

TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE

THE LITTLEST MERMAID

BY JOSHUA BORTHS



CEDAR RAPIDS **OPERA**

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Dear Teachers,

We are delighted that you have chosen to include this opera experience as part of your students' education! This guide is designed to help you prepare your students for the performance and to help you connect themes to other areas of learning.

This opera experience supports the following **Iowa Core Learning Standards**. Throughout the guide, look for specific suggestions to connect to these content areas through discussion and hands-on activities.

- Reading Standards for Literature
- Speaking and Listening Standards
- Social Studies
- General Music Standards

This guide also offers specific supports for Social Emotional Learning using CASEL'S SEL Framework (<https://casel.org/casel-sel-framework-11-2020/>.) Look for suggestions to support your students' growth in the following SEL domains:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

We also hope to provide you with opportunities to promote **creative learning** in your classroom. Many experiences in this guide are designed to engage children in artistic processes that encourage critical thinking, collaboration and experimentation. We hope that you will enjoy going on a creative journey with your students to try some arts-based strategies inspired by this opera experience!

Sincerely,
Cedar Rapids Opera Education Team

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ABOUT CEDAR RAPIDS OPERA

Founded in 1998 by Dr. Daniel Kleinknecht, Cedar Rapids Opera presents two or three operas each season for over 7,000 audience members and community school students, as well as special events.



An Opera America member, the company typically features American artists in its productions. CR Opera's Young Artist Program, active since 2003, offers college and university-educated students of vocal performance a paid opportunity to understudy principal roles, sing comprimario roles, and perform in the opera chorus of mainstage operas, as well as participate in school outreach productions and annual summer operettas/musicals.

The mission of Cedar Rapids Opera is to advance opera as a vital, living American art form and to develop the artists who create it, as well as the audiences that appreciate and support it.

This Teacher Guide was created by Joshua Borths, based on the 2023 Teacher Guide by Christina Ferrell. Special thanks to Cassie Robel and the Department of Education at Arizona Opera.



2024 school performances are generously sponsored by



ENJOYING THE OPERA

An OPERA is a staged performance set to music in which all (or at least most) of the words are sung.

It started in Italy around the year 1600, which is why we use the Italian word, “BRAVO!”

The **AUDIENCE** is the most important part of the opera!

Unlike the actors on your television or computer, performers on stage are aware of the audience, and they want to tell a story directly to *you*. By the time you see a performance, a lot of people have worked for months to bring you their best work.

To show respect for these efforts, every audience member must give the performance his or her full attention. Engaging with the performance by laughing or applauding is encouraged. However, avoid any behavior that interferes or distracts the performers or your fellow audience members. **This is especially important in opera since opera singers don’t use microphones.** Remember, don’t “yuck someone’s yum!”

To help everyone have a great time, here’s are some guidelines for you to follow and explain to your class...

The Four A’s of Audience Etiquette

Allow

- Allow the performers to perform. Do not talk or unless you are responding to the performers and remain in your seat.

Attend

- Attend or pay attention to the performance by watching and listening with both your ears and eyes!

Appreciate

- Appreciate the performers by laughing, applauding, etc., but remember, keep your reactions appropriate and do not disrupt the flow of the performance.

Applaud

- Applaud at the conclusion of the performance. If you wish, you can shout “bravo!” This is how we show our appreciation in opera.

ONE CLASS PERIOD TO PREPARE

You may not have much time to prepare your students for this program. If you have only one class period dedicated to the opera, please consider the following:

- 1) **Bellringer:** Ask your students what they *think* they know about opera! Write OPERA on the board and list the student's answers. After they have answered, read—or have them read—“What is Opera” on pg. 15. After the performance, see if their answers have changed! This is also a great exit ticket activity following the opera.



- 2) **Building background information:** Either present or have students read about the performance, using the materials provided. In addition to presenting students the story and background of *The Littlest Mermaid*, we encourage them to watch the Iowa PBS feature [Iowa PBS: Dvořák in Iowa](#).
- 3) Complete one of the activities of either the **MUSIC** or **DRAMA** part of this study guide.

