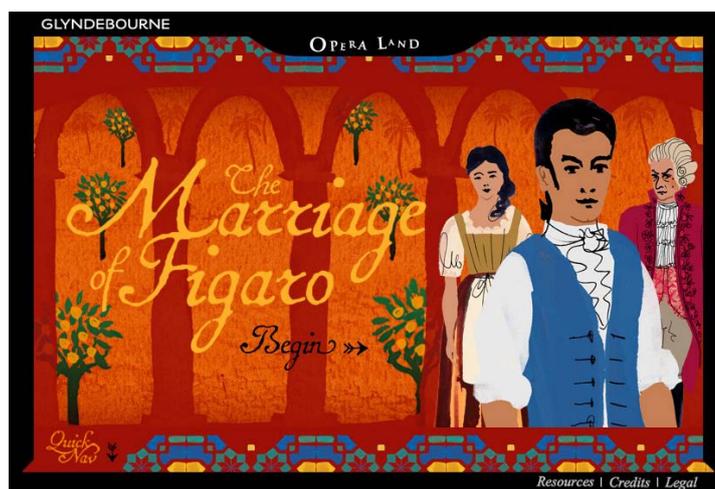


The Marriage of Figaro, teachers' guide

The Site

Go to <http://www.operaland.org> then follow the link to Figaro.

This site is intended to give you the material you need to introduce your students to The Marriage of Figaro. The toolbars take you to the obvious categories of Mozart or the Story or Music, but you'll discover there's also supplementary information on things like guitars, barbers, revolutionaries and so on – all the contextual topics that feed into the plot.



The students can use the toolbars to discover these things for themselves, or they can scroll across the animations. In these they'll discover tiny icons, that bounce into life as the mouse moves over them, and link them to the extra information.

Getting to know Figaro

The animated screens give a truncated version of the story. The whole plot can be found under 'Story' on the toolbar. If you have the time, the most effective way of getting the show across is to tell the kids the story yourself, using the audio clips as you go along.

You'll discover that the clips come with an audio player and a short piece of text, a description of the music. The text is precisely numbered so that if, for example, it says 'The trumpets sound a fanfare (34)' you'll see that (34) corresponds to the time count on the play bar.

Listening to the Music

Given the appealing nature of the Figaro score, it should be no hardship for the kids to hear an extract a couple of times. On the second run through you might ask them to give a vigorous cue when they hear the particular detail you've highlighted for them, Figaro's bass voice perhaps, or an oboe, or Don Basilio whinging...



Some of the audio clips (particularly Clips 7 -11 in the Story section) have a dramatic pattern of their own. The musical dynamic goes from loud to soft (or agitated to serene) and can be easily demonstrated with an arm movement as the music plays. Encourage the children to mime a graph pattern in the air as they hear it.

Social context

The Marriage of Figaro is set in a stately home and the hero and heroine (Figaro and his fiancée Susanna) are valet and ladies maid to the Count and Countess. The elaborate costumes and wigs worn by ladies and gentlemen in the 18th century meant that servants like this were essential members of the staff and waiting, as they did, so intimately on their employers, they became trusted confidantes – even friends.

That master/servant relationship is essential for understanding Figaro. We see it at its best in the affection between the Countess and Susanna, and its collapse when Figaro realises the Count is after his girl. It's not just the tyranny he objects to, it's the betrayal.

The following website provides some interesting details about the minutiae of 18th century dress and wigs.

<http://www.cfa.ilstu.edu/lmlowel/the331/rococo/menreview.htm>

Austria

Mysteriously Austria seems to have dropped out of popular consciousness and Mozart is regularly referred to as a German, in spite of the fact that Germany as such didn't exist. Mozart was an Austrian, he lived in Vienna (the capital of the Austro Hungarian Empire) and was devoted to his Emperor, so it might be useful to introduce the kids to that enormous territory with the aid of an historical map (see Appendix, p.4)

The Austrian Emperor

Mozart's Emperor, Joseph II, was crucial to the creation of The Marriage of Figaro. Without his say-so the opera could never have been put on. He was adroitly managed by Mozart's librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, but the Emperor was a liberal monarch, and not unduly disturbed by the egalitarian ideas in Figaro. He did however object to the risqué jokes and Da Ponte had to promise to remove anything that Joseph found offensive.

The French King, Louis XVI, felt very differently, as the children will discover from Revolution link. It might be interesting to use the globe icon that takes them to this link and place the opera in a time line. It was premiered, as they will see, bang in the middle of the revolutions that swept the Western world.

Revolutionary Time Line

- 1775** Outbreak of the American Revolutionary War
- 1776** The Declaration of Independence
- 1783** The USA gains its independence
- 1786** The Marriage of Figaro
- 1789** Start of the French revolution and the Fall of the Bastille
- 1799** The French Revolution sweeps Europe, the start of the Napoleonic War

Staging

The Marriage of Figaro is both realistic – it’s set in a proper house, with real doors, and windows that open – and farcical. People hide in improbable places, disguise themselves in unlikely cloaks, and land on geranium pots at the wrong moment.

Offer the children a schematic house, like the one below, and get them to ‘open it out’ to make a stage set.

Some of the things they need to consider:

Where is Figaro’s new room?
Who’s room is it next to?
(See the opening of Act 1)

On which floor is the Countess’s room?
(See Act 2, how far does Cherubino jump? And what does he land on?)

Do you need to put any bits of furniture in the rooms? A chair? Screen? Writing desk? Another door?





Appendix: Map of Central Europe.

