

**LYING, CHEATING, MURDER ... THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE MOTHERLY** love. The Roman noblewoman Agrippina was a helicopter parent for the ages. Glamorous, conniving, and desperate to see her son crowned emperor, she seduced, swindled, or simply dispatched anyone who stood in her way, and within a few years of her death, she had already become the stuff of legend. Roman writers wove endlessly colorful yarns about her, sprinkling her real-life exploits with deliciously dark details as readily as Agrippina (supposedly) sprinkled her enemies' entrees with poison. All in all, her life could be boiled down to a single question: What *wouldn't* you do for power?

Yet the composer George Frideric Handel and his librettist, Vincenzo Grimaldi, saw in Agrippina's story much more than ruthlessness and cruelty: Amid the backstabbing and betrayal, they found the seeds of a story that could be very funny, too. Embracing the many competing romances at the story's heart, they crafted a work that is as much soap opera as opera, as much sardonic farce as scorching social critique. "It is an intelligent piece," director Sir David McVicar observes. "It is a scathing piece. It is very funny. And it tells a universal story, which is: People in high office often behave very, very badly to get there." In order to highlight the story's universality, McVicar has transported *Agrippina* from the first century to the twenty-first. As it turns out, the modern Roman Empire would be instantly recognizable, wickedly funny, and terrifyingly real.

This guide presents *Agrippina* as a window onto three different historical times and places: imperial Rome (where the story takes place), 18th-century Venice (where the opera was written), and the present day (when McVicar's production is set). The materials on the following pages include a historical introduction to Agrippina and her family, a musical introduction to Baroque opera, biographical information on Handel and his collaborators, and classroom activities designed to bring *Agrippina*'s music and story to life. By delving into the opera's music, poetry, and drama, this guide will forge interdisciplinary classroom connections, inspire critical thinking, and help students investigate how these three eras differ—and how they might be very much the same.

### THE WORK: AGRIPPINA

An opera in three acts, sung in Italian

Music by George Frideric Handel

Libretto by Vincenzo Grimaldi

First performed December 26, 1709,  
at the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo,  
Venice, Italy

### PRODUCTION

Harry Bicket, Conductor

Sir David McVicar, Production

John Macfarlane, Set and Costume  
Designer

Paule Constable, Lighting Designer

Andrew George, Choreographer

### STARRING

Brenda Rae  
POPPEA

Joyce DiDonato  
AGRIPPINA

Kate Lindsey  
NERONE

Iestyn Davies  
OTTONE

Matthew Rose  
CLAUDIO

This production was originally created by the  
Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie / De Munt Brussels  
and adapted by the Metropolitan Opera

Production a gift of Dunard Fund USA

*Agrippina*, HWV 6, edited for the Hallische Händel-  
Ausgabe by John E. Sawyer. Used by arrangement  
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RAE

DiDONATO

LINDSEY

DAVIES

ROSE

This guide includes five sections:

- **THE OPERA'S PLOT AND CREATION:** The source, the story, who's who in *Agrippina*, and a timeline with key dates for Handel's work
- **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:** Two activities designed to align with and support various Common Core Standard strands used in ELA, History / Social Studies, and Music curricula
- **PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES:** Two activities to be used during the *Live in HD* transmission
- **POST-SHOW DISCUSSION:** A wrap-up activity that will help students reflect on the transmission, express their opinions about the performance, and integrate the *Live in HD* experience into their understanding of the arts and humanities more broadly
- **STUDENT RESOURCE PAGES:** Classroom-ready worksheets supporting the activities in the guide

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Agrippina*, 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 seeks to 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 will offer in-depth introductions to:

- The historical figures of Agrippina, Claudius, and Nero, and the ancient sources through which we know about their lives and deeds
- The structure and style of Baroque opera
- The political motivations behind both Vincenzo Grimani's libretto and David McVicar's staging
- 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:** When the Roman empress Agrippina hears that her husband, the emperor Claudio, has died in a shipwreck, she is overjoyed. Now she can finally make Nerone, her son from a previous marriage, Rome's new emperor. There's just one catch: Claudio isn't actually dead. Although his ship did, indeed, sink, Claudio was pulled from the stormy sea by a soldier named Ottone—and in recognition of this heroic act, Claudio has promised to make Ottone emperor of Rome. Suddenly, Nerone seems farther than ever from the throne.

Agrippina is undaunted by this setback. She knows that Claudio and Ottone are both in love with a beautiful noblewoman named Poppea, and she quickly concocts a scheme that will pit the two men against each other until they are both ruined. At first, Claudio, Ottone, and Poppea all fall for Agrippina's lies. But soon Poppea begins to question the stories Agrippina is telling her, and as Poppea uncovers Agrippina's wicked plot, she figures out a way not only to get even but also to ensure a "happily ever after" ending for everyone concerned.

**THE SOURCE: AN ORIGINAL LIBRETTO BY VINCENZO GRIMANI, LOOSELY BASED ON TACITUS'S *ANNALS OF IMPERIAL ROME*** The Roman writer and politician Tacitus was born around 56 CE, during the reign of Emperor Nero, and died sometime after 117, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. In between, he enjoyed a prestigious political career with appointments across the sprawling Roman empire. His writings on Roman history thus offer modern scholars a remarkable resource: a contemporary perspective on first-century Roman politics by somebody intimately involved in the major events of the day. Tacitus's *Histories*, a monumental work that originally covered the years 68 CE through 96 CE, has mostly been lost; only the years 68 and 69 survive. By contrast, his *Annals of Imperial Rome*, which stretch from 4 CE (during the reign of Rome's first emperor, Augustus) to 68 CE (the date of Nero's death), have come down to modern readers almost completely intact. As such, the exquisitely detailed *Annals*—the name comes from *annus*, the Latin word for "year"—are the primary historical record of Agrippina's dubious exploits.

The image of Agrippina that emerges from the *Annals* is that of a depraved, vindictive, and power-hungry woman. According to Tacitus, she poisoned her stepson, her second and third husbands, and one of Nero's potential rivals; forced a Roman consul to commit suicide; and had the emperor Caligula's ex-wife executed when it looked like Claudius might marry her instead of Agrippina. As proof of Agrippina's no-holds-barred attitude toward getting and keeping power, Tacitus also outlined her romantic conquests, which included her uncle (and later husband) Claudius, her late sister's husband, and her son, Nero.

Baroque opera often featured tales and figures from antiquity, especially ancient Greece and Rome, and Agrippina and Nero's delightfully depraved story was an



## VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range; some opera boasts a seventh voice type, the countertenor, as well:

### SOPRANO

the highest voice type, normally possessed only by women and boys

### MEZZO-SOPRANO

the voice type lying below the soprano and above the contralto; the term comes from the Italian word “mezzo,” meaning “middle”

### COUNTERTENOR

a male voice type with a range comparable to that of the female mezzo-soprano, achieved by singing in the falsetto (or “head voice”) range

### CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

### TENOR

the highest standard voice type in adult males

### BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

### BASS

the lowest voice type

audience favorite almost from the genre’s inception. In 1643, only six years after the world’s first public opera performance, Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Incoronazione di Poppea* detailed Nero’s disastrous extramarital affair with the noblewoman Poppaea Sabina. By the time Handel and Grimani set about writing *Agrippina*, more than a dozen other operas about Agrippina and Nero had already been composed—including Handel’s own German-language opera *Nero*, from 1705.

The story’s appeal for librettist Vincenzo Grimani was thus obvious: As the owner of Venice’s San Giovanni Grisostomo theater, where *Agrippina* premiered, Grimani had a vested financial interest in the opera’s success. Yet there may have been more to Grimani’s decision to set this salacious Roman story than pure financial gain. In addition to running a theater, Grimani was an ambassador to the Habsburg Empire, a political powerhouse centered in Vienna and a longstanding enemy of the Papal States, and Grimani took no pains to disguise his antipathy toward Pope Clement XI. It has therefore been suggested that *Agrippina*, an opera about political corruption in ancient Rome, was a barely disguised stab at the pope and his entourage in the 18th-century incarnation of that same city.

**ACT I:** *The imperial palace in ancient Rome.* Agrippina sits in her dressing room holding a letter. The message is tragic—Agrippina’s husband, the Roman emperor Claudio, has died in a shipwreck—but Agrippina is bursting with joy: Now she has a chance to make Nerone, her son from a previous marriage, the emperor of Rome. She already has a plan to secure Nerone the crown, but she warns him that he must follow her instructions to the letter. Nerone promises to do anything she says.

Agrippina knows that any emperor will need support from Rome’s politicians, so she approaches the courtier Pallante, slyly tells him about Claudio’s death, and says she will marry him if he nominates Nerone as emperor. Pallante happily agrees. Next, Agrippina approaches the courtier Narciso and makes him a similar offer, promising to marry him if he supports Nerone’s bid for the throne. Narciso, too, agrees. Agrippina is now engaged to two different men, but she has no intention of marrying either of them. In fact, she’ll lie to anyone if it means helping her son.

