

MADAME BUTTERFLY

GIACOMO PUCCINI

SOCIAL STUDIES: Letters from the Librettist

Students will

- Read for information
- Research a time period for multiple events, inventions, and individuals of various cultures
- Draft a letter to the composer discussing current events and opera based on research
- Understand the relevance of cultures and historic events within a given time period

Copies for Each Student: *Madame Butterfly* Synopsis, “Our Composer, Giacomo Puccini”, “Our Librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica”, Activity Worksheet, Letter Example

Copies for the Teacher: *Madame Butterfly* Synopsis, “Our Composer, Giacomo Puccini”, “Our Librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica”, Activity Worksheet, Letter Example

Getting Ready

Prepare internet access for research for guided practice or group work.

Gather pens, pencils and additional writing paper as needed for your students.

Introduction

Explain to your students that like all works of theater, opera is a result of teamwork. The librettist and composer must work together and communicate to ensure the success of an opera or project. Communication was often done through postal mail or personal meetings during Puccini’s lifetime. Today, we know a lot about historical events and individuals due to information gathered from personal and official letters.

Have the students discuss what they believe librettist/composers wrote about in their letters. You may want to guide the discussion so that the students begin to understand the presence of historic and cultural references to music, inventions, and political movements during the late 19th century and early 20th century. Have your students read the Letter Example, Synopsis, and Articles about the composer and librettists. Give an overview of the assignment, and point out the information your students are expected to research and write about. Give each student a copy of the Activity Worksheet or display it on a screen. To align with Texas TEKS, you may provide and tailor research topics according to your grade level:

6th Grade: Societies of the contemporary world.

7th Grade: Texas history, from natural Texas to present.

8th Grade: United States history from the early colonial period through Reconstruction.

U.S. History Studies since 1877: U.S. History from Reconstruction to the present day.

World History Studies: Societies of ancient Greece, Rome, India, Persia, China, and Medieval to Renaissance Europe.

Guided/Independent Practice

Depending on your grade level, the ability of your students, and time constraints, you may choose to have students work as a whole class, in small groups, with a partner, or individually. Read the introduction and directions on the Activity Worksheet or display it on a screen. Have students select topics and begin research, being mindful of the requirements for their letter. This can be done in class or as an outside assignment. Have students draft a letter to Puccini being sure to include the required information from their research. Then have students share their letters individually or by groups and tell why they chose their location and events. Letters can also be handwritten and displayed on a class board.

Evaluation

Have students present their ideas to the class for discussion and evaluation. The teacher may want to guide the discussion.

For Further Study

Students may want to do additional research on librettists, composers, or civilizations during a specific time period or other related topics online or in their school library. Their findings can be shared with the class at the beginning of a later lesson.

If time allows

If time allows, have students create an outline for an opera based on one of their historic events or inventions mentioned in their letter.

TEKS

Social Studies

6th Grade

113.18. b. 16 A Culture

The student understands that all societies have basic institutions in common even though the characteristics of these institutions may differ. The student is expected to: (A) identify institutions basic to all societies, including government, economic, educational, and religious institutions.

113.18. b. 17 A,B Culture

The student understands relationships that exist among world cultures. The student is expected to: (A) identify and describe how culture traits such as trade, travel, and war spread; (B) identify and describe factors that influence cultural change such as improved communication, transportation, and economic development.

113.18. b. 21 A,B Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. The student is expected to: (A) differentiate between, locate, and use valid primary and secondary sources such as computer software; interviews; biographies; oral, print, and visual material; and artifacts to acquire information about various world cultures; (B) analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions.

7th Grade

113.19 b. 21 A Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. The student is expected to: (A) differentiate between, locate, and use valid primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about Texas.

8th Grade

113.20 b. 23 C Culture

The student understands the relationships between and among people from various groups, including racial, ethnic, and religious groups, during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. The student is expected to: (C) identify ways conflicts between people from various racial, ethnic, and religious groups were resolved.