TWO OR MORE CLASS PERIODS TO PREPARE

If you have more than two class periods before the performance, please consider this order of classroom activities, along with some of these additional activities for further engagement:



- 1) **Bellringer:** Ask your students what they *think* they know about opera! Write OPERA on the board and list the student's answers. After they have answered, read—or have them read—them “What is Opera” on pg. 15. After the performance, see if their answers have changed! This is also a great exit ticket activity following the opera.
- 2) **Building background information:** Either present or have students read about the performance. Engage in the prompted classroom discussion. In addition to presenting students the story and background of *The Littlest Mermaid*, we encourage them to watch the Iowa PBS feature [Iowa PBS: Dvořák in Iowa](#).
- 3) Complete one or more of the activities of from the **MUSIC** category.
- 4) Complete one or more activity from the **DRAMA** category.
- 5) Complete the **SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING** activity surrounding the themes present in *The Littlest Mermaid*.

BUILDING BACKGROUND INFORMATION: WHAT IS *THE LITTLEST MERMAID*?



The Littlest Mermaid is an English language adaptation of Czech composer Antonín Dvořák’s masterpiece, *Rusalka*. The full-length opera originally premiered in 1901 with a Czech libretto—the text of an opera—by Jaroslav Kvapil. It was based on both Czech folk tales about water nymphs who haunt the ponds of Czech rivers and Hans Christian Andersen’s classic fairytale *The Little Mermaid*. While there are many similarities between *Rusalka* and the popular Disney adaptation from 1989, there are also many differences. See the breakout box for ways to discuss the idea of an adaptation if this is an important topic for your students.

In 2013, stage director and writer Joshua Borths took Dvořák’s music and condensed the opera down to approx. 35 min and wrote an original libretto—itsself another adaptation—based on *The Little Mermaid*. The goal was to give a grand opera experience to young audience using Dvořák’s classic music while present a familiar story. *The Littlest Mermaid* has been performed across the United States, introducing thousands of kids to the world of opera and the power of the human voice.



Class discussion questions:

- What does it mean to create an adaptation?
- How do you know the story of *The Little Mermaid*?
- Did you know the Disney movie is an adaptation?
- What do you think might be different in this version, *The Littlest Mermaid*?

Iowa Fine Arts Standards (Music)- How do musicians make meaningful connections to creating, performing, and responding?

Interested in reading the original story?

Read Hans Christian Anderson’s *The Little Mermaid*. This fairytale is quite long and different from adaptations that students might be familiar with from popular culture. You can also consult your school librarian for adaptations of the story for younger readers. Becoming comfortable with multiple versions of a story is important for developing critical thinking and reading comprehension.

BUILDING BACKGROUND INFORMATION: WHAT IS THE STORY?

Act 1

It is Rusalka's 16th birthday, but she is nowhere to be found! Her sisters look for her, but they are worried it's too late: **Rusalka has fallen in love with a human prince.**

After confronting her sisters, Rusalka swims to the surface of the water just in time to see her Prince's ship sail by. Rusalka wants—more than anything—to be human. Soon, a storm comes, and the ship begins to sink. Rusalka saves the prince and his crew and safely brings the Prince to shore. When he awakens, the prince searches for the beautiful voice that saved him from the shipwreck. All he remembers is a voice! **Rusalka resolves to visit the Sea Witch and use dark magic to become human.**

The Sea Witch wants to rule the world and not live in exile at the bottom of the ocean. She makes a deal with Rusalka: she will turn the mermaid into a human for three days. If the Prince kisses her, she will remain human forever. However, if she returns to the water, the spell is broken. **In exchange for this spell, Rusalka must give the Sea Witch her voice.** Rusalka agrees and the spell is cast.

