

The top of the page features a green and yellow geometric design. On the right, there is a stylized illustration of a red tree with a yellow house on top, set against a green background. The text "CU★PRESENTS" is written in white, with a yellow star between "CU" and "PRESENTS". Below this, the title "Hansel & Gretel" is written in a large, white, serif font. The ampersand is yellow and decorative. To the left of the title, the text "Grades 6-12" and "Teacher Packet" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

CU★PRESENTS

Hansel & Gretel

Grades 6-12 Teacher Packet

Learning about opera

An **opera** is a musical drama or comedy originating in Europe where the actors sing rather than speak their lines. 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. 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.

The **libretto** (meaning “little book” in Italian) contains all of the words of an opera. A libretto is usually shorter than the script for a play because it takes longer to sing lines than to say them, and because music is also a very important part of telling the story of an opera. The person who writes the words for an opera is often a poet or playwright and is called a librettist.

The **composer** writes the music for the opera. All of the music, both vocal (for singers) and orchestral (for instrumentalists) is written in the score which separates lines for each instrument and each singer’s vocal part. The score, as a piece of music, reflects the mood, events and emotions of the characters in the story.

Characters are the people in the story. Singers perform the parts of the characters, also called **roles**.

About the opera Hansel & Gretel

Hänsel und Gretel (in its original language, German) was first performed in **1893** in Weimar, Germany. Composed by **Engelburt Humperdinck** (1854–1921), the opera began as a simple fairy tale play for his sister's children. Humperdinck's sister, **Adelheid Wette**, would go on to write the full libretto for the opera. Based on an old German tale of a child-eating witch in the woods, it was Adelheid's idea for the children to be turned into gingerbread. Since its first performance, Hänsel und Gretel has continued to be an often-performed opera and has been translated into more than 20 languages.



Engelburt Humperdinck

Origins of Hansel & Gretel

The story of Hansel and Gretel was published in 1812 by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The **Brothers Grimm** were German collectors and writers of folk tales. They published, researched and studied folklore during the first half of the nineteenth century and are regarded as two of the best-known storytellers.

During their lives, they wrote, modified and published over 200 stories. Many of the stories they published were told to them by their contemporaries and had been passed down from older generations.

Each country in Europe, as well as smaller regions within those countries, had their own fairy tales. Sometimes these stories had similarities to those in nearby areas, with variations depending on local customs and folklore.



The characters of Hansel & Gretel

Gretel

Gretel is a young girl living in a small cottage by a forest with her family. She is the heroine of the opera. Her voice type is **soprano**, which is the highest singing voice of a woman.

Hansel

This role is a boy, but will be performed by a woman. The voice type is a **mezzo-soprano**, a woman's singing voice a little lower and richer toned than a soprano. Hansel is Gretel's brother, and the hero of the opera.

Witch

The witch lives in the woods by Hansel and Gretel's house, and turns children into gingerbread. She is a villain. This role is a woman, but performed by a male with a **tenor** voice (one of the higher male voices).

Father

Hansel and Gretel's father is courageous and sometimes humorous. His voice type is a **baritone**, a low male voice.

Mother

Mother is tired of poverty in which her family lives, and overjoyed when the family's fortunes change. Her voice type can either be a soprano or a mezzo-soprano.

Dew Fairy

The Dew Fairy is performed by a soprano.

Sandman

The Sandman can be performed by almost any voice type.

Children

Also called the **chorus**, the children sing together in **unison** (all the same notes) or in **harmony** (singing different notes at the same time).



The production team behind an opera

Conductor– The person in charge of the musical interpretation of the opera. He also guides the orchestra through the opera from the first rehearsal to final performance.

Director– Responsible for the overall look or concept of the production. The director determines how the opera will be interpreted and tells everyone on stage when, where, and how to move. Finally, he or she guides the performers on how characters are best presented.

Costume Designer– Designs and creates the clothes singers wear to reflect aspects of the character played by the singer. Costumes should reveal a lot about a character. How old they are, what kind of person they are, what time period he or she lives in, etc.

