

A photograph of the Metropolitan Opera House interior, featuring a grand staircase with red carpeting and a large, ornate chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The architecture is classical, with high ceilings and large windows.

**ACCESS OPERA
EDUCATOR GUIDE**

JOHN ADAMS

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

The Met
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Opera

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

THE WORK

An opera in two acts, sung in English

Music by John Adams

Libretto adapted by John Adams from Shakespeare

With supplementary passages from Plutarch, Virgil, and other classical texts

First performed September 10, 2022, at San Francisco Opera

PRODUCTION

Elkhanah Pulitzer
Production

Mimi Lien
Set Designer

Constance Hoffman
Costume Designer

David Finn
Lighting Designer

Bill Morrison
Projection Designer

Mark Grey
Sound Designer

Annie-B Parson
Choreographer

Lucia Scheckner
Dramaturg

Chris Dumont
Fight Director

Set in the twilight of the Roman Republic, John Adams's *Antony and Cleopatra* brings Shakespeare's legendary lovers to life through hypnotic minimalism and a cinematic ambience inspired by Golden Age Hollywood. Mark Antony—Roman general, military hero, torn between duty and desire—is hopelessly in love with Cleopatra, the bold and brilliant Queen of Egypt. Meanwhile in Rome, Caesar Augustus's political ambitions threaten the balance of power as he becomes emperor, and Rome subsumes Egypt under its dominion. As political and emotional tempers flare, Antony and Cleopatra's affair spirals into obsession, betrayal, and ultimately tragedy.

Adams's music pulses with intimate sensuality, political grandeur, and emotional depth as it portrays the varied passions of the opera's central characters. The composer's unique aesthetic of post-minimalism draws out the play's psychological drama with complex layers of musical material that can swerve from playful to confrontational without a moment's notice. A fluctuating personality in its own right, the orchestra draws on the lush opulence of the Romantic tradition and employs diverse instrumental timbres for maximum dramatic effect. Cleopatra's seductive melodies and authoritative arias complement Antony's conflicted expression, which hovers between the pull of Egypt's lyricism and the declamation of Roman might. In contrast to both, Caesar's calculated and dispassionate rhythmic motives display a relentless offense that mirrors the emperor's rise to power. The result of Adams's savvy and modern adaptation of Shakespeare's original play is an opera whose subject matter is both timeless and urgently contemporary.

This guide is intended to help your students understand the plot's real-life history and John Adams's style of American opera. The information on the following pages is designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of attending a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera.

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The Metropolitan Opera is a vibrant home for the most creative and talented singers, conductors, composers, musicians, stage directors, designers, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers from around the world. Founded in 1883, the Met first opened in a lavish opera house at Broadway and 39th Street that, while beautiful, had significant practical limitations. Almost from the beginning, it was clear that the stage facilities of the original theater could not meet the Met's technical needs. But it was not until the Met joined with other New York institutions in forming Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts that a new home became possible. The new Metropolitan Opera House, which opened at Lincoln Center in September 1966, was a technical marvel of its day, and has remained an architectural landmark ever since.

Each season, the Met stages more than 200 opera performances in New York, welcoming more than 800,000 attendees. In addition to presenting the indispensable masterpieces of history's great composers, performed by the world's finest singers and directed by visionaries from throughout the theatrical world, the Met is committed to ensuring that opera remains a living art form by commissioning and staging vital new works that tell modern stories and engage with the issues of today. The Met is also a leader in new media distribution initiatives, harnessing state-of-the-art technology to bring performances from the Met's iconic stage to millions of people worldwide.

This guide includes a variety of materials on John Adams's *Antony and Cleopatra*

THE SOURCE, THE STORY, AND WHO'S WHO IN ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

A TIMELINE: The historical context of the opera's story and composition

CLOSER LOOKS: Brief articles highlighting an important aspect of John Adams's *Antony and Cleopatra*

TEN ESSENTIAL OPERA TERMS: Musical terminology that will help students analyze and describe Adams's work

STUDENT CRITIQUE: A performance activity highlighting specific aspects of this production and topics for a wrap-up discussion following students' attendance

FURTHER RESOURCES: Recommendations for additional study, both online and in print

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Antony and Cleopatra*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds and will encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.