Rusalka, now a human, arrives on the shore. **While she cannot speak, the Prince is sure she is the one who saved him, and they run off to his palace together.**

Act 2

It is the Prince's 18th birthday, and by law, he must choose his wife. Everyone is concerned that he will marry this mysterious girl with no family, dowry, or voice! His sister informs him that he will lose everything if he marries this strange girl. "After all, there are other fish in the sea!" The Prince is conflicted. What should he do? Rusalka does everything she can to communicate with him, and right as the Prince is about to commit to Rusalka, **the Sea Witch, disguised as a Foreign Princess, enters the palace, using Rusalka's stolen voice as her own.** The Prince immediately recognized the voice from that stormy day at sea, and he is again unsure what he should do!

At the royal ball, Rusalka and the Witch compete for his affection, but **when the Sea Witch casts a spell to make the Prince love her, the disguised Sea Witch, leaving Rusalka no choice but to return to the water.**

Act 3

Back in the water, the spell is broken and Rusalka's voice returns. She is about to give up on the human world when she hears the Prince call for her. She returns to the surface. The Prince recounts that when Rusalka returned to the water, the Witch's true self was revealed. He realizes his mistake and will do anything to be with Rusalka once more. **They Kiss. Rusalka becomes human again, proving there is magic more powerful than the Witch's curse. But just then, the Witch returns, seeking vengeance. She will stop at nothing to get the power she craves...**

After reading the synopsis, discuss the characters and ask your students how they think these characters will sound, look and behave. What do they think the set will look like? Ask your students to draw what they imagined while they heard the story!

BUILDING BACKGROUND INFORMATION: WHO IS THE COMPOSER?



Antonín Leopold Dvořák (1841-1904) was a Czech composer of the Romantic Era. Dvořák’s musical talents were discovered very early in life when he entered his village school at the age of six to receive an education in music. Learning quickly, Dvořák began playing in villages and church bands. At the age of 18, he worked full-time and continued his education at the Prague Organ School which led to the composition of his first string quartet, written at the young age of 20. While composing, Dvořák looked up to composers such as Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms.

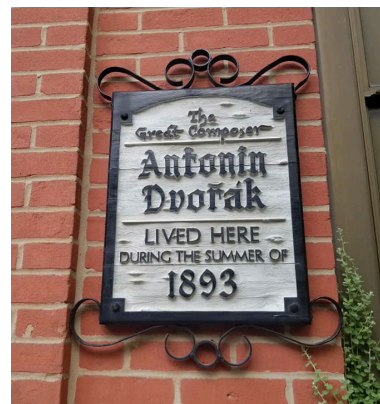
Class Discussion:

Do you have someone you look up to?

Do you love playing music?

What do you hope to accomplish by the time you turn 20 years old?

For a short period of time, Dvořák moved to the United States with his wife where he was the Director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. During his time in the United States, he composed his most famous work: Symphony No.9 “From the New World,” and began his “Cello Concerto in B minor.” When he returned home to Bohemia, his focus turned to opera and chamber music. His most popular opera, *Rusalka*, premiered in 1901. Once home, Dvořák became the Director of Conservatory of Prague continuing this position until his death. Dvořák many operas, symphonies, choral works, concerti, and chamber music have never left the musical cannon.



Learn more about Dvořák’s time in the United States and his important visit to Iowa by following this link to a feature by Iowa PBS:

<https://www.iowapbs.org/iowapathways/artifact/1402/dvorak-iowa-iowa-pbs-explores>



Music – Connecting: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding

BUILDING BACKGROUND INFORMATION: THE ROMANTIC ERA

Antonín Dvořák was a composer of the Romantic Era. The Romantic Era was a literary, musical, artistic and intellectual movement in the late 18th century to the late 19th century.

In many ways, it was a reaction against the rational and logical Age of Enlightenment, a time when everything was subject to organization and rational thought—including music. For example, the first encyclopedia, newspaper, and even the dictionary was created during the Age of Enlightenment. It was also an age of revolution and reform, and one of the most “Enlightened” documents is the American Constitution. In music, emotion was tempered, and logic reigned supreme.



