

The logo for New Orleans Opera Education features the words "new orleans opera" in a black, lowercase, sans-serif font, with "new" and "orleans" on the top line and "opera" on the bottom line. Below this, the word "education" is written in a larger, yellow, lowercase, sans-serif font. A stylized red flourish or graphic element is positioned to the left of the text.

new orleans opera
education



Dear GRADES 7-12 Administrators, Teachers and Students,

The New Orleans Opera Education program is proud to present our **NEW VIRTUAL SERIES**, entitled ***Scenic Songs: Off the Stage***. Here is the link, and we are thrilled that you will be with us in 2020-2021!

This *study guide packet* will serve three purposes:

1. It will **PROVIDE** all kinds of interesting information about each larger work (opera, operetta or musical), including plot and character descriptions.
2. It will **EXPLAIN** our unique re-telling of the storyline within each scene.
3. It will give **CONTEXT** regarding the historical period of each work, and your students will also have an opportunity to learn about the composers!

Let's begin!

Here is the PROGRAM:

Scenic Songs: Opera Off Stage

New Orleans Opera Association and MetroPelican Virtual Program for Schools

Produced by:

William Mouat: Director of Education at New Orleans Opera Association

Taylor Ott: Project Artistic Director and Executive Editor

Scenes:

“Ain't It Awful The Heat” from *Street Scene* - Kurt Weill (1900-1950),

Arranged by Mark-Anthony Thomas and Taylor Ott

Taylor Ott - Soprano, Mark-Anthony Thomas - Tenor

Jesse Reeks - Piano

“Embassy Diplomat” (Danilo’s aria) from *The Merry Widow* - Franz Lehár (1870–1948)

Frank Convit - Baritone

Jesse Reeks - Piano

Dwayne Barone - Video Director

Frank Convit - Video Editor

“A Boy like That” from *West Side Story* - Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Rachel Looney - Soprano, Amanda McCarthy - Mezzo Soprano

Jesse Reeks - Piano

“To Greet You My Lady” from *Le Nozze di Figaro (The Marriage of Figaro)* - W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)

Imani Francis - Soprano, Taylor Ott - Soprano

Taylor Ott - Puppeteer

Jesse Reeks - Piano

“Don Anchise’s Waltz” from *La finta giardiniera* - W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)

Mark Anthony Thomas - Tenor

Jesse Reeks - Piano

Three Dream Portraits "No. 2. Dream Variations", "No. 3. I, Too" - Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

Imani Francis - Soprano

Kendra Unique Wills - Dancer

Jesse Reeks - Piano

Taylor Ott - Video Editor

"Non so piu cosa son, cosa faccio" from *Le Nozze di Figaro* - W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)

Amanda McCarthy - Mezzo Soprano

Jesse Reeks - Piano

"Yes, Gretel Dear" from *Hansel and Gretel* - E. Humperdinck (1854-1921)

Taylor Ott - Soprano,

Taylor Ott - Puppeteer, Editor

Arthur Bosarge - Piano

Duetto Buffo di due Gatti (A Comic Duet for Two Cats) - Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Imani Francis - Soprano, Amanda McCarthy - Mezzo Soprano

Jesse Reeks – Piano

"Glitter and Be Gay" from *Candide* - Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Rachel Looney - Soprano

Jesse Reeks - Piano

Aidan Dykes - Sound Engineer

"Dear Theodosia" A Scene Adapted from *Hamilton* - Lin Manuel Miranda (B:1980)

Frank Convit - Baritone, Mark-Anthony Thomas - Tenor

Jesse Reeks - Piano

Taylor Ott – Painter

"Hmm hmm hmm!" from *The Magic Flute* - W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)

Rachel Looney - Soprano, Imani Francis - Soprano, Amanda McCarthy - Mezzo Soprano, Mark-Anthony Thomas - Tenor, Frank Convit - Baritone, and

Hayden Guthrie - Puppeteer, Taylor Ott - Puppeteer

Jesse Reeks - Piano

Taylor Ott - Editor



PUPPETS and PUPPETEERS

You may have noticed in the titles and photos an extensive use of puppets. Well, there is a unique history that goes with opera and puppets at New Orleans Opera. More than 25 years ago, a program originally called *The Oppets* was VERY popular in our school programs. In fact, this program was SO well-known that the puppets, singers and scenic crew had a van that they drove all around New Orleans and the state of Louisiana to hundreds of schools every year.

In 2020, we decided to resurrect these cute, engaging and well-dressed puppets for this show!