In particular, this guide offers in-depth introductions to:

- Cleopatra VII and the Ptolemaic Kingdom
- Post-minimalism and American opera
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

Summary

The opera opens in Cleopatra's chambers in Alexandria, where she and Mark Antony, still dazed from the previous evening's feasting, are visited by her attendant. Eros enters with news from Rome. While Antony has been with Cleopatra in Egypt, Pompey has been waging war on Rome. Antony explains to Cleopatra that he is needed in Rome, promising that his heart remains with her, but she is unconvinced. In Rome, Caesar gathers with his staff in his office when Antony and his men arrive. He and Caesar quarrel. Agrippa suggests that Antony marry Caesar's sister Octavia to mend fences and make the two men "brothers." Caesar concedes and presents his sister to Antony. Back in Alexandria, Cleopatra learns of Antony's engagement and becomes enraged.

Antony and Octavia are now married and living in Athens. When Caesar learns that Antony and Cleopatra have reunited—and that Antony has gifted her several Roman territories—he declares war on Antony. Cleopatra provides Antony 60 ships from her own fleet, but Antony loses the battle when she withdraws her ships at a crucial moment. In Alexandria, Antony and Cleopatra replay the devastating defeat when Agrippa enters, presenting Cleopatra with a proposal from Caesar: forgiveness in exchange for abandoning Antony. Cleopatra offers an ambiguous answer, which Agrippa understands as an acceptance. Antony assumes that Cleopatra has sided with Caesar and accuses her of manipulation and betrayal. Cleopatra retreats to her fortified tower.

Antony is alone, watching the sky at twilight. Iras appears and informs him that Cleopatra has taken her own life out of remorse, a lie meant to regain his attention. Antony believes the lie and commits suicide. As he lays dying, Charmian enters and tells him the truth. Cleopatra rushes to Antony's side, and he dies in her arms. Cleopatra and her staff have taken refuge from the Romans in the tower. Agrippa arrives with an official offer of forgiveness by Caesar, but the truth behind the offer is quickly revealed. Roman soldiers seize Cleopatra, and she learns of Caesar's plan to exhibit her defeat in Rome. Cleopatra refuses to be taken by Caesar's army. A peasant arrives with a basket concealing a snake. Cleopatra bids her attendants farewell before coaxing the snake to deliver to her its fatal bite.

THE SOURCE: THE PLAY *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA* BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

As with many of his other operas, John Adams rarely uses a single source for his libretti. *Antony and Cleopatra* follows this model by not only adapting Shakespeare's play, but also combining it with materials from a variety of other sources, including Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry V*, and *Richard II*, as well as Virgil's *Aeneid*. The original play was first entered into the Stationer's Register on May 20, 1608. According to scholars, it is likely that it was written in 1606, around the same time as *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. In 1579, Sir Thomas North published an English translation of Plutarch's *The Live of the Noble Grecians*, including a biography of Mark Antony, which Shakespeare read and likely used as the primary source for his interpretation of the relationships among the play's central characters. John Adams has added to Shakespeare's original play passages and lines from other works by the bard, as well as the ancient Roman poet Virgil. The opera's very first lines, for example, are taken from the opening of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, a play preoccupied with themes of deception and idealism in love and marriage.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I *Cleopatra's bedroom in Alexandria.* Antony is barely recovered from the previous night's festivities. She taunts him about his Roman wife, Fulvia, and needles him repeatedly about "the scarce-bearded Caesar." Realizing he must temporarily return to Rome, Antony affirms his love for her, to which she responds with scorn and self-pity.