113.20 b. 24 A,B Culture

The student understands the major reform movements of the 19th century. The student is expected to: (A) describe the historical development of the abolitionist movement; and (B) evaluate the impact of reform movements, including educational reform, temperance, the women's rights movement, prison reform, abolition, the labor reform movement, and care of the disabled.

113.20 b. 29 A Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired through established research methodologies from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. The student is expected to: (A) differentiate between, locate, and use valid primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information about the United States.

United States History Studies Since 1877

113.41. c. 26 A,B,C Culture

The student understands how people from various groups contribute to our national identity. The student is expected to: (A) explain actions taken by people to expand economic opportunities and political rights, including those for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities as well as women, in American society; (B) discuss the Americanization movement to assimilate immigrants and American Indians into American culture; (C) explain how the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, gender, and religious groups shape American culture

113.41. c. 29 A,B,D Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. The student is expected to: (A) use a variety of both primary and secondary valid sources to acquire information and to analyze and answer historical questions; (B) analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing and contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations, making predictions, drawing inferences, and drawing conclusions; (D) use the process of historical inquiry to research, interpret, and use multiple types of sources of evidence

World History Studies

113.42. c. 25 A,B Culture

The student understands how the development of ideas has influenced institutions and societies. The student is expected to: (A) summarize the fundamental ideas and institutions of Eastern civilizations that originated in China and India; (B) summarize the fundamental ideas and institutions of Western civilizations that originated in Greece and Rome.

113.42. c. 29 F Social studies skills

The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including electronic technology. The student is expected to: (F) analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, drawing inferences and conclusions, and developing connections between historical events over time.

Correlates: Language Arts

Gardner's Intelligences: Verbal-Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Intrapersonal

Bloom's Taxonomy: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Synthesis, Evaluation (1956)
Remember, Understand, Apply, Evaluate, Create (2001)

Sources

Pacific Opera Victoria,. "Giacomo Puccini" 500-1815 Blanshard Street, Victoria, BC V8T 5A4. Accessed, 01 Aug. 2016. <http://pov.bc.ca/pdfs/Puccini.pdf>
Accessed on 12/10/15 <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Giuseppe-Giacosa>
Accessed on 12/10/15 <http://www.roh.org.uk/people/luigi-illica>
www.oxfordmusiconline.com

Madame Butterfly

Synopsis

ACT ONE

Near Nagasaki in the early 1900s

American naval officer, Pinkerton, has taken out a 999-year lease on a little house, and is making the final arrangements with the Japanese marriage-broker, Goro, for a Japanese wedding. From a discussion with the American consul, Sharpless, we gather that according to Japanese law the marriage will not be binding. Pinkerton revels in the carefree attitude as a ‘Yankee vagabondo’ who takes his pleasure where he finds it (‘Dovunque al mondo’); Sharpless tries in vain to warn him that his 15-year-old bride, Butterfly, is serious about the marriage. Butterfly enters amid a bustle of friends and relatives, singing happily of the love that awaits her. After shyly greeting Pinkerton, she shows him her belongings – including the ceremonial dagger with which her father killed himself – and the Commissioner performs the wedding ceremony. But the festivities are short-lived; her uncle (the Bonze) arrives and curses her for converting to Christianity, and her relatives and friends immediately join him in rejecting her. Her servant Suzuki prepares her for the wedding night, and she joins Pinkerton in the garden for an extended love duet (‘Viene la sera’). He is enchanted with his plaything-wife and, while she speaks tenderly of her love, ardently claims his fluttering, captured butterfly.

ACT TWO

Part One: The same house, several years later

Butterfly and Suzuki are alone. Pinkerton sailed for America three years ago, but Butterfly remains fiercely loyal and describes to Suzuki her dream of his return (‘Un bel di’). Sharpless, knowing that Pinkerton has taken an American wife and will soon be arriving in Nagasaki with her, attempts to prepare Butterfly for the shock. But Butterfly will not listen and remains stubbornly faithful; she shows Sharpless the child she has borne Pinkerton without his knowledge, convinced that this revelation will ensure her husband’s return. Sharpless leaves, unable to face Butterfly with the truth. A cannon shot is heard and Butterfly and Suzuki see Pinkerton’s ship coming into harbor. Butterfly jubilantly prepares for his return, filling the room with flowers and again donning her bridal costume. With preparations complete, the two women and the child sit down to wait for Pinkerton’s arrival. Night falls; as Suzuki and the child sleep and Butterfly waits motionless, a humming chorus is heard in the distance.