*The Capitoline hill.* Outside the Capitol (the government building in Rome), Nerone distributes money to the city’s poor. Pallante and Narciso praise his generosity and, declaring that his kindness qualifies him to lead Rome, nominate him for emperor. But just as Agrippina is about to place the crown on Nerone’s head, trumpets are heard, and Claudio’s servant, Lesbo, arrives with shocking news: Claudio is alive! Although his ship did, indeed, sink, Claudio was saved from drowning by the soldier Ottone. Obviously, this means that Nerone can’t become emperor, which annoys Agrippina. But an even greater shock is still to come, when the heroic Ottone enters and announces that Claudio has decided to reward his bravery by naming him Rome’s next emperor.

Agrippina is dumbstruck, but she hides her fury well—so well, in fact, that Ottone pulls her aside and tells her a secret: He is in love with the noblewoman Poppea. Agrippina immediately sees a new opportunity for mischief because she knows that someone else is also in love with Poppea: her husband, the emperor, Claudio.

*Poppea's house.* Poppea eagerly awaits Ottone's return. Although Claudio and Nerone have both declared they love her, Poppea loves only the humble soldier Ottone. Soon, there is a knock at the door. Agrippina enters. She says that Ottone has decided to trade Poppea for political power, offering to let Claudio have her if he (Ottone) can be emperor. Agrippina's story is a lie, but Poppea believes her, and she even takes Agrippina's advice on how to deal with Ottone and Claudio. That evening, when Claudio visits Poppea, she sends him away, explaining (as Agrippina instructed) that Ottone has ordered her never to see him again. Furious, Claudio declares he will never let Ottone be emperor—which, of course, is exactly what Agrippina wants.

**ACT II:** *The Capitoline hill.* Agrippina, Poppea, Ottone, and Nerone have gathered to celebrate Claudio's return to Rome. Claudio reflects that the whole world is falling to its knees before Rome's might and imagines a bright future for his empire. Hearing this, Ottone asks Claudio about his promise to make him emperor. Claudio flies into a rage and accuses Ottone of treachery. Ottone has no idea what Claudio is talking about, and he feels hurt and confused.



Poppea, meanwhile, still can't understand why Ottone would betray her. She is sure there is more to the situation than meets the eye, so when she sees Ottone approaching, she decides to find out the truth. Pretending to be asleep, she begins murmuring about how Ottone traded her for the crown of Rome. Ottone can't believe his ears. He asks Poppea where she heard such vile lies. Together, they realize that Agrippina has tricked everyone, and they figure out that she must be doing it to put Nerone on the throne. Poppea promises to give Agrippina a taste of her own medicine and clear Ottone's name. She soon comes up with a plan, and when Claudio and Nerone each express a desire to see her that evening, she invites them both to visit her at home.

Agrippina realizes that Poppea has stopped following her orders, but she thinks she still has three people—Claudio, Pallante, and Narciso—under her control. One by one, she approaches them and asks them to kill Ottone. Pallante and Narciso have already figured out that Agrippina tricked them, and they avoid answering, but Claudio readily agrees.

**ACT III:** *Poppea's house.* Nerone arrives at Poppea's house looking forward to their tryst, but Poppea says she is worried about them being found together and forces Nerone to hide in her closet. A few minutes later, Claudio shows up. Instead of welcoming him, Poppea asks why he hasn't punished the person who tried to keep them apart. Claudio says he did punish Ottone, but Poppea, feigning surprise, replies that it wasn't Ottone demanding her love—it was Nerone. As proof, she opens the closet door to reveal Claudio's stepson.

*The imperial palace.* Nerone flees Poppea's house and runs to his mother for sympathy. Agrippina, however, is furious when she hears how Nerone allowed his crush on Poppea to jeopardize their plans. Nerone promises to forget Poppea and focus instead on the throne.

Claudio, meanwhile, wonders what is really going on. He knows someone is lying to him, but is it Poppea? Nerone? Ottone? Or could it be Agrippina? Soon he bumps into Narciso and Pallante, who tell him how Agrippina attempted to use the report of Claudio's death to get Nerone crowned emperor. Claudio finally recognizes Agrippina's treachery. He is understandably angry, but Agrippina tells him that if he truly wants to have a peaceful empire, he must banish anger from his own heart.

Claudio apologizes to Ottone and declares that Ottone will be emperor and Nerone will marry Poppea. No one is happy with this solution. Ottone explains that he has no interest in becoming emperor; all he wants is Poppea. Claudio finally understands that love is more important to Ottone than power, while Nerone cares only for the throne, so he issues a new decree: Poppea will marry Ottone, and Nerone will be the new emperor of Rome.



## WHO'S WHO IN AGRIPPINA

CHARACTER		PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Agrippina	Claudio's wife and Nerone's mother	ah-greep-PEE-nah	mezzo-soprano	Agrippina is desperate to get her son crowned emperor—whatever it takes.
Claudio (Claudius)	Emperor of Rome, married to Agrippina but in love with Poppea	KLOW*-dee-yoh *rhymes with "plow"	bass	Claudio may be the most powerful person in the Roman empire, but when it comes to trickery and cleverness, he is no match for his wife, Agrippina.
Nerone (Nero)	Agrippina's son from a previous marriage, in love with Poppea	neh-ROH-nay	countertenor / mezzo-soprano	Although his mother is empress, Nerone is not the son of the emperor and thus has no real claim to the throne. But that won't keep him from trying ...
Ottone (Otho)	A soldier, in love with Poppea	oht-TOH-nay	countertenor	A humble yet heroic soldier, Ottone wants nothing more than to marry his beloved Poppea. But when he accidentally gets on Agrippina's bad side, it will take everything in his and Poppea's power to find their "happily ever after" ending.
Poppea (Poppaea)	A noblewoman, in love with Ottone	pop-PAY-yuh	soprano	Poppea is beautiful and clever. Even though she initially falls for Agrippina's lies, she soon finds a way to get even and get her man.
Pallante (Pallas)	Courtiers	pahl-LAHN-tay	bass	Agrippina thinks she can easily manipulate Pallante and Narciso and use them to help make Nerone emperor.
Narciso (Narcissus)		nahr-CHEE-zoh	countertenor	





**1685** George Frideric Handel is born on February 23 in Halle, a city in central Germany. His father, a physician at the court of Saxony, hopes Handel will grow up to be a lawyer and actively discourages his son's interest in music. Little Handel, however, is not deterred: According to an early biography, he secretly practices harpsichord in the attic.

**c. 1694** The Duke of Saxony hears Handel, age nine, playing organ, and he convinces Handel's father to procure a musical education for the remarkably talented child.

**1702** Handel enrolls in law school at the University of Halle, though he still hopes to pursue a career in music, and the provincial Halle will soon prove too small for his artistic needs. Around this time, Handel visits Berlin, where he likely meets two Italian opera composers working at the Prussian court.

**1703** Handel moves to Hamburg, one of the major musical centers in northern Germany. He gets a job as a violinist and continuo player at the Hamburg Opera, the only "public" opera (i.e., that operates outside of a court setting) in Germany.

**1705** On January 8, Handel's first opera, *Almira*, receives its premiere at the Hamburg Opera. Less than seven weeks later, on February 25, his second opera, *Nero*, debuts there, as well. In contrast to the operas he will write later in life, both *Almira* and *Nero* are in German.

**1706** Handel travels to Italy. He soon takes up residence in Rome, where he enjoys the patronage of the nobility and clergy, as well as collaborations with many of the city's most famous musicians. Although Italy is the operatic capital of Europe, Handel writes no operas while in Rome, since opera performances have been banned by the pope. He does, however, compose a variety of sacred and secular works, many of which feature the same recitative-aria structure he will employ in his operas.

**1707** Handel's first Italian opera, *Rodrigo*, premieres in Florence.

**1708** In January, the Hamburg Opera performs two more of Handel's German-language operas. Handel likely returns to Hamburg for the occasion, although Italy remains his primary country of residence.





**1709** Handel travels to Venice. The birthplace of public opera and one of Europe's wealthiest cities, Venice is the ideal location for a young composer seeking to make his name in the world of opera.