In Rome, Caesar voices his disgust for Antony's shirking of duties in Egypt while he, Caesar, has to deal with a mounting insurrection. Antony arrives, greeted by a chilly, annoyed Caesar. A heated argument ensues. Agrippa makes a surprise proposal: that Antony marry Octavia, Caesar's sister, who has recently become a widow. To everyone's astonishment, Antony agrees.

Enobarbus describes the fantastic scene when Antony first met Cleopatra in Cydnus, her glamorous arrival, dressed as Aphrodite, on her barge with its perfumed, purple sails, and her irresistible magnetism.

Back in Alexandria, Cleopatra lounges by the pool, pining away theatrically for Antony. Eros arrives with news of Antony's marriage to Octavia. Cleopatra erupts in a rage. Unwilling to hear the truth, she continues to ask the same question, "Is he married?"

Antony, humiliated by Caesar and forced to move to Athens in order to isolate himself and minimize his influence, resolves to make preparations for war against him. Now officially Antony's wife, Octavia voices her frustration at being caught in the middle of the two men she loves. She must choose between her husband and her brother. Perhaps she already senses Antony will abandon her.

An infuriated Caesar receives the news that Antony and Cleopatra are back together again and behaving in flagrant disregard of Rome, Antony "bestowing" Cyprus, Lydia, and Syria to her as if he had the power to do so. Caesar is interrupted by the surprise appearance of his pregnant sister Octavia, who has fled back to Rome. Insulted now two-fold, Caesar declares war against Antony.



Despite the fact that his navy is cobbled together from inexperienced sailors and inadequate vessels, Antony is exuberant, savoring the return of his long-lost military prowess. His pride is such that he believes he can win any contest. Cleopatra has provided 60 of her own Egyptian warships. The naval battle goes poorly for Antony and, at a critical moment, Cleopatra inexplicably recalls her ships. Worse still, Antony draws back his navy and flees, following hers. The result is catastrophic.

Alone on the deck of his ship, Antony rues his fascination with Cleopatra and blames her as well as himself for the catastrophic outcome of the battle.

ACT II Returned to Egypt, Antony and Cleopatra replay the devastating lost sea battle. She is contrite for having withdrawn her ships from the battle, never having suspected he would follow her. His military power, he says, has been neutered by his love for her. He will now have to send entreaties to the young Caesar, a galling humiliation for Antony, the once celebrated warrior.

In Rome, Caesar reads petitions from both Antony and Cleopatra, both bowing to his authority and begging his mercy. He orders Agrippa to go to Alexandria and convince Cleopatra to abandon Antony.

Agrippa, now in Alexandria, meets alone with Cleopatra to present Caesar's proposal. She responds ambiguously while Agrippa flamboyantly kisses her hand. Antony, having observed this, interrupts and orders Agrippa to be whipped. In a blistering diatribe, Antony unloads on Cleopatra—"the false soul of Egypt"—accusing her of duplicity and lack of faith in him. Charmian urges her queen to flee to safety in the monument (a fortified tower).



Caesar gives a rousing speech to the populace, proclaiming Rome's absolute dominance over the known world. A chorus of "vox populi" hails his ascendance. This signals the end of the Republic and with it, the rise of the Roman Empire and Caesar's transformation to Emperor Augustus.

Cleopatra, returned to her court, bids her maid Iras to go to Antony and inform him that she, Cleopatra, has committed suicide out of remorse. It is a ruse on her part, intended to recapture his attention. But Antony believes this false information and, in despair, orders his loyal servant Eros to help him commit suicide. Eros refuses, killing himself instead, forcing Antony to carry out the act alone. But Antony bumbles it. Charmian arrives, is shocked to see him writhing in agony, and tells him that Cleopatra is indeed still alive. Cleopatra, up to now afraid to leave the security of the monument, is unable to resist coming to Antony. She rushes to his side in a state of extreme remorse and despair. With great effort, the women carry his heavy, nearly lifeless body up the stairs to the safety of the monument. He is failing, and she is beside herself. Antony dies in her arms.

