

La Forza di Opera



[Detroit Publishing Company](#). Photograph of French Opera House ca. 1900 (Public Domain)

Objectives

Overview

Students will learn about the history of French and Italian opera in New Orleans and learn about Giuseppe Verdi's *La forza del destino*.

Time frame: 30 minutes

Musical Selection

Overture to *La forza del destino* - Giuseppe Verdi

Standards

Music Standards: MU.K-4.M-HP-E1 (Recognize musical styles representative of various cultures);, MU.K-4.M-HP-E2 (Recognize and discuss the function of music within historical and cultural contexts, including celebrations, ceremonies, and special occasions);

MU.K-4.M-HP-E5 (Recognize great composers and their most significant musical works;),
MU.K-4.M-CA-E2 (Identify simple music events (e.g., dynamic change, meter change,
same/different sections) while listening to a work;), MU.K-4.M-CA-E4 (Identify relationships
among music, other arts, and disciplines outside the arts;)

Correlated Standards: Social Studies, Literature

Preparatory Exercise

Vocabulary

- **Opera:** A drama set to music with costumed actors who sing and act and are accompanied by an orchestra
- **Overture:** The instrumental music that begins an opera. *Overtures* usually incorporate the musical themes of an opera to set the stage.

Historical Connections

The first operas staged in the United States happened at the Theatre de la Rue Saint Pierre in New Orleans, which was built in the French Quarter in 1792. In the 18th and 19th centuries, opera was a form of mass entertainment. One of the largest theaters in New Orleans, the St. Charles Theatre in what is now the Central Business District, seated over 4,000 people. Some of the main things that attracted people to watching operas were the spectacle (with live music, beautiful costumes, and complex sets), the exotic nature (with most operas being set in foreign countries), and the drama (whether operas were comedic or tragic). Italian operas performed in New Orleans were often translated into French, which was still spoken by many citizens through the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries.

Many operas were heard around New Orleans in different ways. There were many theaters in nearly every neighborhood where people could hear operas or music from operas (such as overtures). Groups such as *La Société Philharmonique* (a community orchestra for free people of color) and other bands and orchestras would often play opera overtures, much as people listen to soundtracks from movies now.

Ask your students where they get their entertainment today. Compare and contrast contemporary entertainment with the era of opera.

Material from this section is derived from research compiled by [The Historic New Orleans Collection](#).

Composer Profiles

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)



[Giacomo Brogi](#) (Public Domain)

Giuseppe Verdi (pronounced joo-ZEP-ay VER-dee) was an Italian composer of Romantic-era operas. He was inspired by earlier opera composers such as Donizetti and Bellini who wrote in the *bel canto* ("beautiful singing") style. Many of his arias and choruses from operas are renowned for their tunefulness, such as "Va, pensiero" from *Nabucco*.

Lesson Content

Opera overtures set the mood for the opera much as the soundtrack at the beginning of a movie does. Listen through each excerpt of the overture to get an idea of the themes. Then, if time and attention permits, listen a second time to give students "think" time to bring up the vocabulary or themes presented.

[1: Fate Theme \(0:27 - 0:47\)](#)

The entire brass section begins the overture with three Es in unison. A few measures later, they repeat the gesture. Verdi meant this to signal *fate*, or destiny. Ask students what they think the opera might be about. Will it be a tragedy or a comedy?

[2: Agitato \(Agitated\) Theme \(0:47 - 1:24\)](#)

Related to the brass "fate" theme, this theme indicates that there is something that is unsettled. Listen for this to return.



[3: Andantino \(Slow tempo\) Theme \(1:24 - 2:14\)](#)

The opera centers on the character of Leonora. She is a young noblewoman whose father wants her to marry only the most noble man. Yet, she falls in love with Don Alvaro, who is actually from South America and descended from Indians.

This melody comes from a duet sung by Don Alvaro and Leonora's brother Don Carlos.



4: Andante mosso (Walking speed, with motion) Theme (2:14 - 4:07)

A terrible thing has happened - in an accident, Don Alvaro kills Leonora's father. This melody is an aria that Leonora sings. She prays for mercy, claiming that she will spend the rest of her life atoning for her sin.



5: Allegro brillante (Fast, brilliant) Theme (4:07 - 4:44)

Leonora wears a disguise to run away to a monastery. She is accepted to the hermitage to live apart from other people for the rest of her life. This melody is her song of relief and piety.



Finale (4:44 - 8:10)

The remainder of the overture draws all of these themes together. Remember, the audience has not yet seen the opera. Think about which themes recur. Keep the sheet music excerpts visible. On a white board or chalk board, keep track of how many times each theme comes up. Have students silently hold up 1 through 5 fingers when they hear a theme recur.

Musical excerpts above are drawn from the [website of Gene De Lisa](#).

Enrichment Activities

The Story of La Forza

For older students (8th grade and higher), take a look at a [plot synopsis](#) of *La forza del destino*. It is clearly a tragic opera with many twists and turns. Compare and contrast the plot to *Romeo and Juliet*, which came a few centuries earlier. Which characters and situations are similar? Which are distinct? Does the music in the overture seem to agree with the conclusion of the opera?

Primary Source Documents - Historical New Orleans Theaters

Take a look at selected photos, drawings, and paintings of theaters in New Orleans through [Louisiana Digital Library](#). Here are some links to get you started:

- [Drawing of Theatre St. Charles, ca. 1835](#)
- [Painting of French Opera House, 1859](#)
- [Photo of St. Charles Theater, ca. 1864](#)
- [Undated photo of crowds in French Opera House](#)

Do some exploring on your own (either as a class or with a class set of computers) using search terms related to this topic. Look at "theaters," "opera," or "orchestras."

Fate in Music

Other composers have used the idea of a musical "fate" motif. Compare the beginnings of these pieces as an example:

- Video link: [Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, Mvt. I](#) (0:00 - 7:02)
- Video link: [Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.4, Mvt. I](#) (0:00 - 9:49)
- Video link: [Prelude to Act I of Bizet's Carmen](#) (0:00 - 3:46; [fate motif begins at 2:11](#))

Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra

Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra: Sound Education