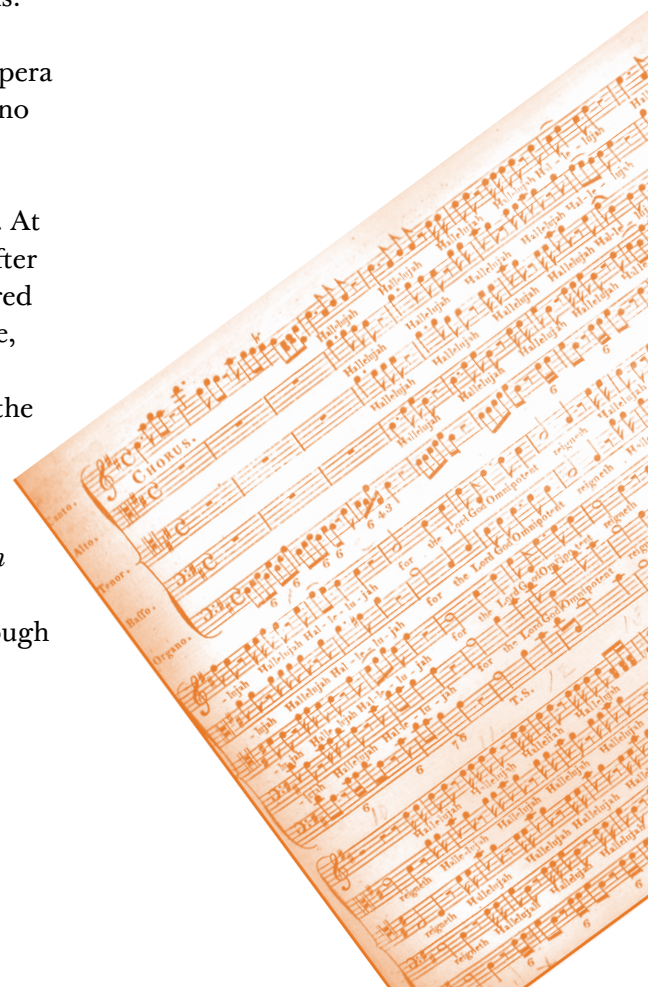
On December 26, *Agrippina* premieres at Venice's San Giovanni Grisostomo theater. The inaugural opera of the carnival season, it is an instant hit. According to Handel's first biographer, John Mainwaring, *Agrippina* enjoys 27 consecutive nights of performances—even though two other opera theaters are also open at the same time—and the auditorium is filled with shouts of “Viva il caro Sassone!” [“Long live the dear Saxon!”], a reference to Handel's place of birth.

**1710** Handel returns to Germany to take up a position as music director at the court of the Elector of Hannover.

**1711** Handel's newest opera, *Rinaldo*, premieres in London to wild acclaim. Italian opera has been popular in London since around 1705, but most of these performances have been “pastiches,” operas cobbled together from a variety of pre-existing works. *Rinaldo*, by contrast, is a newly composed opera by a single composer, and it establishes Handel as the king of Italian opera in London. Over the next three decades, Handel will write no fewer than 38 operas for the London stage.

**1742** On April 13, Handel's oratorio *Messiah* premieres in Dublin. At this time, most music is composed for a specific occasion; after the intended performance, the composition is typically retired and never heard again. (The works of J.S. Bach, for instance, will languish in obscurity for nearly a century between the composer's death in 1750 and their revival in the middle of the 19th century.) *Messiah*, by contrast, is never retired. From 1743 on, Handel will conduct yearly charity performances of the work in London to great acclaim, and even after Handel's death, the oratorio is regularly performed. *Messiah* thus marks the first piece of classical music to remain in the performing repertoire from the time of its composition through the present day.

**1759** Handel dies on April 14, nine days after conducting his last performance of *Messiah*.



## Arias of Influence: How Agrippina Achieves Her Ambitions Through Music

### Music

#### IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the reproducible resources available at the back of this guide entitled *Arias of Influence*, as well as the audio selections from *Agrippina* available online or on the accompanying CD. You will also need copies of the synopsis (available in this guide) and colored pencils.

#### CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Art, History, English / Language Arts, Drama, Ethics

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To strengthen students' comprehension of *Agrippina's* characters and story
- To deepen students' understanding of how composers can portray character through music
- To expand students' knowledge of operatic forms (recitative, da capo aria, etc.)
- To extend students' ability to describe, discuss, and depict music through verbal, visual, and dramatic expression

How does an opera composer tell a story with music? For every scene or monologue in Vincenzo Grimani's libretto (or script) for *Agrippina*, composer George Frideric Handel had to make choices about whether the music would keep the story moving or stop to focus on one idea or emotion. Throughout *Agrippina*, we hear scenes in which Handel's music briskly propels the plot forward, with characters singing their dialogue in speech-like rhythms; we call the music in these sections *recitative*. In between these scenes of recitative, however, we hear extended meditations on a few lines of text, longer pieces in which a single character's thoughts are stretched and heightened, the same words repeating on an ever-expanding melody; we call this an *aria*. This activity will introduce students to these classic techniques of operatic text-setting, focusing on a specific Baroque aria structure called the *da capo* aria. By completing this activity, students will gain an understanding of the traditional structure of the da capo aria (and its relationship to recitative) and develop insight into how Handel utilizes these structures in *Agrippina* to convey the personality and intentions of the title character.

Students will:

- Review the plot of Act 1 of *Agrippina* and act out a scene between Agrippina and Poppea
- Analyze and discuss how recitative and the da capo aria allow for dramatic development of character
- Create a color map illustrating the structure of a da capo aria from *Agrippina*
- Envision a staging for a scene in *Agrippina* that would complement and highlight the music's development of character

#### GUIDE TO AUDIO CLIPS FOR THIS ACTIVITY

For this activity, there are six audio selections from *Agrippina*, available online or on the accompanying CD:

**TRACK 1:** "Pur al fin se n'andò" (recitative)

**TRACK 2:** "Non ho cor che per amarti," complete aria

**TRACK 3:** "Non ho cor che per amarti," instrumental introduction

**TRACK 4:** "Non ho cor che per amarti," B section ("Con sincero e puro affetto")

**TRACK 5:** "Non ho cor che per amarti," recapitulation of the A section

**TRACK 6:** "Pensieri, voi mi tormentate"



## COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND AGRIPPINA

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6

Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

## STEPS

In this activity, students will reimagine the text and music of a scene from *Agrippina* visually and dramatically. As they discover the musical structures of Handelian opera, students will create a visual representation of an aria, imagine their own staging of a scene from the opera, and use careful listening skills to identify how Handel's compositional techniques help audiences understand the character of Agrippina.

**STEP 1:** To launch this activity, ask students if they can think of a friendship—one they've experienced or observed—in which one friend pretends to care about the other while being secretly manipulative or deceitful. Students can briefly discuss or share in pairs what this manipulation looked and sounded like—what kinds of words or actions made the deceitful friend seem trustworthy or believable? Remind students that deception is a major plot point in *Agrippina*. Pass out the synopsis. Students should read the synopsis of Act I to themselves.

**FUN FACT:** Operas are famous for their deadly drama and surprising comedy, but what happens backstage can be just as wild as anything that happens on the stage itself. On December 5, 1704, Handel was playing the harpsichord for *Cleopatra*, a new opera by the composer and theorist Johann Mattheson. Mattheson himself was onstage, singing the role of Cleopatra's lover, Antony; when he finished singing, he approached the musicians and asked to take over Handel's position at the harpsichord. Handel refused. This seemingly minor altercation soon escalated into a duel with swords. Mattheson landed a blow, but Handel serendipitously survived—because Mattheson's sword broke when it hit the button of Handel's coat.

Check for understanding:

- Why does Agrippina deceive Poppea?
- What does Agrippina want Poppea to do?

**STEP 2:** Pass out the reproducible entitled “Agrippina Deceives Poppea.” In pairs, students should read the scene between Agrippina and Poppea. Remind students to emphasize Agrippina's deceit (including her aside to the audience) in their acting. After a few minutes of rehearsal, invite a few pairs of students to share their interpretations with the class.

**STEP 3:** Play **Track 1**, the recording of the recitative “Pur al fin se n'andò” (the first part of the scene that students have just performed). This recording is approximately a minute long. After listening to this excerpt, invite students to describe what they have just heard. Some guiding questions:

- Did anything surprise you about how Handel set the scene to music?
- What instruments did you hear accompanying Agrippina and Poppea?
- Did the rhythms of the back-and-forth dialogue sound similar to the scenes you acted out?
- Would you describe the musical setting of the text as conversational or expressive? Or both? Why?

Explain to students that this kind of musical setting is called *recitative*, a type of singing in which singers deliver the text conversationally, usually accompanied by only a harpsichord and cello. (See the *Ten Essential Musical Terms* in this guide for a more extended definition.)

**STEP 4:** Tell students that they will now listen to Agrippina's aria “Non ho cor che per amarti” (nohn oh COHR keh PEHR ah-MAHR-tee), which sets the final lines of this scene. Pass out colored pencils and the reproducible titled “Color Map: ‘Non ho cor che per amarti’” to students. Explain to students that in this aria, Handel repeats lines of text multiple times. As they listen to the aria, they will be illustrating the structure of the aria using different colors to represent the different lines of text. (Note that the translation of “Non ho cor che per amarti” on the color map differs slightly from the translation provided in the conversation students acted out: The color map features a more literal translation so that students can keep track of what is happening in each line of text.)

Begin by giving students about a minute to select five different colored pencils; as they make their color map, one color will correspond to each line of text. Give them a few minutes to create a key (in the column labeled “Color” on the color map

reproducible), reviewing the text as they mark each line with the color they have chosen.

