beaumarchais)

In My Own Little Corner

Musical: *Cinderella*

Music: Richard Rogers

Lyrics: Oscar Hammerstein II

Una Voce Poco Fa

Opera: *Barber of Seville*

Composer: Giacchino Rossini

Libretto: Cesare Sterbini (after Beaumarchais)

Un Bel Di Vedremo

Opera: *Madam Butterfly*

Composer: Giacomo Puccini

Libretto: Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa

Habanera

Opera: *Carmen*

Composer: Georges Bizet

Libretto: Meilhac and Halévy (after Prosper Mérimée)

Canción de un amor dolido

Opera: *El Amor Brujo*

Composer: Manuel de Falla

O Mio Babbino Caro

Opera: *Gianni Schicchi*

Composer: Giacomo Puccini

Libretto: Giovacchino Forzano

(This is only performed if a guest soprano is available)