Part Two

It is dawn and Butterfly has fallen asleep at her post. Suzuki rouses her and she carries the sleeping child into the next room, singing a lullaby. Pinkerton and Sharpless arrive and ask Suzuki to talk to Pinkerton’s new wife, Kate, who is waiting outside. Suzuki agrees, but the sight of her distress, together with memories of the past, overcome Pinkerton. He is filled with remorse (‘Addio fiorito asil’), and he leaves rather than face the woman he deserted. Butterfly rushes in, searching desperately for Pinkerton, but she sees only the strange woman waiting in the garden. Suzuki and Sharpless manage to break the news that this is Pinkerton’s wife, and that her husband will never return to her. Butterfly seems to accept the blow, and agrees to give up her son, asking only that Pinkerton come in person to fetch him. Kate and Sharpless leave; Suzuki tries to comfort Butterfly, but she asks to be left alone. She takes her father’s dagger from the wall and prepares to kill herself. Suzuki pushes the child into the room, and Butterfly drops the dagger, momentarily deterred. After an impassioned farewell (‘O a me, sceso dal trono’), she sends the child away, and commits ritual suicide just as Pinkerton rushes in calling her name.

Madame Butterfly

Our Composer, Giacomo Puccini

The Italian composer Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was the most successful follower of Verdi, continuing the line of Italian operatic composers into the 20th century. Born in Lucca on Dec. 22, 1858, into a family whose members had composed operas of local success for several generations, Giacomo Puccini learned the rudiments of music from the best local teachers, served as a church organist, and composed sacred choral works while still in his teens. A pension in 1880 from Queen Margherita made it possible for him to go to Milan for study at the conservatory. His most important teacher was the composer Amilcare Ponchielli, who encouraged him to write his first opera, *Le Villi*, in 1884. The work was entered in a competition sponsored by the Teatro Illustrato but received no recognition there; it was performed with such success at one of the smaller Milanese theaters that it was put on the stage at the famous La Scala opera house in 1885.

Edgar, which premiered at La Scala in 1889, was a failure. However, *Manon Lescaut*, which premiered four years later in Turin, was favorably received and soon became a popular work throughout Italy and abroad. Puccini's first spectacular triumph came in 1896 with *La bohème*, to a libretto by Giacosa and Illica, also premiered in Turin. Its touching portrayal of episodes in the lives and loves of students in Paris and the simplicity and accessibility of the music in joyous, romantic, and pathetic scenes excited and moved audiences from the first performance on, and its popularity has continued to the present day in all countries that enjoy opera. *Tosca*, yet another opera set to a libretto by Giacosa and Illica, premiered in Rome in 1900. This was a much more serious and melodramatic work, with relatively few moments of lyricism, but it was almost as successful and has also become a mainstay of the standard repertory. *Madama Butterfly*, set in Japan, was the first work in which Puccini used scales and melodies of non-Western music. It was poorly received at the first performance at La Scala in 1904, but has since become every bit as popular as *La bohème* and likely for the same reasons: there are long passages of lush and sentimental music, tunes that are easy to remember, effective scenes of pathos, and well-calculated bits of stage business. *Madama Butterfly* was also his last completely successful work.

Welcoming the opportunity to visit America, Puccini wrote a new work for the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, *La fanciulla del West*. The first performance, in 1910, was received with the expected enthusiasm, but the opera was not so well-received later and is rarely performed today. Puccini endeavored to capture the local color of the American West with this opera through scenes of gambling and saloons; an attempted lynching, and he even attempted to have some of the tunes sound like American songs. However, in the end, the music sounds just like classic Puccini, and according to the opinions of some, not classic Puccini at its best. His comic opera, *La Rondine*, premiered in Monte Carlo in 1917, has not held the stage as much either.