For example, students might choose for red to correspond to instrumental music, for green to correspond to the first line of the aria, “Non ho cor che per amarti,” and for purple to correspond to the second line of the aria, “Sempre amico a te sarò.” For the first 30 seconds of the musical excerpt (during the instrumental introduction), students would draw in red, then they would draw in green during the first line of text, then purple, then green again, and so forth, as the text changes. (Educator’s preview: What students will ultimately discover from their color map is that the first two lines of text are sung repeatedly at the beginning *and* at the end of the aria with the last two lines of text sandwiched in between—the traditional A–B–A da capo aria structure.)

Explain to students that as the aria plays, they can illustrate what they are hearing in whatever ways they like, as long as they follow the color-coding system and use the time stamps on the color map reproducible as a reference. (If it is not possible for students to see how much time has elapsed as the aria plays, simply direct students to begin drawing on the left side of the page and move to the right as the aria progresses.)

Play **Track 2**, which features the complete aria, while students complete their color map.

**STEP 5:** Ask students to switch color maps with a partner. Have students follow along with their partner’s color map while listening to the aria for a second time. Students can compare color maps as they listen.

Facilitate a discussion of what students have discovered through the color mapping. Some guiding questions:

**FUN FACT:** When Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Incoronazione di Poppea* premiered in Venice in 1643, it was performed in a theater built by none other than Vincenzo Grimani’s father.

**SO MANY CAESARS** Students watching *Agrippina* might be surprised by the constant use of the word “Caesar” in the libretto, since Julius Caesar is nowhere to be found in this opera. Beginning with Emperor Augustus, all Roman emperors had the designation “Caesar” attached to their name. Thus, Claudius would have been called “Claudius Caesar,” while Nero was called “Nero Caesar.” Similarly, when Agrippina talks about Nero “becoming the Caesar,” she means simply that he will become emperor.





# AGRIPPINA & NERO: RULERS OF ROME

## CIRCA 15 ce

The Roman noblewoman Agrippina is born on November 6 in Cologne. As a granddaughter of Rome's first emperor, Agrippina boasts impeccable noble credentials, but as a woman, she will only ever be able to attain power through the men in her life.

## 28

Agrippina marries the nobleman Domitius.

## 37

Agrippina's brother Caligula is crowned emperor. On December 15, Agrippina's son Nero is born.

## 39

Accused of conspiring against Caligula, Agrippina is banished to the Pontian Islands, a small chain of islands some 70 miles west of Naples where the mythological Sirens were said to reside.

## 40

Agrippina's husband, Domitius, dies on the Italian mainland. Agrippina is still in exile.

## 41

Fed up with Caligula's tyranny, a group of soldiers and senators—including Caligula's uncle Claudius—hatches a plan to rid Rome of Caligula once and for all. While a theatrical performance takes place in the palace complex, Caligula is trapped in one of the palace's underground passageways and killed. Claudius takes the throne. Agrippina returns to Rome.

## 49

Claudius marries Agrippina, who also happens to be his niece. The following year, he officially adopts Agrippina's son, Nero.

## 53

Nero marries Claudius's daughter Octavia.

## 54

Claudius dies, allegedly after eating a mushroom that Agrippina had sprinkled with poison. Nero ascends the throne, yet contemporary historians claim that Agrippina is the one with real power, running the empire from the shadows while her son wears Rome's crown.

## 55

Claudius's biological son Britannicus dies; Nero is suspected of having him poisoned. This same year, Agrippina is accused of conspiring against Nero. She is acquitted.

## 59

Nero, annoyed by Agrippina's opposition to his love affair with Poppaea Sabina (who is already married to the future emperor Otho), decides to have Agrippina murdered. According to contemporary historians, Nero arranges to have his mother set sail in a faulty boat; when the boat collapses, Agrippina swims safely to shore—only to be murdered by Nero's henchmen when she gets there.

## 62

Nero falsely accuses his wife, Octavia, of having an affair. He divorces her, marries Poppaea, and then promptly has Octavia executed.

## 65

Poppaea dies, likely from a miscarriage, although it is rumored that her death is caused by a brutal beating from Nero.

## 68

Nero is overthrown in a coup. He escapes to his country villa, where he takes his own life.





- What do you notice in your color maps?
- Besides the repetition of text, what aspects of the aria, if any, did you try to represent in your color map (e.g., long musical lines, high notes, different instruments, etc.)?
- Which lines get repeated multiple times? Which do not?
- How would you describe the structure of the aria?

Tell students that “Non ho cor che per amarti” is a classic example of a da capo aria—“da capo” means “from the head” or “from the top.” Da capo arias always feature contrasting A and B sections of music and are structured according to an A–B–A pattern. Ask students to identify which lines of the aria are in the A section and which lines are in the B section. Explain that during the second A section, the singer will often improvise ornamentation, usually by adding extra notes or trills, or incorporating exceptionally high notes into phrases.

**STEP 6:** Ask students to briefly discuss how Handel’s music and a singer’s performance might convey Agrippina’s deception to the audience, then return to the music.

Play **Track 3**, the first 30 seconds of the aria (the instrumental introduction). Encourage students to represent what they hear visually by adding to their color maps, then ask them to share their observations. Some guiding questions:

- What instruments do you hear? (Note that Baroque opera features a number of instruments that are not frequently heard in operas from later periods; there is no need for students to identify these instruments, although they may comment on the unique sound of Baroque instrumentation in general.)
- What images does the section played by woodwinds bring to mind?
- How might this instrumentation help the audience understand Agrippina?

Play **Track 4**, the B section of the aria. Ask students to follow along in the text and translation. Encourage students to represent what they hear by adding to their color maps, then ask them to share their observations. Some guiding questions:

- Which words does Agrippina stretch out? This text-setting technique, in which a singer vocalizes a single syllable of text across multiple notes, is called a *melisma*. (Educator’s preview: The two words are “infedeltà” and “arti,” “infidelities” and “arts/artifices.”)
- Why do you think Handel chose these particular words for Agrippina to sing in this way?
- How does this vocal writing help the audience understand Agrippina?



**FUN FACT:** In 1723, Handel moved into a new apartment in London; for the rest of his life, he would call 25 Brook Street home. Over two and a half centuries later, the upper two floors of the adjoining house (at 23 Brook Street) were rented by another legendary musician: Jimi Hendrix.

Play **Track 5**, the recapitulation of the A section. Encourage students to represent the musical ornamentation by adding to their color maps, then ask them to share their observations. Some guiding questions:

- What do you hear in Agrippina's vocal line?
- What can you infer about Agrippina by hearing this extensive improvised ornamentation?
- How does this ornamentation help the audience understand Agrippina?

Invite students to share with one another (or with the class) how they incorporated these new musical details into their color maps.

**STEP 7:** Now that students understand the relationship between recitative and aria, invite them to imagine in their partnerships how a director might stage this scene to bring out the contrasts between what Agrippina says and what she means. What could Agrippina do onstage, especially during the instrumental sections of the aria, to show the audience how she really feels about Poppea? Might Agrippina act differently during each of the A sections (when she is singing the same text)? Have students discuss this while the recitative and aria play. If time allows, invite a pair of students (or multiple pairs) to describe their vision for the scene or act it out for the class while the music plays.

**FOLLOW-UP:** Original audiences for *Agrippina* would have been familiar with the da capo aria form and would have noticed when a composer deviated from the standard A–B–A structure. Handel did just that in Agrippina's epic Act II aria "Pensieri, voi mi tormentate" (pen-see-YEH-ree voy me tohr-men-TAH-tay), available on **Track 6**. As a homework assignment or further in-class project in pairs or small groups, students can listen to this aria (and the surprising recitative included inside it) and make a new color map of it. Students should consider the following questions:

- In "Pensieri, voi mi tormentate," Agrippina describes her restless state of mind. How does Handel's music for the aria depict Agrippina's mental state? Think about both the instrumental introduction to the aria and the way that Handel sets Agrippina's few lines of text.
- After the expected A–B–A da capo structure concludes, Agrippina has a brief solo recitative followed by a shortened version of the A section of the aria. How do you think audiences expecting the aria to be over would react to hearing this music again? Why do you think Handel did this?

When Nerone starts singing in the opening scene of *Agrippina*, you might be very surprised: Nerone is a male character, yet his vocal range is comparable to that of his mother, Agrippina. This is because the role of Nerone was originally sung by a castrato (pl. castrati), a male singer who, for the sake of retaining his high voice, underwent surgical castration before puberty. And although the idea of castrated singers might strike modern listeners as strange or even barbaric, castrati were the Baroque opera world's biggest stars.

Castration affected boys' vocal cords, but it also had a profound effect on the rest of their bodies. By disrupting normal growth hormones, castration could result in a variety of unusual physical attributes, including remarkable height and an abnormally large chest cavity—which, in singing terms, meant powerful thoracic muscles and extra lung capacity. As such, castrati were uniquely equipped to produce the loud, sustained, highly ornamented phrases that Baroque audiences loved.