A triumphant Caesar dispatches Maecenas to go to Cleopatra and offer official forgiveness, although his ulterior motive is to exhibit her in Rome as a victory trophy. There is now no hope of escape for Cleopatra. Maecenas arrives in Alexandria with Caesar's patronizing message. But Roman soldiers suddenly seize Cleopatra, who reacts by attempting to stab herself. Maecenas orders them to release her, but not before he admits to Cleopatra that Caesar will indeed parade her in humiliation through the streets of Rome.

Cleopatra commands her women to bring her finest clothes, her crown, and her jewels. A peasant brings a basket that contains several poisonous asps. Each of the women lies back and applies an asp to her body. Cleopatra imagines she hears Antony call.

She dies.

WHO'S WHO IN ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Cleopatra Queen of Egypt	klee-uh-PAH-tra	soprano	The Queen of Egypt and Antony's lover, Cleopatra must balance her loyalty to her country with her affections for the Roman general.
Mark Antony Roman general and Cleopatra's lover	as in English	bass-baritone	A Roman general who shares power with Caesar and Lepidus, Antony is constantly torn between duty and pleasure.
Caesar Roman politician and dictator	SEE-zer	tenor	The nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, Octavius Caesar shares leadership of Rome with Antony and Lepidus before crowning himself emperor.
Octavia Caesar's sister	ock-TAY-vee-uh	mezzo-soprano	Octavia marries Antony following the death of his wife, Fulvia, in an effort to repair the strained relationship between Caesar and Antony.
Charmian Cleopatra's trusted servant and advisor	CHAR-mee-an	mezzo-soprano	Cleopatra's faithful attendant, Charmian is often the bearer of important messages.
Eros An aide to Mark Antony	AIR-os	tenor	A loyal servant to Antony, Eros would rather sacrifice himself than to bring harm to his master.
Enobarbus Mark Antony's closest friend	ee-noh-BAR-bus	bass-baritone	Antony's most devoted friend and advisor, Enobarbus is faithful to Antony until the very end.
Agrippa Roman general and statesman	uh-GRIP-uh	baritone	A fierce military leader and shrewd politician, Agrippa serves as Caesar's advisor and is his most loyal ally.

The Creation of *Antony and Cleopatra*

- 83 BCE** Mark Antony is born in Rome. His father is a politician and his mother is a relative of Julius Caesar.
- 70 BCE** Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator is born. She is a descendant of the Ptolemy I Soter, the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty that rules Egypt.
- 51 BCE** Following the death of her father, Ptolemy XII Auletes, Cleopatra VII ascends to the throne as Queen of Egypt.
- 30 BCE** Cleopatra dies and Egypt falls, becoming part of the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus.
- 1597** An English translation of Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Grecians*, including a biography of Mark Antony, is published.
- 1606** After reading Plutarch, Shakespeare writes his play *Antony and Cleopatra*.
- 1947** John Adams is born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on February 15. His earliest music training is clarinet lessons with his father, and he begins composing at age ten.
- 1965** Adams attends Harvard University, where he receives both bachelor's and master's degrees in music. The Harvard composition faculty is deeply invested in the musical modernism currently in vogue in Europe, and Adams initially embraces the sharp dissonances and complex forms of the style.
- 1971** Adams moves to San Francisco to teach at the city's music conservatory. As he gets to know the city's thriving new music scene, Adams broadens his compositional palette to include minimalism and other distinctly American styles and forms.
- 1978** Adams is hired by the San Francisco Symphony to serve as their advisor on new music. He founds the orchestra's New and Unusual Music series and soon becomes one of the United States's most important voices for contemporary classical music.
- 1983** Adams and frequent collaborator Peter Sellars begin working on an opera based on Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China. *Nixon in China*, which features a libretto by Alice Goodman and is directed by Sellars, premieres at Houston Grand Opera in 1987. The opera receives Emmy and Grammy awards, and its recording is named one of the "ten most important records of the decade" by *Time*.

