

FROM STORY TO OPERA -

Writing the Libretto

Introduction:



Okay, you've got a wonderful story. You (meaning you and your students) found a copyright-free story (like a fairy tale, folk tale, legend, myth, urban legend, etc.) and rewrote it, or perhaps you made one up from scratch. Now you are ready to make it into an opera libretto! This will take some time (about 2-3 hours), but with the story already finished your task as teacher is simply to ask your students what different characters “say” (**in quotations because in opera, you sing everything!**). When you are finished, your libretto should be about 3 TOTAL PAGES. This will be approximately a 10 to 15 minute opera.

Objectives:

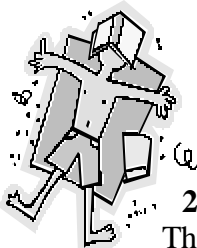
Students will be able to adapt their story into a libretto that will later be put to music. They will know and understand the following terminology: *recitative, libretto, scene, action, aria, duet, trio, quartet, and chorus*. They will be able to use these words in appropriate context in discussion and in creation of their libretto. They will also understand the words, “minimal” and “simple” as they apply to the libretto for their opera. They will understand and demonstrate through their creative efforts how opera librettos are formatted with dialogue and parenthetical action comments. They will learn the process of editing. **The final libretto will be approximately 3 total pages.**

Process:

*Show don't
Tell*

Please, understand that opera is dramatic, so you will need **action**. In opera, we **DO** things rather than tell about things. We **SHOW** action rather than sing about it. **REMEMBER THESE TWO IMPORTANT THINGS** as we go through the process:

1. Know the Story



First, have your students be very familiar with the story. You should have a good story with a beginning, middle and end with (usually) lots of interesting and fun characters. The class should know the story in and out and have a good understanding of it.

2. Know the Characters

The class should know who the characters are and each character's personality. Have your students try some simple dramatic actions as the different characters. If your opera has groups of characters, each student will still need to be specific about his own character within that group. The more a class exaggerates the characters and their differences, the easier writing your libretto for the opera will be. Go crazy and have fun! You can use other mediums for exploring characters such as artwork. Have each student

draw or paint his specific character, or have the students describe the character's backpack or purse or bedroom (if they have such things) Knowing and defining character continues through the staging process.

Here are some examples of how characters can be described:

Example:

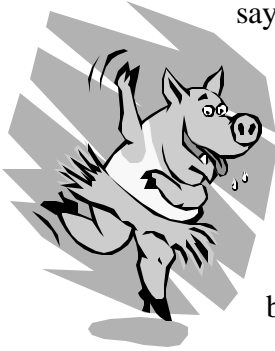
Wolf = He is goofy, stupid, but mean. He always says, "Oooooow! My, my, my!"



Pig #1 = He wants to play on the computer, loves doing a little dance all the time. He is lazy.

Pig #2 = He wants to impress the sows. He is always worried about his hair and if his ears are "lean and mean."

Pig #3 = He is an artist. He takes his time and does things right. He loves to suddenly break out and sing about how everything in nature is beautiful.



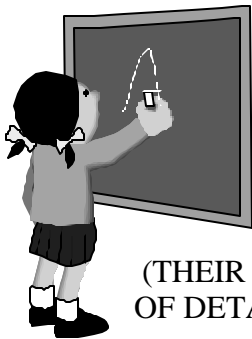
Townsperson #1= A cobbler everything.



(shoemaker) who is scared of

Working the Libretto:

Start at the beginning and go through each scene (**a scene is simply a complete unit of thought**. Scenes often change when someone enters the story, or if the story's place or setting changes). These scenes will match up with your 5 sentence structure if you have written the story with this format. As you go through each scene, write the name of the character speaking on the chalkboard with a colon after the name.



REMINDE THE STUDENTS TO STICK TO THE SIMPLE STORY (THEIR ORIGINAL 5 SENTENCES. THIS IS NOT A TIME TO ADD LOTS OF DETAILS THAT WERE NOT IN YOUR ORIGINAL STORY.)