As the 19th century began, artists looked around at the world the Enlightenment created, including the horrors of the French Revolution and the worst abuses of the Industrial Revolution, and posited a new way of expressing and exploring the world. This reaction became known as **Romanticism: An artistic movement where emotion, fantasy, longing, mystery, and the power of the individual were prioritized and explored.**

In opera, the move from the Enlightenment to Romanticism meant a new emphasis on emotion. Composers found more expressive techniques to tell their stories such as complicated harmonies, larger voices, bigger orchestras, and epic stories. They also created more equality between vocal and instrumental elements. In the Romantic Era, the orchestra was sometimes even heard as the most important part of the opera.



Finally, as different regions of Europe asserted their independence and fought against oppression, **folk music became important in opera.**

Dvořák was a leader in the Late-Romantic era in the Czech lands and even helped establish the national, Czech style of classical music. You can see and hear this clearly in his opera *Rusalka*, the basis for *The Littlest Mermaid*:

- Listen to how layered the music is and how powerful the voices are in our production.
- Pay attention to how the piano part in *The Littlest Mermaid*. Our pianist is not just playing along with the singers. They are creating the world and telling the story along with them.
- Notice the folk music of Rusalka’s sisters and the national dances that happen throughout! This is Romanticism in music!

While not every class needs to learn about the details of Romanticism, below features are important to discuss with your class. Before the performance, preview the following features:

- Notice when the music makes you want to dance!
- Listen for differences between the folk music of the magical creatures and the complicated harmonies of the human world.
- Be “wowed” by the power of the voices on stage!
- Listen to the entire performance—not just the vocal line. The pianist is important to the storytelling!



Some other Romantic Era opera’s include *Lucia di Lammermoor*, by Gaetano Donizetti, *Hansel and Gretel*, by Engelbert Humperdinck, and *The Ring Cycle*, by Richard Wagner.

The Romantic Era coincided with a period of significant immigration to the United States. Look at these resources from the National Czech and Slovak Museum to bring this history to life with your students!

<https://ncsml.org/education/mana-one-girls-story/>



Music – Connecting: How do the other arts, other disciplines, contexts, and daily life inform creating, performing, and responding to music?

MUSIC

There are many things to listen for in *The Littlest Mermaid*, and you should encourage your students to actively engage as **active listeners**. Try not to let them be passive! To help you with this task, here are two things for them to listen for while watching the performance:

1) Different Voices

In this opera, you will be introduced to three different voice types – soprano, mezzo-soprano, and tenor. Often, the sounds of their voices portray the personality and emotion of the character. As an introductory activity, have your students think about what the Sea Witch’s voice. What do you think her voice will sound like? If you were to compose an opera, what would our heroine, Rusalka, sound like. Compare the two voices. What does this tell us about each character?



2) The Power of Musical Suggestion

Like the human voice, the music played underneath the singers often sets the mood for the scene to come. Can you predict the mood of the scene based on the music you hear before the performers sing? Does the music make you feel happy, excited, anxious, sad, etc.? [Play excerpts of classical music](#) and have students write down what emotion they think the music is portraying. For younger students, have them draw lines, shapes, and chose colors that are inspired by the music. Compare responses for the different pieces of music.

3) The Overture

The goal of this activity is for students to learn how to close read music, using the sounds themselves as text!

- Play the overture to *Rusalka* and have students raise their hands every time there is a musical change (or a new section). (Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6OB2bfmEa8>)
- Listen to the music again, and have students decide what the emotion or attitude of each section is (for example: “This music is playful,” “This music is serious,” “This section is more energetic”). For younger students, you can also have them choose colors or draw, as outlined above!
- Have them listen to it a third time and come up with reasons why the music made them feel a certain way (for example: “This section was serious because it is slow” or “This section is exciting because it’s loud”).
- Based on this simple musical analysis, ask students what they expect to experience or see in *The Littlest Mermaid*.