Pictured above, we have Taylor Ott, our project artistic director on the left, and Hayden Guthrie on the right. Hayden is a professional PUPPETEER, and she provided a storyboard (just like movie directors do when they are designing a concept for a new blockbuster movie), and she also provided a setting for each scene in our program that involved puppets. This takes hours and hours of work behind the scenes, but the result is a spellbinding, compact story for each puppet scene that transport us to many familiar locations throughout the city of New Orleans.

THE SHOW BEGINS with “Ain’t It Awful, the Heat” which is the beginning scene of an opera called *Street Scene* by American composer Kurt Weill. Kurt Weill was famous for his ability to create *verismo* (an Italian word meaning “realism”) within an opera, and *Street Scene* is a perfect example. The entire story of *Street Scene* takes place in a New York tenement building that has seen better days. It is 1947. In the original version of “Ain’t It Awful, the Heat”, a group of women are hanging their laundry out to dry on the balconies and staircase railings of their respective apartments. In Weill’s opera, there are manic moments of comedy, like the famous Ice Cream ensemble, but the opera ends tragically. Our version is anything but tragic, as Taylor Ott and Mark Anthony Thomas tear up the scenery with a distinctively New Orleans version, reshaped into a duet with French Quarter vibrancy!

In our second scene, we feature Danilo’s first act aria from Franz Lehar’s comedy, *The Merry Widow*. Lehar was the master of Viennese comedy. His stories always end happily, but there are occasional moments of romantic intrigue as well. Grand finales of Lehar operettas usually feature a rousing chorus in the final scene, with lots of dancing and fun. The *operetta* (opera with dialogue) *The Merry Widow* is set in a Pontevedrian embassy in Paris, and the timeframe is 1905. “Pontevedro” (a fictional name) for the country that Danilo serves is not being taken seriously by Parisians, and Danilo doesn’t take his job seriously either. He would much rather be doing anything other than sitting in a desk in a dusty embassy. Our modernized version is similar. In “Embassy Diplomat” Frank Convit, an office worker, really does not wish to be stuck indoors, attending ZOOM meetings. He would much rather be outside, playing games and enjoying the beautiful sunshine.

We move from comedy to drama in the duet, “A Boy Like That” from *West Side Story*, a musical drama by American composer Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein was one of the most famous conductors, composers, music educators and philanthropists of the 20th century. *West Side Story* is set in the 1950s, amidst a dangerous street gang rivalry between the Jets and the Sharks, who are fighting for territory. Bernstein, in this brilliant adaptation of William Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, sets the stage for star-crossed New York city teenagers Maria (a shark) and Tony (a jet). In our modernized adaptation, Maria (Rachel Looney) and Anita (Amanda McCarthy) are sisters, and Anita is horrified that Maria is remaining loyal to Tony, after Tony killed her husband, Bernardo.

Travelling from mid-20th-Century New York to 1786 Spain, we present the Act I *Marriage of Figaro* duet “To Greet You, My Lady”. Here, we encounter a rivalry between Marcellina, an older lady who is seeking money, and Susanna, a young lady who wants to get Marcellina out of the way so that she can marry Figaro. Mozart wrote many serious and comic operas in Italian and German, but *The Marriage of Figaro* is the first work where he ridiculed royalty and nobility, while pointing out the virtues and cleverness of palace servants, Susanna and Figaro. In the end, they baffle the Count Almaviva, who wishes to interfere with the marriage, and Count Almaviva realizes – finally – that he is truly in love with the Countess. Here, we feature Imani Francis as Susanna and Taylor Ott as Marcellina. (This one is going to surprise you, and, if you

wish to know how we did it, have your teacher contact us in the education department at New Orleans Opera.) Here is a hint. We have LOTS of puppets who play LOTS of people, but which one below do you think might be Marcellina?



In “Don Anchise’s Waltz”, we remain in the realm of Mozart, but we shift the composer’s timeline back about a decade with the *opera buffa* (comic opera) *La finta giardiniera*. This title literally means, in English, “The False Gardener” and, in this case, a noblewoman Violante lost her memory, and somehow became a gardener (named Sandrina) for the frequently confused Don Anchise, an Italian baron. Violante eventually regains her identity and marries the handsome Belfiore, a nobleman, but there are plenty of cases of mistaken identity in the meantime to thicken the plot. We bring Mark Anthony Thomas back for this delightful rendition of Don Anchise’s second act, late 18th century dance tune.