During staging, many fun details can be added. If they are able, have the students write down the libretto with you (You are writing on the black or white board) in their opera journals. They will be slower, but you can tell them just to do their best, and that you will take all of their notes, put them together and make the final copy of the libretto. Have someone who is fast write the script, too (a student aid or parent volunteer would be helpful in the younger grades)! **Ask the children specific questions about what this character would say in the situation.** It is not necessary for recitative (conversation) in the libretto to rhyme. In fact, avoid rhyming until you work on the songs (discussed later).

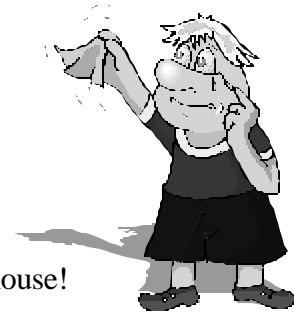
It is a good idea to repeat the lines back to them by being very dramatic (to model good acting) or by singing (which reminds them that the opera will be sung). Try to reveal a bit of each character whenever they speak (sing). These lines should be very short.

Example:

*Simple
dialogue*

Mama: Oh dear, oh dear.
I can't believe you're leaving.
I will miss you so!

Pig #1: Yeah, well. That's life, Ma.
I can't wait to get some new
computer games for my new house!



*No
rhyme*

Pig #2: How's my hair, Ma?
Are my ears lean and mean?

Pig #3: It's okay, Ma.
We'll come by and visit you often.
Won't we guys?

Handling Action in the Libretto:

Since you are showing and doing rather than telling take descriptive action and put it into parentheses to make it a stage direction. You may choose, occasionally, to have the characters comment on what they are doing and how they feel about it. If you have trouble with this, as an exercise, try turning your story into a pure *pantomime*. Then your class can see just how much can be SHOWN instead of talked (sung) about. Most basic stories can actually be done in pantomime. If yours cannot, it may be too reliant on the words.

In the example below, note how the audience really doesn't need Pig #1 to say anything at all. They could simply watch him as he builds his house and plays his computer game in pantomime. But note how the lines add depth and a sense of fun to the character. The information in parentheses and italics are not sung, but they are necessary for the performers to realize what they'll be doing. You may change some of these actions slightly if your scene design mandates.

Example:

From the ORIGINAL (five sentence) story: The first little pig built his house. He set up his computer and started playing his favorite game, Barn Raider.

CHANGED to Libretto: (The first little pig builds his house by throwing a few pieces of straw. The Chorus then "builds" the house by revealing the scenery)

Pig #1: Wow. This is hard work. (Grunts)
I'm glad I'm building my house out of straw.
Now I'll have more time to play on my computer!
(He sets up his computer)
Great! It's plugged in!
I love playing Barn Raider! It's my favorite game!



Avoiding Narration:



Notice how we do not have any narration in our script so far. **Narration is good to AVOID whenever possible.** Instead, we are **focusing on doing and showing.** Narration focuses on telling. If you must use narration, try to use it in the context of action. The following example shows how the same information is being given, but in the context of characters expressing their fears, so we are **SHOWING** the characters' feelings. We also reveal information, but it is disguised as revealing their emotions:

Example: While narration might sound like this:

Chorus: The Wolf came into town.
He was mean and hungry!

Using the Chorus as real characters is much more exciting, but still makes your point in a fun, dramatic way:



Chorus: Look out! The Wolf! He's coming!
He's mean and hungry.
He'll eat us up if we don't hide.

Finishing the Libretto:

After doing the first scene together as a class, you may continue to work together or you may choose to divide the class into groups and have each group work on a different scene (sentence). Each group should have a scribe. Young classes may be divided according to available adult scribes. After each group completes their scene, come together as a class and read through the entire libretto. **Edit the libretto.** Make additions, deletions, or changes as the group feels necessary. Remember that you can also dramatize scenes to get a better feel for how they will perform on stage. Kids are naturally good playwrights, and in this case librettists!

Simple dialogue

Remember, that you are essentially writing poetry, but in dramatic form, kind of like Shakespeare did. The goal, however, in the beginning is to **WRITE SIMPLE RECITATIVE (DIALOGUE), not poetry.** Do not be concerned about rhyming or meter. What is most important is that you simply keep the lines short. Do not write in paragraphs. When the music specialist helps your class devise the melodies with beats and rhythms, some of your dialogue will likely change, but if your lines are short, this will be much easier and the lines will change much less. See the example above.