The earliest archival records of castrati date to the 1550s. At the time, castrati sang only sacred music; a biblical injunction against women singing in church had created a dearth of singers capable of performing the high parts in sacred choral works. When opera arrived on the musical scene around 1600, the castrato's unusual voice was quickly embraced by composers working in the new genre. Claudio Monteverdi's 1607 opera *Orfeo* featured castrati singing the opera's Prologue as well as two female roles, yet the castrato's phenomenal vocal powers would soon lead them to be cast as the manliest role in opera: the *primo uomo*, or heroic male lead.

Successful castrati were the rock stars of their day, and they delighted noble and public audiences alike. The castrato commonly known as Farinelli (born Carlo Broschi, 1705–82) was knighted by the King of Spain and even had a ministerial role at the Spanish court. By the 19th century, however, changing operatic styles and new conceptions of medical ethics meant the castrato tradition was quickly dying out. The Vatican banned castrati in 1903, and the last known castrato, Alberto Moreschi, died in 1922; recordings of Moreschi singing offer modern listeners the only surviving example of this voice type.

Fortunately, singers and directors have come up with two solutions for casting castrato roles today. One solution involves having a woman sing the role formerly played by a male castrato. Another solution is the “countertenor,” a male singer who has carefully trained his falsetto range so he can sing the high notes required by castrato roles. Both of these solutions are on display in the Met's production of *Agrippina*: Nerone will be played by the (female) mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey, while Ottone will be played by (male) countertenor Iestyn Davies.

# CASTRATI



A caricature of the castrato Senesino, the soprano Francesca Cuzzoni, and the castrato Gaetano Berenstadt performing Handel's opera *Flavio* in 1723. Note the male singers' enormous chests and remarkable height, both of which are comically exaggerated here but were nevertheless common physical attributes of castrati.

## Tell Me What You Feel Like: Simile Arias in *Agrippina*

### English / Language Arts

#### IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the reproducible resources available at the back of this guide entitled *Tell Me What You Feel Like*, the synopsis, and the illustrated synopsis (available online).

#### CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

English / Language Arts, Poetry, Close Reading, Creative Writing, Drama

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To strengthen students' comprehension of *Agrippina's* characters and story
- To increase students' comfort with a common poetic device (the "simile") and its use in Baroque opera
- To foster students' creativity and communication skills through discussions, optional acting exercises, and a creative writing assignment

Arias demanded a lot of Baroque composers and librettists. On the one hand, they needed to be profoundly expressive, since the aria was the one place where characters could articulate their emotional responses to the wild events taking place onstage. On the other hand, arias needed to be breathtakingly virtuosic: Audiences wanted to hear high-flying feats of vocal acrobatics, and singers (whose paychecks relied on their enduring popular appeal) wanted arias that would showcase their abilities. In other words, arias had to be deeply moving while still leaving plenty of space for vocal fireworks, and composers and librettists had to develop a variety of techniques for delivering a maximal emotional punch through a few carefully chosen words. One of these techniques was the "simile aria," which uses carefully constructed metaphors to reveal a character's innermost feelings and thoughts. This activity will introduce students to three simile arias from *Agrippina*, help them analyze the arias' poetry in relation to *Agrippina's* plot, and invite them to create a simile aria of their own. By completing the activity, students will gain a better understanding of both *Agrippina's* story and the poetic and musical conventions of Baroque opera, thereby equipping themselves to actively engage with Handel's opera as it unfurls on the cinema screen.

Students will:

- Learn about similes and practice identifying and using this common rhetorical device
- Apply what they have learned about similes to analyze three arias from *Agrippina*
- Craft their own "simile aria" in response to one of the opera's scenes
- Share their work with the class



## STEPS

In this activity, students will investigate and analyze a common form in Baroque opera that incorporates both musical and poetic elements: the “simile aria.” Through a series of steps that involve close reading, group discussion, and improvisation and performance, students will delve into *Agrippina*’s story and craft a series of new simile arias, expressing the opera’s story through their own poetry and imbuing the plot with their own creative insights.

**STEP 1:** A good understanding of *Agrippina*’s plot is fundamental to the success of this activity, so begin by distributing the synopsis or illustrated synopsis. Depending on your class’s strengths and needs, you can have your students read the plot silently, direct them to read it out loud to one another in small groups, and/or invite them to act out scenes from the opera as short skits in front of the class. Ask if students have any questions.

**STEP 2:** The jumping-off point for this activity is the simile, a rhetorical device that occurs in both poetry and prose. If your students are already familiar with similes, you can skip to the end of this step and discuss the examples available on the reproducible “Practicing Similes,” or you can skip this step altogether. Otherwise, begin by writing the following phrases on the board:

My feet are like ice.

She ran like lightning.

The lion’s purr was like thunder.

This cookie is like a rock.

Distribute the first reproducible sheet for this exercise, “Practicing Similes.” Then ask your students what these four sentences have in common. Encourage all answers, but guide the conversation toward the following observations.

1. They all compare two things:  
feet:ice   running:lightning   lion’s purr:thunder   cookie:rock
2. In any given pair, the two things that are juxtaposed are very different.
3. Although the two things are different, the second thing helps us understand some crucial attribute of the first:
  - Since ice is cold, the speaker’s feet must be cold.
  - Since lightning is very fast, the girl in question must have run very fast.
  - Since thunder is loud and “rumbly,” the lion’s purr must also be loud and rumbly.
  - Since rocks are hard, the cookie must be very hard (because it is stale or overcooked).

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND AGRIPPINA

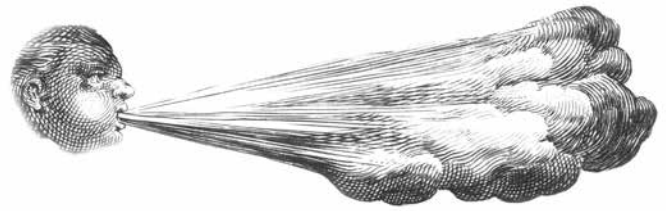
### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.11

Create interpretive and responsive texts to demonstrate knowledge and a sophisticated understanding of the connections between life and the literary work.

“Ogni vento ...



**FUN FACT:** The emperor Nero has gone down in history as one of the cruelest, most capricious leaders the Western world has ever seen, and numerous stories attest to his bizarre and ruthless leadership. One of the most famous involves his behavior during the Rome fire of 64 CE, during which he was said to have been seen on a hill nearby “fiddling while Rome burned.” He wasn’t, however, playing the violin, an instrument that wouldn’t be invented until the following millennium. Instead, “fiddling” here means “engaging in idle activities”: Nero was rumored to have been reading an epic poem he had written about the conflagration of the ancient city of Troy as he watched his own capital city go up in flames.

Write the word “simile” on the board and offer your students the following definition:

A **SIMILE** describes an object through a comparison to another object; this comparison is often introduced by a word such as *like* (my feet are *like* ice) or *as* (my feet are as cold *as* ice).

For teachers who wish to dive more deeply into similes and their role in poetry and prose, the reproducible also includes a list of similes from famous works of literature. Invite your students to find the simile (hint: look for the word *like*) and discuss why the comparison forms a useful description.

**STEP 3:** In a few minutes, we will return to similes and their importance in Baroque opera. But first, we need to develop some musical vocabulary. (If students have already completed the music activity in this guide, entitled *Arias of Influence*, teachers may choose to skip this step.)

Dramatic moments in opera tend to fall into two broad categories: the moments in which things happen, and the moments in which people express their emotions in response to these events. In general, these two kinds of scenes are accompanied by different kinds of music. The “actions and events” music is called *recitative*, while the emotional music is called *aria*.

Each scene in a Baroque opera typically begins with some dialogue (in recitative) about an action/event, and then a character responds to this event with an aria. For example:

**RECITATIVE:** Agrippina tells Nerone he will be emperor.

**ARIA:** Nerone sings: “I feel so happy that I will be emperor!”

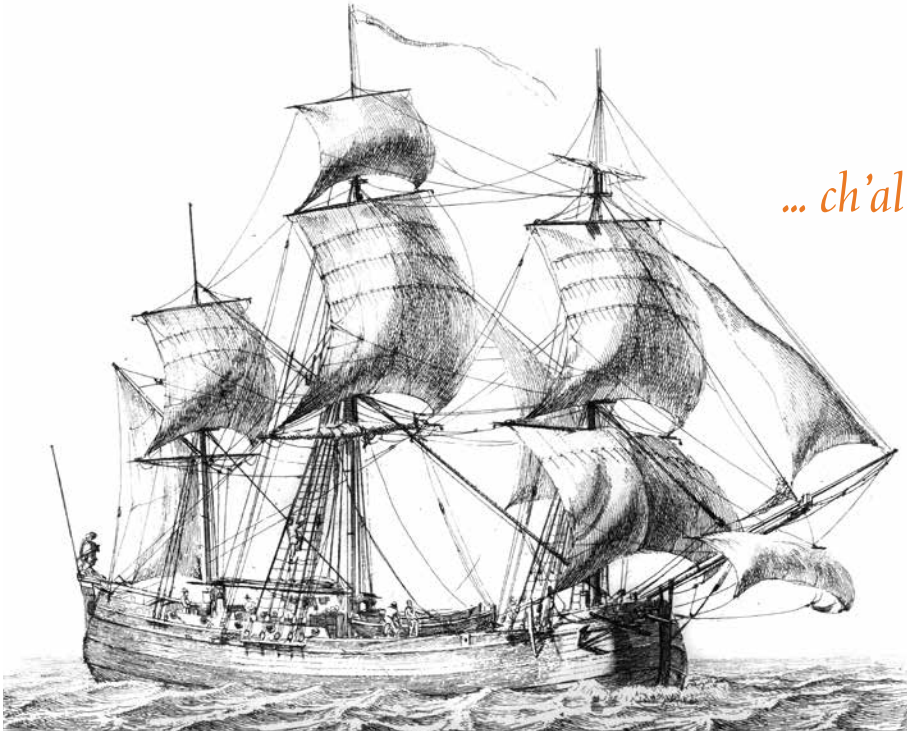
**RECITATIVE:** Poppea tells Ottone she can’t see him anymore.