- 1989** The Adams–Sellars–Goodman collaboration continues with *The Death of Klinghoffer*, an opera about the hijacking of a cruise liner in 1969 by members of the Palestine Liberation Front. Upon its premiere in 1991, the work immediately sparks furious backlash, and the resulting controversy pushes Adams to take a long break from opera.
- 2000** Adams’s opera *El Niño* premieres at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris in a production directed by Sellars.
- 2005** Adams’s opera *Doctor Atomic*, about theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and the development of the atomic bomb and with a libretto by Sellars, premieres on October 1 at San Francisco Opera.
- 2006** Adams’s opera *A Flowering Tree*, based on an Indian folktale with a libretto by Adams and Sellars, premieres in Vienna.
- 2008** *Doctor Atomic* has its Metropolitan Opera premiere.
- 2014** *The Death of Klinghoffer* receives its Metropolitan Opera premiere, but the *Live in HD* transmission of the opera is canceled.
- 2017** Adams’s opera *Girls of the Golden West*, about the California Gold Rush and with a libretto by Sellars, premieres at San Francisco Opera.
- 2018** A chamber reduction of *El Niño* titled “Nativity Reconsidered,” arranged by soprano Julia Bullock, is performed in a concert at the Met Cloisters in New York City.
- 2020** *Antony and Cleopatra* is commissioned by San Francisco Opera, Liceu Opera Barcelona, and the Metropolitan Opera in celebration of the centennial of San Francisco Opera.
- 2022** *Antony and Cleopatra* premieres at San Francisco Opera.
- 2023** *Antony and Cleopatra* receives its European Premiere in Barcelona.
- 2024** *El Niño* has its Met premiere in a new production directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz.
- 2025** *Antony and Cleopatra* premieres at the Met.

Ancient States: Cleopatra VII and the Ptolemaic Kingdom

Cleopatra, the famous Queen of Egypt at the center of Adams's opera, was the last active Ptolemaic pharaoh of Egypt before the country became a province of the Roman Empire. The Ptolemaic Kingdom was an ancient Greek regime based in Egypt from 305 BCE until 30 BCE. The empire's namesake, Macedonian general Ptolemy I Soter, was a companion of Alexander the Great, who conquered Persian control of Egypt in 332 BCE. Ptolemy and his descendants then ruled Egyptian lands for three centuries. In an attempt to legitimize their rule, members of the Ptolemaic dynasty used the Egyptian title of pharaoh, donned Egyptian dress, and adopted Egyptian religious customs, in particular the marrying of one's siblings.

Despite mostly superficial efforts to absorb Egyptian culture, Ptolemaic Egypt was among the wealthiest and most powerful of Alexander the Great's conquests, and the kingdom was a leading example of ancient Greek civilization. A large collection of well-preserved papyri and earthenware vessels, which include depictions of contemporary life, has provided details about the society. The pharaohs lived in Alexandria, where they used their wealth to construct monuments such as the Great Library and the Lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, which also include the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus in present-day Turkey. While all the male rulers of the dynasty took the name Ptolemy, many of the female rulers took the name Cleopatra, meaning "glory of her father." The seventh and final Cleopatra was the last ruler of the dynasty and the figure best known today by the name. Many of the female rulers often ruled jointly with their spouses, who were also typically their brothers. Only Cleopatra II, Berenice III, and Berenice IV officially ruled alone, though Cleopatra VII effectively did so, as documents indicate that following the death of her father, Ptolemy XII, she rejected co-rule with her brother, Ptolemy XIII.