Finding Important Lines:



As (or after) your class crafts lines for your opera, look for lines that are **very important** - those lines that are vital for the audience to understand so they can comprehend the story. You may want to have the chorus **REPEAT THESE LINES.** This makes it very clear to the audience what is going on, and it also involves the chorus more.

Wolf: Oooow! My, my, my. I'm hungry. I want a pig!
Chorus: He's hungry. He's hungry. He wants a pig!

Adding Songs:

At this point, your libretto should be “finished” except for the songs: Arias, Duets, Quartets, and Choruses. The libretto has a good story, and it is basically adapted for the stage. To create the songs, look for places within each scene where characters (or character) express STRONG EMOTION or has the POTENTIAL to express how they feel. This is especially important for chorus characters (those characters that are not the main characters). Emotional revelation is a good place to put arias and songs (as opposed to recitative). See the example above in #5 when Pig #1 sings about his new computer game to see how this might work for a single character. Here is an example for a chorus:

Example:

Chorus: This house is gone.
It's just a mound.
Will ours be next?
It's been blown down.

This house is gone.
That wolf is bad!
Protect the town!

Solo: I want my dad!



Other good times for songs are at the beginning (describe who, what, and where), and at the end (What happened and/or a moral), at the climax and/or major events, as well as for things like: lullabies, working, or other times when folks naturally sing. The example below shows what it might be like to have a song at the beginning as an introduction and to set the stage for the story. See how by using SONG, YOU CAN REVEAL FEELINGS AND SITUATIONS. In this case, they are the community feelings of the town:

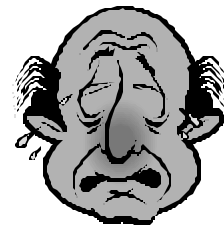
Example:

Chorus: Welcome to our town.
Welcome to our town.
It's peaceful here so please sit down.
It's peaceful here so please sit down.
We have our cows.
We have our ducks.
We have bad times and then good luck.

Solo: We have our girls. We have our boys.
Hey what is that? What is that noise?

Chorus: It's Mamma pig and she is sad.
Well what is wrong?

Solo: I want my dad!



Finishing Up:

Read your script through to make sure it sounds good, flows, tells the story, and that the class likes it. If your libretto is more than 3-4 pages, it may be too long; see where you can edit by making cuts of unnecessary recitative (Can the same thing be said in a four line song?). You can count on about 3-4 minutes of performing time per page, depending on how much action

is performed without recitative. Most operas will be about 10 to 15 minutes in length.

You will ultimately need a neat, typewritten copy of the libretto for the music specialist. See the attached example for a full length libretto and how it is formatted. Adjust your script as necessary, and you are ready for the Music Specialist!

Perhaps you have a way to approach this process that is unique and valuable to your class. Great! Just remember that the general process shown in the steps above will always be similar regardless of the method. And **above all, remember that it is the children's work, not yours, that is important!**

The 10 Commandments of Adapting Your Opera Libretto

1. Strive to make this a **POSITIVE, FRIENDLY, FUN** and **REWARDING** experience for your students.
2. Make every effort to leave ***OWNERSHIP*** of the process and product to the children.
3. Let the **CHILDREN** come up with the lines of recitative and songs.
4. Be **FLEXIBLE**, deferring to the children's choices most of the time.
5. Use **GENTLE ENCOURAGEMENT** and **ASK SPECIFIC QUESTIONS** to help your students write the libretto.
6. **ASK PERMISSION** of your class to add a line yourself (as teacher) or change a line the students crafted.
7. Use **SHORT SENTENCES** and not paragraphs in your script. Put action in parenthesis.
8. Keep thy libretto to **ABOUT THREE-FOUR TOTAL PAGES**.
9. **SHOW**, not tell in your libretto.
10. Try to use this entire opera process to **FURTHER YOUR ENTIRE CURRICULUM** goals, making connections where ever possible to things that you are already teaching and exploring with your class. What are the connections to language arts? Math? Science? Social science? Dance? Visual art? Character education? Make it a teaching method and not just an extra thing you do.