Next, Imani Francis will enthrall with her hauntingly beautiful soprano voice as Kendra Unique Wills provides a dream ballet in two selections from *Three Dream Variations* by Margaret Bonds, who lived from 1913 to 1972. Margaret Allison Bonds was an American composer, pianist, arranger, and teacher. One of the first black composers and performers to gain recognition in the United States, she is best remembered today for her popular arrangements

of African-American spirituals and frequent collaborations with Langston Hughes. Margaret Bonds is pictured here in her early life and career. Legend has it that she had perfect pitch!



“Non so piu cosa son, cosa faccio” is featured next as a shining example of Mozart’s genius for comedy in Cherubino’s plea to understand the nature of the Countess, the woman he thinks he is going to impress. (In fact, Cherubino, a minor nobleman and page living on the estate of Count Almaviva so enrages the Count that he is almost evicted from the premises and drafted into the army!) In our version, Amanda McCarthy’s Cherubino is put into the context of a bored modern-day teenager with far too much free time! It is noteworthy that, in Mozart’s time, women often played teenage boys and these types of roles were known as “trouser roles”.

“Yes, Gretel Dear” from the opera *Hansel and Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck is a showcase aria for the Witch. Despite the grotesque origins of the original fable of Hansel and Gretel, composer Humperdinck not only succeeded in turning it into a comedy, he also provided a brilliant orchestration reminiscent of the great German Romantic composer Richard Wagner. In the operatic tale, Hansel and Gretel push the Witch into the oven and they are rescued by their father, who is successful in following their trail of breadcrumbs into the forest. In our rendition soprano Taylor Ott recreates the role of the beguiling and zany Witch who has an unpleasant surprise for Gretel.

We travel to the era of Italian comic composer Gioachino Rossini who was best known for his comic opera, *The Barber of Seville*. In fact, *The Barber of Seville* was so popular that it was satirized in the vintage, mid-twentieth century cartoon series *Bugs Bunny* by Warner Brothers Studios. However, Rossini wrote other comic works besides opera. One of his most frequently performed stand-alone selections is *The Duet of the Cats*. This versatile work is performed with staging, or in concert, with equal effectiveness. In our version Amanda McCarthy and Imani Francis are fabulous frenetic felines competing for anything and everything.



We return to the magic of Bernstein with the aria “Glitter and Be Gay” from his opera *Candide*. Bernstein’s opera was based upon a satire first published in 1759 by Voltaire, a philosopher of the Age of Enlightenment. In the aria, “Glitter and Be Gay” Cunégonde has discovered that, for now, money does indeed buy happiness. In our version, the role of Cunégonde is portrayed by Rachel Looney. This aria is widely performed out of the context of the opera, and on the concert stage due to its vocal pyrotechnics for the leading soprano!

Next, we pay homage to a duet between two fathers, crooning to their infant children, in a multi-media selection based upon Hamilton. The original “Dear Theodosia” is supposed to be performed after Aaron and Alexander welcome their respective children, Theodosia and Philip, but the song was rehearsed in different incarnations and in altered sections of the musical before it was finally decided where it should be placed. (This is a problem frequently faced by modern composers, and it was often faced by opera composers in many genres and eras.) The roles of Burr and Hamilton are performed here by Frank Convit and Mark Anthony Thomas.

OUR GRAND FINALE is the Act One quintet from Mozart’s *Singspiel* (play with music) *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), which is set in a faraway place in ancient times. Here, we have three ladies – servants of the star-blazing Queen of the Night – who appear to remove the padlock from birdcatcher Papageno’s mouth, after he has endured this punishment for lying. Tamino, a prince from another part of the world has fallen in love with Pamina, the Queen of the Night’s daughter, and both men are given a mission to rescue her from the so-called “evil one” (Sarastro), who turns out to be good in the end. In an exciting juxtaposition of puppetry and real-life, our final selection features Frank Convit as Papageno, Mark Anthony Thomas as Tamino, Rachel Looney as the First Lady, Imani Francis as the Second Lady and Amana McCarthy as the Third Lady. The Magic Flute was Mozart’s final opera before his untimely death in 1791.