Cleopatra VII inherited the throne at just 18 years of age, and—as was the tradition for Macedonian rulers—she was an absolute monarch, serving as the sole civil and chief religious authority over her kingdom. Her rule was marked by a number of unique and impressive feats. She was extremely intelligent and has been credited with authoring various treatises on topics from coinage to cosmetics. She was the first Ptolemaic ruler known to have learned the Egyptian language, unlike her ancestors who spoke only Latin and ancient Greek. Her interest in the Egyptian language was part of a broader effort to revive and preserve Egyptian identity, which she promoted through her mode of dress and self-presentation. Ruling at the time of the rise of the Roman Empire, Cleopatra retained Egyptian sovereignty for as long as she did thanks to her shrewd political instincts, including her ability to manipulate and capitalize on her relationships with Roman leaders, such as Mark Antony and Julius Caesar.

An 18th-century depiction of Cleopatra's suicide



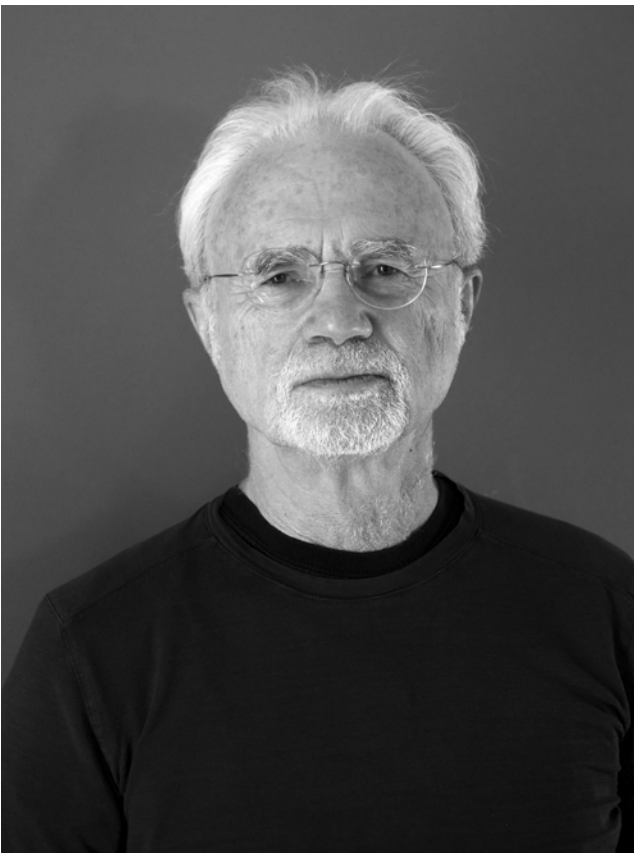
Post-Minimalism and American Opera

Composer John Adams has written nine operas, making him one of the most prolific American contributors to the form. Adams's early operas were unique in that they were among the first to deal with contemporary American politics. These include his first opera *Nixon in China*, about President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to the People's Republic of China, and later *Doctor Atomic*, which told the story of American physicist Robert Oppenheimer's creation of the atomic bomb. Even his operas that are not explicitly American in subject matter retain an "American" character. *El Niño*, for example, uses multilingual texts from Spanish and English sources, the two most widely spoken languages in the contemporary United States. The title also references not just the Christ child, but also the extreme weather event of the same name. In 1997, just two years before the composition of the opera, an especially intense El Niño storm ravaged California, where Adams lives.

The composer's musical language also has American roots. Adams often refers to the importance of his American surroundings and upbringing to his artistic formation, in particular the pulsating rhythms and emotional directness of American popular music. According to the composer, he draws from a wide

range of influences, from classical music to contemporary popular genres such as jazz and soul, and most of his compositions are a celebration of American culture. Indeed, his works mirror a life spent amid American music making. Raised in New England, the composer learned the clarinet from his father and played in marching bands and community orchestras as an adolescent. At the age of ten, he began composing his own music. While a student at Harvard, Adams regularly attended performances of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

In reaction to the difficult, academic music that was promoted during Adams's formal studies, his early works were associated with an American compositional movement called minimalism. Minimalist music is constructed from the static repetition of certain melodic patterns and characterized by a regular pulse. It also makes use of tonal harmonies, creating consonant sounds that are generally pleasant to the ear. Although minimalist composers such as Philip Glass have also written operas, Adams emphasizes the necessity of dramatic action, emotional dynamism, and narrative development, thereby moving beyond the static nature of pure minimalism. As a result, Adams is often considered a post-minimalist composer, and he borrows freely from various sources of musical inspiration. The sense of forward movement essential to minimalism, however, is always at the heart of his music and, according to the composer, is also part of the foundation of American musical identity.