The following year Puccini wrote three one-act operas, *Il trittico*, designed to be done together as an evening's entertainment, and premiered in New York. The first, *Il tabarro*, is melodramatic, much in the style of parts of *Tosca*; *Suor Angelica*, set in a convent and written for women's voices, is lyric and subdued; and *Gianni Schicchi*, the most successful and often done separately, is his best comic work, rapid-paced with some fine moments of contrasting lyricism.

Our Composer, Giacomo Puccini *continued...*

Death took Puccini before he could complete his last work, *Turandot*. He was nearing the end of the work when he was stricken by throat cancer and taken for an operation to Brussels, where he died on Nov. 29, 1924. The opera was completed by Alfano and first performed at La Scala, conducted by Arturo Toscanini, in 1926. It has some fine lyric and unusually effective dramatic moments, and in some places it makes more effective use of such pseudo-Oriental devices as pentatonic scales than *Madama Butterfly*. But the work as a whole has not been as perennially popular as some of his earlier operas.

Puccini's strengths are his delicate and sensitive handling of both voices and orchestra in lyric and pathetic scenes and occasionally in lively scenes as well and his ability to write melodies that audiences learn quickly and apparently never tire of hearing. His best scenes are those for one or two characters; ensemble writing in his operas rarely approaches the excitement common in the works of such predecessors as Gioacchino Rossini and Giuseppe Verdi.

Music was undergoing dramatic stylistic changes in the last decades of Puccini's life with the works of such men as Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, and Béla Bartók. Puccini clung to the harmonic and melodic language of the late 19th century. The problem of reconciliation between radical changes of musical language and the venerable form of opera has been a thorny one. It should be noted that the last operas to be truly successful in terms of wide acceptance by audiences and retention in the repertory are those of Puccini and Richard Strauss, two men who remained on the periphery of the widespread innovation so characteristic of the first decades of the 20th century.

Madame Butterfly

Our Librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa

Giuseppe Giacosa, was born on October 21, 1847 and died on September 1, 1906. He was an Italian dramatist who collaborated with Luigi Illica to write the libretti for three of Giacomo Puccini's most famous operas.

The son of a Piedmontese lawyer, Giacosa earned a law degree from the University of Turin but soon abandoned the law to write for the theatre. His first successful comedy, *Una partita a scacchi* (1873; "A Game of Chess"), was set in the European Middle Ages. Giacosa followed this with several more comedies and light historical dramas. He then gradually turned to examining contemporary social problems in the manner of Henrik Ibsen. Giacosa's best plays, among which are *I diritti dell'anima* (1894; "Sacred Ground") and *Come le foglie* (1900; "Like Falling Leaves"), are psychological investigations of people in crisis.

In 1891 Giacosa was one of several writers asked to work on the libretto for Puccini's opera *Manon Lescaut*. Giacosa suggested that Illica assist him, and this led to a collaboration between the two men on the texts of *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), and *Madama Butterfly* (1904). In their collaborations, Illica devised the operas' structure and first draft, which Giacosa then polished and converted into verse.

And Luigi Illica

Italian dramatist Luigi Illica (1857–1919) wrote librettos for a number of important operas around the turn of the 20th century. He worked with Puccini on the texts of *Manon Lescaut*, *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* and wrote librettos for many other operas, including Catalani's *La Wally* and Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*.

Illica was born near Piacenza and ran away to sea as a young man. In 1879 he settled in Milan, working as a journalist; during this period he lost part of his right ear in a duel. He began creating theatre works in 1875, and his first libretto – for Antonio Smareglia's *Il vassallo di Szigeth* – dates from 1889. In 1892 Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa became the final two librettists to work on Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, bringing the text to completion after its long gestation. Illica and Giacosa also collaborated on *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, with Giacosa versifying Illica's drafted scenarios. Illica worked independently on more than thirty further librettos, including a number by Giordano and Mascagni.