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Hayden Guthrie has worked as a visual artist and actress in New Orleans for the past three years, since graduating from the University of New Orleans in Film and Theatre. She has most recently acted in television shows such as *N.C.I.S.*, *The Purge*, and *Your Honor*. You may have also seen her in the Nola Project's rendition of *Urinetown the Musical* as Little Becky Two Shoes or as Mrs. Elvsted in UNO's production of *Hedda Gabbler*. She also works as an arts enrichment instructor at Community Works, teaching storytelling and visual arts through a variety of puppet forms, including shadow puppets! Check out the Community Works social media to keep up with their new series entitled *Helping Hands* where you can see Hayden as her hand puppet alter ego, Phalange. Here, she is interviewing a variety of other artists working as enrichment instructors with students all over the New Orleans area.

Amanda McCarthy, mezzo-soprano and native New Orleanian, completed her undergraduate degree from Loyola University in Vocal performance and her Master's in voice from Texas State University. She returned home to New Orleans to serve as a member of the city's rich and vibrant musical community. She hopes to do her part in the return of performance art and culture in New Orleans during this pandemic.

Taylor Ott, is a collaborative artist, performer and educator, and is ecstatic to continue creating programming with the New Orleans Opera Association. She specializes in opera and multi-disciplinary art, creating vibrant scenes focusing on community and diversity. In 2018 Miss Ott wrote music and lyrics for her first musical "Ghost of a Chance". She has a Master of Music, and has performed in cities across the U.S.A. and England.

Rachel Looney, soprano, has been praised by The Times Picayune for her smooth silvery tone and ringing top notes. In 2018, she starred as Marian Paroo in *The Music Man* at Rivertown Theaters and received a Big Easy Awards nomination for Best Actress in a Musical. She then made her operatic debut with New Orleans Opera as La statue animée in Rameau's *Pygmalion*. In 2019, Rachel appeared as Phoebe D'Ysquith in *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* at Le Petit. Rachel is a frequent soloist with New Orleans Opera in both their "Opera on Tap" and Opera Education programs. During the 2019 - 2020 school year, she performed the title role in Barab's *Little Red Riding Hood* for hundreds of school children throughout the city. Rachel has also performed with the Victory Belles, Tulane Summer Lyric Theatre, and JPAS. Rachel Looney received her Bachelor of Music from LSU and Master of Music from Loyola.

Rachellooneysoprano.com

Imani Sarai Francis is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana. She is the daughter of Reverend Norman N. Francis and Dr. Valerie Anne Jones Francis. Imani is a proud product of the Orleans Parish Public Schools System where she attended and graduated from the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) in 2016. Imani is also active in her community as she has served as a youth counselor, and assistant voice and African American history teacher for Tambourine and Fan, a youth organization founded by Freedom Fighter, Mr. Jerome Smith. She has also Awards

and Recognition: Classical Singer Vocal Competition, Semifinalist; Red River Young Artist Competition, First Place; New Orleans Opera Youth Vocal Competition, Second Place; National Association of Teachers of Singing Competition, 2014, First Place, Canto Lirico Internacional Competition Recitalist, Trujillo, Peru, 2017; National Association of Negro Musicians, vocalist and Masterclass participant with Robert Sims and George Shirley. Imani is a proud Boston Conservatory @ Berklee College of Music graduate where she received her Bachelor of Music degree in Vocal Performance in May, 2020. She is currently a graduate Vocal Performance major at LSU, Baton Rouge, Louisiana pursuing the Master of Music degree in Vocal Performance.

Mark Anthony Thomas, tenor, a native New Orleanian who received his B.M.& M.M. in Vocal Performance from Loyola. He teaches Classical Voice and Music Theory at NOCCA, is the Music Arts Director at Vintage Church New Orleans, and performs various genres of music throughout the metro area.

Frank Convit, described as singing with the “poignant power of a seasoned soloist” (Richard Balthazar Blog), has been captivating audiences with his rich timbre and ringing high notes. In 2020, Frank made his Midwest debut with Heartland Opera Theatre as Marco in Puccini’s Gianni Schicchi and his New Orleans Opera debut as Loreé in Tchaikovsky’s Joan of Arc. Previous roles include the Big Bad Wolf from Little Red Riding Hood, Pandolfe in Massenet’s Cendrillon and Pablo Picasso in Tom Cipullo’s Afterlife. In 2018 Frank was the soloist in Haydn’s Creation with Tulane Choir and the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra and was the baritone soloist in Mozart’s Requiem with the Cornish-American Song Institute and Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* with the Consortium Novum Orchestra. Frank earned his Master of Music Performance Degree from Loyola in 2019. Frank is a regular performer at *Opera On Tap*, *Opéra Nouvelle*, and several virtual concert series. Frank can also be heard as section leader and soloist at St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church.