Encouraging Student Response in Attending the Final Dress Rehearsal

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1d

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Watching and listening to a performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. This performance activity will help students analyze different aspects of the experience, engage critically with the performance, and express their views in a respectful and supported environment.

The enclosed performance activity is called “Opera Review: *Antony and Cleopatra*.” The handout for this activity, available at the back of this guide, will invite students to think of themselves as opera critics, taking notes on what they see and hear during the performance and critiquing each scene on a five-star scale. Students should bring this activity sheet to the final dress rehearsal and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. When they return to class, students can use their “Opera Review” sheets as they review and discuss their experience.

DISCUSSION

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the final dress rehearsal. What did they like? What didn't they? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? What would they have done differently?

A central aspect of *Antony and Cleopatra* is the way it treats complex social, romantic, and political relationships among characters with big personalities. Shakespeare's play includes rivalries and feuds, marriages and affairs, lies and deceit, not to mention full-on military conflicts—all amplified by Adams's signature musical style. Students might enjoy discussing these aspects of the opera, especially if they have engaged with the composer's Shakespearean source material. You may prompt them with the following questions:

- In what ways do the characters of the opera transcend their time and place? Are the relationships at the center of this story still relevant?
- What role does paranoia and deception play in the outcome of the opera?
- The two lovers make some surprising decisions: Why do you think Antony agrees to marry Octavia? Why does Cleopatra withdraw her fleet at a crucial moment during the Battle of Actium?
- How do you think the music reflects the personalities of each of the main characters: Antony, Cleopatra, and Caesar?

IN PRINT

May, Thomas. *The John Adams Reader: Essential Writings on an American Composer*. Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus, 2006.

A collection of essays on composer John Adams, particular compositions, and his composing style written by prominent musicologists, music critics, and performers of Adams's work.

Adams, John. *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*. New York: Picador, 2009.

An autobiographical chronicle of Adams's life, beginning with childhood, exploring his compositional training, style and creative process.

ONLINE

Alex Ross, "John Adams Captures the Music of Shakespeare."

The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/10/03/john-adams-captures-the-music-of-shakespeare-antony-and-cleopatra>

Alex Ross reviews and explores the premiere of Adams's opera in San Francisco.

Michael Witmore. "John Adams Gives *Antony and Cleopatra* the Operatic Treatment."

Shakespeare Unlimited Podcast. <https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/john-adams-antony-cleopatra-opera/>

An interview with the composer about his approach to Shakespeare's language and text.

Aria

A song for solo voice accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting musically on his or her emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition.

Chorus

A section of an opera in which a large group of singers performs together, typically with orchestral accompaniment. Most choruses include at least four different vocal lines, in registers from low to high, with multiple singers per part. The singers are typically from a particular group of people who play a certain role on stage—soldiers, peasants, prisoners, and so on. Choruses may offer a moral, comment on the plot, or participate in the dramatic action.

Ensemble

A musical piece for two or more soloists, accompanied by orchestra. Types of ensembles include duets (for two soloists), trios (for three soloists), and quartets (for four soloists). Sometimes singers will respond directly to one another during an ensemble. At other times, singers will each sing to themselves as if the other singers were not on stage. In ensembles, multiple characters may simultaneously express very different emotions from one another.

Score

The complete musical notation for a piece, the score includes notated lines for all of the different instrumental and vocal parts that together constitute a musical composition. In an opera orchestra, the conductor follows the score during rehearsals and performances, while each performer follows his or her individual part.