**ARIA:** Ottone sings: “I feel very sad because Poppea dumped me.”

(More extended definitions for both recitative and aria can be found in the *Ten Essential Musical Terms* in this guide.)

Introduce these terms to your students, and invite them to spend some time in groups exploring the distinction between recitative and aria through short improvised scenes. For instance, Student 1 might tell Student 2: “You just won the lottery!” Then Student 2 could reply: “That makes me so happy!” and hum an upbeat tune to express this happiness.





... *ch'al porto lo spinga*"

**STEP 4:** Once students feel comfortable with the dramatic purpose of the aria, write a new term on the board: "simile aria." Begin a short, class-wide brainstorming session. Based on the previous two steps, what do students think this term might mean? Again, accept all answers, but guide the conversation toward the following definition:

Instead of expressing emotions through the formula "I feel ...," a **SIMILE ARIA** expresses emotions through the formula "I feel *like* ..."

For example:

Instead of "I feel so happy that I will be emperor," Nerone might sing, "I feel *like* a playful puppy enjoying life while my mom takes care of me."

Instead of "I feel very sad because Poppea dumped me," Ottone might sing, "I feel *like* a lonely island sitting by itself in the middle of a cold, dark sea."

**STEP 5:** It's finally time to turn to *Agrippina's* libretto. Divide students into two groups. Give all the students in one group a copy of the reproducible "È un foco quel d'amore"; give all the students in the other group a copy of the reproducible "Ogni vento ch'al porto lo spinga."

Invite your students to read the introductory paragraph that describes the aria's position in the opera's story. Next, have them carefully read the translation and rewrite the aria in their own words (in prose) to ensure they understand what the character is talking about. Ask your students to identify *what* the simile is in the aria (it may be one thing, or it may be more), and invite them to discuss (in their groups) *why* this simile

**FUN FACT:** In the Baroque era, it was not uncommon for composers to incorporate arias they had already written into new works. *Agrippina*'s aria "Bel piacere" first appeared in Handel's 1707 oratorio *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*; two years after *Agrippina*'s premiere, the same music appeared in his opera *Rinaldo* (1711). Singers also requested that old arias be slotted into new operas—especially if the aria in question was particularly suited to the singer's voice, or if it was an exceptional crowd-pleaser. Since singers "carried" these arias with them from opera to opera, the arias came to be known as "suitcase arias."

is useful for describing the character's emotions in this scene; space is provided for each of these steps on the reproducible handout.

**STEP 6:** Put students in pairs comprising one student from each of the two groups established in Step 5. Have the student who studied "È un foco quel d'amore" explain this aria to the other student and vice versa. Then distribute the text of the aria "Come nube che fugge dal vento." Have students—still working in their pairs—identify the similes at play in this aria. Do they recognize these similes? Why did Grimani bring them together here? (Educators preview: "Come nube che fugge dal vento" uses both wind and fire to describe Nerone's mental state; in other words, it brings together the two similes that students have already studied.)

**STEP 7:** Now it's time for your students to craft a simile aria of their own. Divide your class into several small groups and give each group one panel from the illustrated synopsis of *Agrippina*. Explain that their task is to write a new simile aria for the scene illustrated on their panel. Invite them to approach this task by following the steps outlined below; the reproducible "Writing a Simile Aria" will help guide your students through the process.

**Describe** what is happening in this scene in your own words.

**Choose** one character and identify what emotion that character must be feeling. Make a short list of words that describe their emotional state.

**Brainstorm** some similes that might describe one or more of the emotions you listed in the previous step. (The examples from *Agrippina* focused on the similes of storms and fire, but your students may choose any simile they like.)

**Pick** one or more similes that will form the basis of your aria text.

**Write a poem** using these similes; it does not need to rhyme. (Students who have done the other activity in this guide, *Arias of Influence*, may wish to have their poem follow the A–B–A format of a da capo aria.)

**STEP 8:** To bring this activity to a close, invite your students to present their new arias to the class. If there is a new simile aria for each panel in the illustrated synopsis, you might choose to present the scenes in order: Congratulations—your students have just created a brand new version of *Agrippina*!

**FOLLOW-UP:** It might seem like the “simile” in a simile aria is limited to the poetry, where the librettist can express the simile in words, yet composers often took great pains to express these ideas musically, too. As a follow-up activity (in class or as homework), invite your students to listen to these three arias and think about how the music expresses or embodies the storms and fires of the texts. Each of the arias is readily available online.

You may also wish to invite students to consider how simile arias helped composers and librettists satisfy the twin requirements of the aria: virtuosity and expressivity. Why might it be beneficial to use a simile rather than simply stating an emotion outright?



**FUN FACT:** On October 11, 1727, King George II and Queen Caroline of England were crowned at Westminster Abbey. Handel provided four newly composed choral works for the occasion. One of these, *Zadok the Priest*, has been performed at every English coronation ever since.

# Ten Essential Musical Terms

**Aria** A self-contained piece for solo voice, usually accompanied by orchestra. In opera, arias mostly appear during a pause in dramatic action when a character is reflecting on their emotions. Most arias are lyrical, with a tune that can be hummed, and many arias include musical repetition. Arias are not unique to opera, as they also appear in oratorios, cantatas, and other vocal genres.

**Baroque** A designation for music and art produced approximately between the years 1600 and 1750. In music history, the beginning of the Baroque period coincides with the invention of opera as a genre, and its end coincides with the death of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. Originally, the word “baroque” was a term for oddly shaped pearls; it was first applied to music in the 1730s by critics who preferred a simpler, less ornamented style and thus found the intricate counterpoint of 17th-century music to be reminiscent of these bizarre natural gems.

**Castrato** A male singer who underwent surgical castration before puberty and thus retained the vocal range of a young boy. Castrati performed both sacred and secular music for nearly 400 years—the earliest recorded castrati joined church choirs in the 1550s; the last known castrato died in 1922—but they reached their zenith in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, when they were commonly cast as the heroic male lead in operas.

**Countertenor** The highest male vocal type, with a range equivalent to a female mezzo-soprano or soprano. Countertenors have the deep speaking voices typical of adult males, but they carefully train their falsetto (“head”) range so they can sing remarkably high lines of music. Today, countertenors often sing roles that were originally written for castrati.

**Continuo** A form of harmonic accompaniment, also called “basso continuo,” used throughout the Baroque period. Continuo accompaniments are typically notated as a single line of bass notes, with small Arabic numerals indicating chords that will be improvised by the performer. The instrumentation of a continuo accompaniment is also variable and can consist of one or more instruments; today, the continuo part in opera is typically played by harpsichord and cello, while the continuo part in sacred music is usually played by an organ. As the name implies, “continuo” (the term is related to the English word “continuous”) often occurs throughout Baroque works, but it is most easily heard in Baroque opera during sections of recitative, since recitative is usually accompanied by continuo alone.

**Da capo aria** An aria that follows an A–B–A structure, with an opening “A” section; a contrasting “B” section; and a return of the complete “A” section, typically with added (improvised) ornamentation. The term “da capo,” which means “from the head” (or “from the top”), describes this return to the beginning of the piece. The da capo aria is the basic musical building block of Baroque opera.

**Ornamentation** An embellishment to the melody, rhythm, or harmony of music, intended to make the music more impressive and ornate. Ornamentation can either be indicated by the composer or improvised by the performer. In da capo arias, performers typically add a good deal of ornamentation when the A section returns.

**Prima donna and primo uomo** Literally “first woman” and “first man,” the terms prima donna and primo uomo refer to the singers with the greatest number of arias in a Baroque opera. For instance, in *Agrippina*, Poppea has 11 discrete arias while Agrippina has only 8; thus, Poppea is the prima donna, while Agrippina, despite being the title character, is relegated to the status of seconda donna (“second lady”). Since opera stars were notoriously high-maintenance, the term prima donna later came to be applied to people who are demanding and self-centered, regardless of their gender or profession.