Scenic Designer– Creates the visual background and set pieces for the opera. He or she creates small models and detailed blueprints which serve as the “instructions” for building the set.

Lighting Designer– Creates the lighting plan that emphasizes the drama of the moment and allows the audience to focus on the action. Lighting design is an important visual element that contributes to the ambience of the stage setting and affects the appearance of people, costumes and props onstage.

Stage Manager– Coordinates all of the elements of the show during rehearsal and performance. He or she is responsible for calling cues, scene changes, and organizing the backstage area so that the show runs smoothly and consistently.

Crew– This group of professionals is responsible for setting up and running all of the equipment for a performance, including changing the scenery, costumes, and props. They also open and close the curtain, operate trapdoors, run sound effects, and run quick costume changes.



Components of opera

Opera is a musical form. The **orchestra** is the group of musicians who play instruments during the opera, and are led by the conductor. The orchestra provides the overriding musical path, while the singers sing and act on the stage.

An **overture** is the piece of music played by the orchestra at the beginning of an opera. It usually, but not always, contains some of the musical themes from the opera and sets the mood for what the audience is about to experience.

Recitative (from Italian, re-chi-ta-TEEV) is sung dialogue that propels the action forward. The singing is generally faster and is composed to sound more like speech. In contrast, an aria is an extended musical passage sung as a solo. It often explores emotions as a character absorbs, reflects, and makes decisions in the drama.

Often singer will sing in groups of different numbers. A **duet** is an extended musical passage for two singers. A **trio** is for three singers and a quartet is a piece for four singers. An **ensemble** is an extended musical passage for more than four voices. Often, each character is singing different words at the same time, and ensembles tend to occur at the most pivotal point in the drama or the end of an act.

Lastly, since operas are most often performed in the language in which they were composed, most opera productions have translations above the stage where a translation is projected for the audience to read. These translations are called **supertitles**.



Opera Knowledge Quiz

Test what you've read about the different things you've learned. Match the letter definition to the correct numbered term.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. Recitative | A. "Little book"; contains the words of the opera |
| _____ 2. Stage manager | B. A higher male voice; sings the witch in Hansel and Gretel |
| _____ 3. Tenor | C. Librettist for Hansel and Gretel |
| _____ 4. Brothers Grimm | D. Singing the same notes at the same time |
| _____ 5. Supertitles | E. Creates the visual background and set pieces for the opera |
| _____ 6. Soprano | F. The person who writes the music for an opera |
| _____ 7. Libretto | G. Sung dialogue that propels the action forward in an opera |
| _____ 8. Conductor | H. A lower female voice; sings Hansel in Hansel and Gretel |
| _____ 9. Trio | I. German collectors and writers of folk tales |
| _____ 10. Adelheid Wette | J. Translations above the stage for opera audiences |
| _____ 11. Overture | K. Three people singing together |
| _____ 12. Composer | L. Coordinates all of the elements of the show during rehearsal and performance |
| _____ 13. Scenic designer | M. Music played by the orchestra at the start of an opera |
| _____ 14. Unison | N. Person in charge of the musical interpretation of the opera |
| _____ 15. Mezzo-soprano | O. Highest female voice; sings Gretel in Hansel and Gretel |



Opera Knowledge Quiz - Answer Key

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|----------|---------------------|---|
| G | 1. Recitative | A. "Little book"; contains the words of the opera |
| L | 2. Stage manager | B. A higher male voice; sings the witch in Hansel and Gretel |
| B | 3. Tenor | C. Librettist for Hansel and Gretel |
| I | 4. Brothers Grimm | D. Singing the same notes at the same time |
| J | 5. Supertitles | E. Creates the visual background and set pieces for the opera |
| O | 6. Soprano | F. The person who writes the music for an opera |
| A | 7. Libretto | G. Sung dialogue that propels the action forward in an opera |
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