Libretto

The text of an opera, including all the words that are said or sung by performers. Until the early 18th century, a composer would frequently set music to a preexisting libretto, and any given libretto could thus be set to music multiple times by different composers. During the 18th and 19th centuries, collaboration between the author of the libretto, known as the librettist, and the composer became more frequent. Some opera composers, most notably Richard Wagner, are known for writing their own text.

Melody

A succession of pitches that form an understandable unit. The melody of a piece consists of the tune that a listener can hum or sing. During arias, the singer will usually sing the main melody, though other instruments may play parts of the melody. Sometimes, such as during ensembles, multiple melodies can occur simultaneously.

Minimalism

A style of composition marked by a purposefully simplified melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic language. It often features lengthy repetitions and ostinatos of simple musical gestures against a static harmonic (typically diatonic) background. As a musical movement, minimalism first arose in the 1960s as a reaction against the complex atonality and fragmented musical forms of the mid-20th century. The foremost minimalist composers are Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley, although not all composers whose work is described as “minimalist” embrace the term.

Orchestration

An aspect of composition, orchestration is the art of choosing which instruments should play each part of a musical work. Successful orchestration requires both practical considerations (for instance, that a given melody is within an instrument’s range) and more creative elements (for instance, whether an instrument’s unique timbre is suited to the emotions or ideas that a melody needs to express).

Theme and motive

Themes are the melodic ideas that are musical building blocks for a piece. A theme is often recognizable as a distinct tune and may reappear in its original form or in altered form throughout the piece. A motive (or motif) is a brief musical idea that recurs throughout a musical work. Motives can be based on a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic component, and their repetition makes them recognizable to the listener. In opera, musical motives are often symbolically associated with specific characters or dramatic ideas.

Tonality

The arrangement of different pitches into hierarchical relationships that dictate the musical harmonies and allow listeners to anticipate a musical work’s direction. Tonality describes the relationships of pitches that allow us to hear moments of tension and resolution. Works can be tonal, meaning the music has a clear tonal center (usually based on a major or minor scale), or atonal, where the pitches are arranged freely and with no hierarchy.

Antony and Cleopatra

Performance date:

Reviewed by:

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Antony and Cleopatra*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design, and rate each scene. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about the opera and this performance at the Met!

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
As Antony and Cleopatra recover from a night of festivities, Eros arrives with news calling Antony back to Rome.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
In Rome, Antony and Caesar quarrel. Agrippa suggests that Antony marry Caesar's sister to mend their rift.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Cleopatra learns of Antony's marriage to Octavia.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Octavia, now pregnant, bemoans being caught between two men she loves: her brother and her husband.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
When Caesar learns that Antony and Cleopatra have reunited, he vows war against Antony.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
<p>Antony attacks Caesar's forces with Cleopatra's help, but she withdraws her fleet at a crucial moment and the battle ends in catastrophe.</p> <p>MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:</p>	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
<p>Antony and Cleopatra come to terms with Antony's catastrophic defeat.</p> <p>MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:</p>	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
<p>Agrippa presents a proposal from Caesar to Cleopatra. Her ambiguous response leads Antony to fly into a jealous rage, and she retreats to an isolated tower.</p> <p>MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:</p>	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
<p>Caesar gives a rousing victory speech to the populace and ascends to the position of Emperor Augustus.</p> <p>MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:</p>	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
<p>Antony learns that Cleopatra is dead and takes his own life, before realizing that she is still alive. Cleopatra rushes to her dying lover, filled with remorse and despair.</p> <p>MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:</p>	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
<p>Caesar sends Cleopatra an offer of forgiveness, and she once again takes refuge in the tower where she is detained by Roman soldiers.</p> <p>MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:</p>	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
<p>A peasant brings Cleopatra a basket concealing an asp, and she provokes the snake's venomous bite.</p> <p>MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:</p>	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