**Recitative** A type of singing that imitates the accents and inflections of natural speech. Composers often employ recitative for passages of text that involve quick dialogue and the advancement of plot, since the style allows singers to move rapidly through a large amount of text. Recitative may be accompanied by a single instrument (such as a harpsichord), a small ensemble, or the whole orchestra. The term is derived from an Italian verb meaning “to recite.”

**Simile aria** An aria that uses a simile or metaphor to describe how a character is feeling. Since simile arias efficiently express an emotional state without relying on particular details of an opera’s plot, Baroque composers often used the same simile aria in multiple operas.

## *Follow the Money: Public Opera in Baroque Venice*

Venice held a unique position in 17th- and 18th-century Italy. As an independent city state, it was free from the oversight of Vatican censors, who kept a tight lid on everything that was performed in Rome and the surrounding regions. As a republic that elected its leaders from a wide ruling class (rather than following the bloodlines of a single noble family), it boasted an unusually large number of wealthy citizens. And as the host of the most famous carnival in Europe, it was never short of people looking for a good time.

The earliest operas were written for royal courts in cities like Florence and Mantua. But in the mid-1630s, the traveling theater artist Benedetto Ferrari wondered if the new art form might not do well playing to a wider audience. If so, he reasoned, Venice's annual carnival festivities would be the place to try it out. A period of celebration preceding the 40 ascetic days of

Lent, carnival was (and is) celebrated across the Christian world. Yet the most famous carnival by far was the one in Venice, where the festivities stretched from the day after Christmas through Shrove Tuesday, a period of nearly two months. Each year, tourists flocked to the city to enjoy the wild masquerades and general loosening of social strictures for which Venice's carnival was known.

Betting on the readiness of tourists and wealthy Venetians alike to pay for good entertainment, Ferrari set about planning a public opera performance for the carnival season of 1636–37. The resulting opera, which featured a libretto by Ferrari and marked the inaugural performance of the newly built Teatro San Cassiano, opened to tremendous popular acclaim; it also ushered in a fundamentally new economic model for the performing arts. Previously, composers and

musicians had been full-time, salaried employees at the courts of noble families, writing and performing operas and other forms of musical entertainment according to their employers' whims. By contrast, each production at the Teatro San Cassiano was funded by paying ticket holders. This model was soon adopted by other Venetian impresarios: By 1641, three more public opera houses had opened in Venice, and by 1650, over 50 operas had been performed in the city. Yet with their art form now supported by a paying public, opera composers, librettists, and impresarios had to appeal to public taste—or risk going bankrupt. Wildly impressive set designs became the norm, as did the kind of scandalous storyline that was sure to appeal to rowdy carnival-goers.

The most important (and expensive) part of the new opera venture, however, was the singer. By the late 17th century, star singers were commanding prices that, 50 years before, would have paid for an entire performance, stage sets and all. Impresarios may have balked at the astronomical rates these singers demanded, yet they must have felt it was worth it, since star singers kept audiences coming back for more. The power of the singer also inspired the musical format that was to become standard in Baroque opera: short periods of recitative followed by phenomenal solo arias, after which the singer would bask in applause and then promptly leave the stage.





## Supporting the Student Experience during the *Live in HD* Transmission

### IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the Performance Activity reproducible handouts found at the back of this guide.

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *AGRIPPINA*

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.11

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama aesthetically and ethically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events and situations.

Watching and listening to a live performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. These performance activities are designed to help students analyze different aspects of this experience while engaging critically with the performance. Each performance activity incorporates a reproducible sheet; students should bring these activity sheets to the *Live in HD* transmission and fill them out during intermission and/or after the final curtain.

For *Agrippina*, the first activity sheet, “21st-Century Rome,” invites students to consider how opera directors depict historical eras onstage. For instance, an automobile onstage would indicate that a production must be set some time in the 20th or 21st century, while a horse-drawn carriage would indicate that the production is likely set in an earlier era.

*Agrippina*, as Handel wrote it, takes place in the first century CE, but Sir David McVicar has updated the setting to our own time. As your students watch the *Live in HD* broadcast, they should consider how the costumes, stage sets, and props work together to communicate “21st century” to the audience. Students should identify at least two items from each category, write about these items on the reproducible sheet, and return to class prepared to talk about what they observed and how these objects helped them understand (or not) *Agrippina*’s story and its relevance to the modern world.

The second activity sheet, “Opera Review: *Agrippina*,” includes a scene-by-scene rating system to help students keep track of the opera’s story and develop their own opinions about what they see and hear. This activity is the same for each opera, and it is intended to guide students toward a consistent set of objective observations while enriching their understanding of the art form as a whole.

The performance activity reproducible handouts can be found at the back of this guide. On the next page, you’ll find a follow-up activity created specifically for reviewing the *Live in HD* performance of *Agrippina*. This activity is intended to inspire careful, critical thinking about what students have seen and heard while also inspiring students to engage in further discussion and study.



### Agrippina: An Empress for Our Time

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did they like? What didn't they like? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? This discussion should be an opportunity for students to review their performance activity sheets and express their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production, the singers' performances, and *Agrippina*'s music and story.

*Agrippina* offers a terrific opportunity to explore the relationships between opera, narrative, performance, and history. Begin by asking the class a (seemingly) simple question: When does *Agrippina* take place? Students will likely come up with two answers: the first century (when the historical Agrippina lived), and the 21st century (when Sir David McVicar's production is set). In fact, both of these answers are not only valid but also essential to understanding this performance. The following questions will help clarify the distinction between these two answers and invite students to think more broadly about staging an opera:

- When did the real-life Agrippina live? (For more on Agrippina's life, see the sidebar *Agrippina and Nero: Rulers of Rome*.)
- When was the opera written?
- When Handel and Grimani wrote this opera, when did they intend for the story to take place?
- In Sir David McVicar's production at the Met, when does the story take place?
- Why did McVicar choose to set *Agrippina* in a different era than the one Handel and Grimani imagined? What statement(s) do you think he wanted to make about the modern world?
- Can you think of any politicians today who are putting their children in positions of power? Why might this be antithetical to the norms of a democratic society?
- What if somebody in the year 2420 watched this production? Would they understand the references? Why or why not?

Invite your students to imagine they have been hired to craft a new production of *Agrippina*. When would they set it? Why?

#### IN PREPARATION

This activity requires no preparation other than attending the *Live in HD* transmission of *Agrippina*.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To review students' understanding of Handel's *Agrippina*
- To encourage students to develop and express their opinions about *Agrippina*'s story, music, and staging
- To inspire students to think critically about the relationship between an opera's history, plot, and production

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND AGRIPPINA

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

##### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Excerpts taken from the  
Metropolitan Opera performance  
of February 6, 2020

**POPPEA**

Brenda Rae

**AGRIPPINA**

Joyce DiDonato

Conducted by  
Harry Bicket

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra  
and Chorus

- 1 "Pur al fin se n'andò" (recitative)
- 2 "Non ho cor che per amarti," complete aria
- 3 "Non ho cor che per amarti," instrumental introduction
- 4 "Non ho cor che per amarti," B section ("Con sincero e puro affetto")
- 5 "Non ho cor che per amarti," recapitulation of the A section
- 6 "Pensieri, voi mi tormentate"

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Arias of Influence

Agrippina Deceives Poppea

**POPPEA:** Pur al fin se n'andò! Lieto mio core,  
oggi vedrai punito il traditore.

*Agrippina enters.*

**POPPEA:** O mia liberatrice, quanto a te devo, e quanto  
da' tuoi saggi consigli il frutto attendo.

**AGRIPPINA:** Nascosa, il tutto intesi;  
oggi saremo compagne a mirar liete più il nostro che di  
Cesare il trionfo. T'abbraccio, amica, e in me tutto confida;  
disponi, o cara, del mio cor che t'ama!  
(*Aside*) Felice riuscì l'ordita trama.

**POPPEA:** Augusta, il mio voler da te dipende.

**AGRIPPINA:** Quest'alma dal tuo amor legata pende.  
Non ho cor che per amarti;  
sempre amico a te sarà.  
Con sincero e puro affetto  
io ti stringo a questo petto;  
mai di frodi, inganni, ed arti  
sia tra noi l'infedeltà.

Claudio finally left! Oh be happy, my heart:  
Today, you'll see Ottone punished for his treachery!

Agrippina, you saved me! I owe you so much, and I'm looking  
forward to whatever advice you can give me!

While I was hiding, I heard everything.  
Today we'll stick together, and you'll see how we will  
triumph—and *not* the emperor. I embrace you, friend.  
Confide in me; take advantage of how much I care about you.  
My plan is working out perfectly!

Oh, noble empress, my whole happiness depends on you.

And my happiness depends on your friendship.  
The only reason I have a heart is so that I can love you.  
I will always be here for you.  
I will always keep you close  
and treat you with sincerity, selflessness, and kindness.  
Tricks, games, cruelty, and backstabbing  
will never come between us.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Arias of Influence (CONTINUED)

Aria, “Pensieri, voi mi tormentate”

**AGRIPPINA:** Pensieri, voi mi tormentate.

Ciel, soccorri a’ miei disegni!