Teacher Guide: Overture

- Opening (0:00): The mysterious world of the forest...
- Theme #1 (0:22): The world of Rusalka...
- Theme #2 (1:52): The world of the Prince...
- Theme #3 (3:00): Rusalka’s longing for the world above...

Music – Responding: How does understanding the structure and context of music inform a response?

Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration & Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details

DRAMA

1) Fish Out of Water

Explore some of the **literary themes** in *The Littlest Mermaid* by guiding students through some of the following questions as appropriate. These questions might make great bellringer activities

- In *The Littlest Mermaid*, Rusalka doesn't feel like she belongs in the world of the sea and wants to be on land. She is a "fish out of water." Have students write or share when they've felt like they've been "fish out of water."
- Rusalka and the Prince each **want—they yearn or long— for something very important** in *The Littlest Mermaid*. What do you long for? What do you really want that isn't a physical item? In opera, an *aria* is a solo song where a character shares their deepest desires. If your life were an opera, what would your *aria* be about?
- Rusalka wants to become the best version of herself, and as she grows, **she transforms throughout the story**. As you grow up, what are three, positive qualities that you possess that help you grow up? What are three areas you could work on to be the best version of yourself?

2) Fairytales

Fairytales make up an important genre of literature. Together as a class:

- Brainstorm a list of fairytales and write them on the board.
- Lead a discussion exploring what these stories have in common. What makes a fairytale? Many answers are possible, but students may be guided into some kind of answer like, "fairytales are fictional stories set in different times and places with magical elements that teach us or help us learn important lessons about growing up."
- Divide into groups and have each one come up with an important lesson they've learned as they've grown up.
- Have each group come up with their own fairytale that teaches this lesson! Share with the class!

3) Make your own opera!

Operas are written by composers who write the music and librettists who write the text. Divide into teams of two to create a short "opera scene." One person will be the **composer**, and one will be the **librettist**.

- Imagine two students are disagreeing about something. Work together to decide who the characters are and what the disagreement is about.
- The **librettist** will write the words that each character says. Consider having each character say *how* they feel, *why* they feel that way, and what they want to *do*.
- The **composer** will write musical directions for how each line should be sung to express the emotions in the scene. For instance, the composer might write "fast and loud with a high note on the last note to show that the character is angry OR "soft and slow" to express that a character is sad.

Here are some musical options that the composer can choose from:

- Dynamics (loud or soft)
- Tempo (Fast or slow)
- Pitch/Melody (high or low)
- Rhythm (steady, bouncy, unpredictable, etc.)

- Practice your scene and share! Talk about how each pair’s music choices helped express the emotions in the scene. How did the **composer** and **librettist** work together?

Music – Creating: How do musicians make creative decisions?

Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration & Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details

Social Awareness: Perspective-Taking

Self-Awareness: Identifying Problems

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

1) Classroom Culture

In *The Littlest Mermaid*, Rusalka is a “fish out of water” who longs to be a part of the human world. Everyone wants to fit in, but we know that not everyone feels like they do. Imagine a new student comes to your classroom and feels like a “fish out of water.” Brainstorm as a class who you already do to make students feel welcome. Then, look at that list. What’s missing? What else could you do as a class to make sure each student feels like the best version of themselves? How can you ensure everyone has a voice in your class?



2) Sea Witch Bullies

The Sea Witch is a bully in *The Littlest Mermaid*. While this opera is a fairytale, we sometimes confront bullies in real life. What are the best ways to confront a bully in class or on the playground so that no one “loses their voice?”