Though Giacosa's death in 1906 brought an end to Illica's most fertile period of collaboration with Puccini, Illica worked on *Maria Antonietta*, ultimately never set by Puccini, until he enlisted for military service in 1915 at the age of 58.

Madame Butterfly

Social Studies Activity

Puccini and librettist duo, Giacomini and Illica worked together to create *Madame Butterfly* in the early 20th century. Like any partnership, communication was required to ensure the project was successful. Letters were a very important part of communicating during majority of their lives. They not only provided specific information about a topic, but also contained thoughts about current events and well wishes; just like any communication between colleagues or friends today. Since they did not have the ability to easily and instantly inform someone of an event or thought through email, face-time, or text message, letters would discuss the events of the previous months, weeks, or days until the next physical meeting or letter.

Think about what life was like in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What were some of the major events taking place in the world, in the US, and in Texas at that time? What events had already happened or were developing? Who were the celebrities and famous persons at that time? Research the time period to gather information about events and inventions. Then, draft a letter to your friend and composer, Puccini, to catch-up on current events and discuss the topic of *Madame Butterfly* as a possible opera. You may choose any location in the world as your home such as Egypt, the U.S., an island in the Pacific, or China. Be sure to mention at least 2 different events and exciting inventions that are taking place at the time of your letter. You may need to do a little research about the composition and history of the opera to develop a more detailed letter.

Your Letter

Your drafted letter to the composer must contain the following:

- Date and location
- Greetings
- Mention of your environment and things happening around you
- Mention of a current event in the world
- Mention of a current event in the United States or Texas
- Mention of a new invention or famous person
- Conclusion
- Signature

Complete the activity worksheet to organize your research for your letter.

1. What date will you choose? What is your location when the letter is written?
2. What are some of the major things happening in the world during this time?
 - a. How do you feel about this event?
3. What are some of the major things happening in the United States or Texas at this time?
 - a. How do you feel about this event?
4. What is a newly developed invention? Or an invention that is still receiving a patent?
 - a. How do you feel about this invention? What do you hope will happen?
5. Who is someone you would like to meet and why?
6. How do you feel about the story? How do you feel about the characters?

All of this information can be as brief or as detailed as your teacher requests. The information in your letter does not have to be based on exact communication and travel circumstances of your chosen period.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Madame Butterfly

Activity Worksheet: Letters from the Librettist

1. What is the date of your letter? What is your location when the letter is written? Why did you choose this location?

2. List a few major or minor world events that took place during that time. How do you feel about the events?

3. List a few major or minor U.S. and/or Texas events that took place at that time. How do you feel about the events?

4. Briefly tell about a new invention or an enhancement to a current invention of the late 19th century. What do you hope will be accomplished through this invention?

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5. Who is someone you would like to meet from this time period? Why? Does Puccini know this person? Do you imagine that you have already met this person?

6. Briefly discuss the story of *Madame Butterfly*. How do you feel about the story and the characters?

Use the answers to the above questions to draft your letter to Puccini. Be sure to write the letter from your point of view if you lived as a poet and librettist in the early 20th century. Your status can be authentic or fictional.

Bonus: Handwrite your letter to Puccini.

Madame Butterfly Letter Example

Date

My dearest Giacomo,

My thanks for your many gifts my dear friend.

I do hope that your compositions are proving fruitful if not challenging. I understand that you have started to consider *Madame Butterfly* for your next work. Do try and enjoy the process a bit more. A tale of innocence, cowardice, and honor. It will surely cause quite a frenzy with many, but it shall be no less a masterpiece than your previous works I am sure.

Have you heard word of (**current invention**)? I do hope it will prove more successful than his last contraptions. He is quite an interesting character, although odd. While a bit apprehensive about the many evidences of his lack of sanity, it will surely be entertaining.

Have you tested the merit of the invention, the telephone?

How is (**current event**) going for you? Surely the public will come to its senses and realize....

Things are a bit on end here. Oddly enough, we are still feeling the aftermath of the (**event**). I have faith that progress will be made.

I look forward to our next encounter.

Sincerely,

(Name)