Il mio figlio fa’ che regni,

E voi, Numi, il secondate!

Quel ch’oprai è soggetto a gran periglio.

Creduto Claudio estinto, a Narciso e a Pallante fidai

troppo me stessa. Ottone ha merto, ed ha Poppea  
coraggio, s’è scoperto l’inganno, di riparar l’oltraggio.

Ma fra tanti nemici a voi, frodi, or è tempo; deh, non  
m’abbandonate!

Pensieri, voi mi tormentate.

Oh thoughts, you torment me.

Oh heaven, help me with my plans!

Make my son ruler, oh gods,

Stay by his side!

My plans are now in grave peril.

Thinking Claudio was dead, I told Narciso and Pallante too  
much. Ottone has enough integrity and Poppea has enough  
courage that they can fix what I’ve done if they learn about it.

But among so many enemies, I turn now to you and your tricks,  
oh gods. Please do not abandon me!

Oh thoughts, you torment me.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Arias of Influence (CONTINUED)

Color Map: "Pensieri, voi mi tormentate"					
COLOR	ITALIAN	ENGLISH			
_____	Instrumental music	Instrumental music			
_____	Pensieri, voi mi tormentate.	Oh thoughts, you torment me.			
_____	Ciel, soccorri a' miei disegni!	Oh heaven, help me with my plans!			
_____	Il mio figlio fa' che regni,	Make my son ruler, oh gods,			
_____	E voi, Numi, il secondate!	Stay by his side!			
_____	Recitative	Recitative			
0:00	0:45	1:30	2:15	3:00	3:45
				4:30	5:15
					6:00
					6:45



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Tell Me What You Feel Like

Practicing Similes

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My feet are like ice.

Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Object 2: \_\_\_\_\_

How Object 2 helps describe Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

---

She ran like lightning.

Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Object 2: \_\_\_\_\_

How Object 2 helps describe Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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The lion's purr was like thunder.

Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Object 2: \_\_\_\_\_

How Object 2 helps describe Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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This cookie is like a rock.

Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Object 2: \_\_\_\_\_

How Object 2 helps describe Object 1: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Tell Me What You Feel Like (CONTINUED)

Practicing Similes

Examples of similes from famous works of literature:

Alice looked up, and there stood the Queen in front of them, with her arms folded, frowning like a thunderstorm.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter 9

“It was then that I rushed in like a tornado, wasn’t it?” Mr. Darling would say, scorning himself; and indeed he had been like a tornado.

—J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, Chapter 2

Baskerville shuddered as he looked up the long, dark drive to where the house glimmered like a ghost at the farther end.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Chapter 6

Clinging to one of the greasy rocks and blending almost perfectly with it was a large, unkempt, and exceedingly soiled bird who looked more like a dirty floor mop than anything else.

—Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Chapter 16

Peter Blood pounced like a hawk upon the obvious truth.

—Rafael Sabatini, *Captain Blood*, Chapter 6

She wore a gown of shimmering grey silk, and a scarlet rose, fresh-gathered, was pinned at her breast like a splash of blood.

—Rafael Sabatini, *Captain Blood*, Chapter 24

She entered with ungainly struggle like some huge awkward chicken, torn, squawking, out of its coop.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Three Gables”

The glorious sunlight filled the valley with purple fire. Before him, to left, to right, waving, rolling, sinking, rising, like low swells of a purple sea, stretched the sage.

—Zane Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Chapter 3

The long vacation saunters on towards term-time,\* like an idle river very leisurely strolling down a flat country to the sea.

—Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Chapter 20

\* “Term-time” here means the time when students must return to school for a new term.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Tell Me What You Feel Like (CONTINUED)

“È un foco quel d’amore”

Ottone is not the only one who has noticed Poppea’s beauty—Nerone and Claudio have declared their love for her, as well. Yet Poppea cares nothing for the attentions of the emperor Claudio or the prince Nerone. She loves only the simple soldier Ottone. As she sits at home in Act I, waiting for Ottone’s return, Poppea reflects on what a strange thing love is: Although it can never be explained, it is more powerful (and potentially more destructive) than anything else on earth.

**POPPEA:** È un foco quel d’amore  
che penetra nel core.  
Ma come? Non si sa.  
S’accende a poco a poco,  
ma poi non trova loco,  
e consumar ti fa.

The fire of love  
is a fire that burns in the heart.  
But how does it get there? No one knows.  
It starts very slowly,  
but then runs out of room,  
and consumes you completely.

THIS POEM IN MY OWN WORDS:

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THE SIMILE(S):

\_\_\_\_\_ is compared to \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ is compared to \_\_\_\_\_

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Tell Me What You Feel Like (CONTINUED)

“Ogni vento ch’al porto lo spinga”

At the end of Act II, all of Agrippina’s well-laid plans are crumbling around her: Pallante and Narciso have discovered her two-timing promises, Poppea has figured out that Ottone isn’t actually trying to steal Claudio’s throne, and Ottone has figured out that Agrippina is telling treasonous lies about him. And yet, although Agrippina is ready to apologize and admit her guilt if she absolutely must, she still harbors a faint hope that Nerone will become emperor.

**AGRIPPINA:** Ogni vento ch’al porto lo spinga,  
e benchè fiero minacci tempeste,  
l’ampie vele gli spande il nocchier.  
Regni il figlio, mia sola lusinga,  
sian le stelle in aspetto funeste,  
senza pena le guarda il pensier.

No matter how menacing a storm may be,  
the sailor caught in the storm will turn his sails  
to catch any wind that might push him back to port.  
May my son, my only joy, sit on the throne.  
Even if the stars may seem foreboding,\*  
I will look to them without fear.

*\*Here, Agrippina is looking to the stars for signs of the future.*

THIS POEM IN MY OWN WORDS:

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THE SIMILE(S):

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\_\_\_\_\_ is compared to \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_ is compared to \_\_\_\_\_

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Tell Me What You Feel Like (CONTINUED)

“Come nube che fugge dal vento”

When Agrippina hears how Poppea tricked Nerone at the beginning of Act III, she is not happy. She chastises Nerone and tells him to refocus on their joint goal: getting him crowned emperor. Nerone replies that he will abandon his love for Poppea immediately.

**NERONE:** Come nube che fugge dal vento,  
abbandono sdegnato quel volto.  
Il mio foco nel seno già spento,  
di quest'alma già il laccio è disciolto.

Like a cloud that flees the wind,  
I, hurt and deceived, will happily forget her face.  
The fire in my heart is already smothered,  
And the ties that bind me to her are already broken.

THIS POEM IN MY OWN WORDS:

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THE SIMILE(S):

\_\_\_\_\_ is compared to \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ is compared to \_\_\_\_\_

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Tell Me What You Feel Like (CONTINUED)

## Writing a Simile Aria

My scene:

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What's happening in this scene (in my own words):

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How this character is feeling (in a few descriptive words):

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Possible similes to illustrate these feelings:

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The simile(s) I'm going to use:

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## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

## Tell Me What You Feel Like (CONTINUED)

# My Simile Aria

[illegible]

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY

21st-Century Rome

Agrippina’s story takes place 2,000 years ago, but Sir David McVicar’s staging updates the action to the 21st century. As you watch the *Live in HD* broadcast, ask yourself: “How can I tell that this story is taking place in the modern world?” In particular, focus on three categories of design—costumes, stage sets, and props—and identify two items from each category that help set the story in the present day. Be prepared to discuss your findings when you return to class.

	WHERE I SAW IT IN THE OPERA:	HOW IT INDICATED “21ST CENTURY” AND HELPED ME UNDERSTAND THE STORY:
Costume 1		
Costume 2		
Stage Set 1		
Stage Set 2		
Prop 1		
Prop 2		

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY

## Opera Review: *Agrippina*

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

As you watch *Agrippina*, 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 of the star singers. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about Handel's opera and this performance at the Met!

THE STARS	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Brenda Rae as Poppea	☆☆☆☆☆	
Joyce DiDonato as Agrippina	☆☆☆☆☆	
Matthew Rose as Claudio	☆☆☆☆☆	
Kate Lindsey as Nerone	☆☆☆☆☆	
Iestyn Davies as Ottone	☆☆☆☆☆	
Conductor Harry Bicket	☆☆☆☆☆	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Agrippina learns of Claudio's death MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Agrippina asks Pallante and Narciso for help MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
An announcement: Claudio is alive! MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Ottone is amazed by his good fortune MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Poppea waits for Ottone MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE (CONTINUED)	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Agrippina tells Poppea some terrible news MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Poppea rebuffs Claudio MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Agrippina and Poppea look forward to Ottone's punishment MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Everyone celebrates Claudio's return MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Ottone can't understand why Claudio is mad at him MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Poppea and Ottone figure out what Agrippina is up to MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Agrippina realizes her plan might not work out, after all MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Nerone and Claudio visit Poppea at her home MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Nerone decides to forget Poppea MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Agrippina tells Claudio he should forgive everyone MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The grand finale MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