Social Studies: Behavioral Sciences- Recognizing the Interaction Between the Individual and Various Groups

Relationship Skills: Relationship Building

Social Awareness: Perspective Taking, Empathy, Appreciating Diversity, Respect for Others

FOLLOWING THE PERFORMANCE

We hope you have enjoyed *The Littlest Mermaid*! Now that you have seen the opera, we want to hear from you! You can do this in three different ways:

- 1) You can fill out this quick survey!
- 2) Write a review of the performance and send it to Cedar Rapids Opera!
- 3) Create a piece of art based on the opera. This artwork could be selected to be displayed at Cedar Rapids Opera performances!

Survey:

- 1) On a scale of 1-5 (5 being highest) how good were the performers in their presentation?

1 2 3 4 5

Why did you give them the above rating?

- 2) What did you like best about the performance?

- 3) Write down a few things you learned today about opera (things the performers told or showed you, or things you realized on your own).

- 4) What could we do to make the show *even* better?

- 5) What questions do you now have about opera or today's performance?

Brainstorm a list the words or actions that stood out to you during the performance:

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF OPERA!

An OPERA is a staged performance set to music in which all (or at least most) of the words are sung.

It started in Italy around the year 1600, which is why we use the Italian word, “BRAVO!”

What is opera?

An opera is a live performance where music, singing, and drama combine to tell a story! The word “opera” derives from the Latin word *opus*, which literally means “a work of art.” Like a play, an opera is performed on a stage with singing-actors, scenery, makeup and lighting. With very few exceptions, opera is performed without the help of microphones, and opera companies perform operas from different time periods—including our own—and celebrate many different cultures by performing diverse music.



Opera is truly a multi-disciplinary art, which means it is a combination of many art forms (singing, orchestral music, theater, visual arts, dance, etc.) and subject areas (history, mythology, literature, etc.). Opera combines these disciplines in a very powerful way to tell a story. Opera can be funny, sad, scary, dramatic, mysterious, fantastical, or any combination of feelings and moods.

How is it performed?

Unlike singers who perform popular music, opera singers do not use a microphone. An opera singer works to use their body as a source of “natural” amplification.

Language

Operas are written in many different languages, so opera singers must study and be prepared to sing in languages other than English. While you will be hearing *The Littlest Mermaid* in English, many operas are sung in Italian, French, German, Spanish, and more! When possible, we perform operas in their original languages out of respect for those cultures.



Singers prepare all these languages by studying diction, which helps them pronounce the words correctly. They translate the text word-by-word so they know exactly what they are singing. Not only do singers learn what they are saying, but what everyone else on the stage is saying as well!

GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS

Aria – The Italian word for a “song” in opera.

Baritone/Bass – The lowest male voices.

Cadenza – a flashy, often improvised, solo section usually at the end of an *aria*.

Chord – a group of notes (usually 3 or more) that are played together to create the harmony.

Classical Music – music written during the Classical Era (1750-1830); often refers to the genre of ‘serious’ music (not folk or popular music) written according to long-standing Western traditions.

Dialogue – When characters speak instead of sing. While not often appearing in opera, many operas including *The Littlest Mermaid* utilize dialogue.

Duet – When two characters sing at the same time.

Dynamics – the levels of loud or quiet.

Genre – a category of music (jazz, classical, folk, hip hop, R&B, etc.).

Harmony – a combination of musical notes in a chord; the structure of a series of chords; when things combine for a pleasing effect (like people getting along with each other).

Melody – a series of single notes that creates a “tune” or satisfying musical sequence.

Mezzo-Soprano – The lowest female voice.

Notes – individual pitches (each key on a piano is a single note).

Pitch – describes how high or low a note is.

Recitative – The “talk-singing” that moves the story of an opera forward.

Rhythm – a pattern or series of strong or weak, long or short sounds that create the movement or flow of a piece of music; rhythm may be steady and repetitive, or synchronized and irregular.

Soprano – The highest female voice.

Orchestra – a large ensemble that accompanies an opera. The role of the orchestra in *The Littlest Mermaid* will be played by a single pianist.

Tempo – describes how fast or slow.

Tenor – The highest male voice.