

THE MET: HD LIVE IN SCHOOLS

2015-16 Educator Guide

VERDI **Otello**



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BEGINNING WITH THE FIRST DRAMATIC CHORD THAT LAUNCHES *Otello*'s opening storm scene, Verdi thrusts his audience into the turbulent world of his protagonists and their larger-than-life passions: these are characters of deep heroism, unmitigated malice, idealistic love, and jealous despair. With *Otello*, Verdi and his librettist, Arrigo Boito, created a gripping meditation on the downfall of a volatile hero and the collateral damage that results when our worst impulses triumph over our better selves. *Otello* is the second of the composer's three great Shakespeare adaptations and the opera that lured him back to the theater after a 16-year hiatus and his would-be retirement. A devastating portrayal of a man who is deceived into murdering the woman he loves, *Otello* is also an audacious example of operatic innovation in its development of a new, more fluid approach to musical drama and emotional expression.

In his new Met production, director Bartlett Sher understands *Otello* as psychologically adrift, led astray by a skewed perception of who can be trusted and what can be known. Taking his cue from the title character's inner turmoil, Sher sets the opera in a world of glass, mirrors, and stone walls, which both reflect and amplify *Otello*'s disordered mind. The result is a new and insightful perspective on this iconic character that presents him as battling within a moral trap of his own making.

This guide is intended to help your students appreciate *Otello* and its status at the intersection of literature and music. They will explore how Verdi and Boito reinterpreted and adapted Shakespeare's drama, comparing both the opera and the play to their earlier source. They will also study Verdi's musical craft in creating some of the most dramatic and highly charged music in all of Italian opera. The activities on the following pages are designed to provide context, deepen background knowledge, and enrich the overall experience of this *Live in HD* transmission. This guide will also align with key strands of the Common Core Standards.



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THE WORK:

OTELLO

An opera in four acts, sung in Italian

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Arrigo Boito

Based on the play *Othello* by William Shakespeare

First performed February 5, 1887 at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Italy

PRODUCTION

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Conductor

Bartlett Sher, Production

Es Devlin, Set Designer

Catherine Zuber, Costume Designer

Donald Holder, Lighting Designer

Luke Halls, Projection Designer

STARRING

(In order of vocal appearance):

Dimitri Pittas

CASSIO (tenor)

Željko Lučić

IAGO (baritone)

Chad Shelton

RODERIGO (tenor)

Aleksandrs Antonenko

OTELLO (tenor)

Sonya Yoncheva

DESDEMONA (soprano)

Jennifer Johnson Cano

EMILIA (mezzo-soprano)

Production a gift of Jacqueline Desmarais, in memory of Paul G. Desmarais Sr.

This guide is divided into five sections.

- **THE SOURCE, THE STORY, WHO'S WHO IN *OTELLO*, AND A TIMELINE**

- **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 Met: Live in HD* transmission, highlighting specific aspects of this production

- **POST-SHOW DISCUSSION:**
A wrap-up activity, integrating the *Live in HD* experience into the students' understanding of the performing arts and the humanities

- **STUDENT RESOURCE PAGES:**
Classroom-ready worksheets supporting the activities in the guide

The activities in this guide will focus on several aspects of *Otello*:

- The provenance of the opera's characters and their history in literature
- The adaption of the story in different artistic genres
- Verdi's musical depiction of the storm in the opera's opening scene
- The portrayal of race both in the opera and in its sources
- 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

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Otello*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera. 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.

THE SOURCE: SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO* Most likely written in 1603–04, *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's five great tragedies, together with *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. For the plot, Shakespeare drew from an earlier story by Giovanni Battista Giraldi, known as Cinzio, an Italian humanist and writer whose *Gli Ecatommiti* of 1565 included a tale of the "Moor of Venice" who kills his wife after being incited to jealousy by a duplicitous ensign. Shakespeare likely read Cinzio in the original Italian and found additional inspiration among his other stories: the *Ecatommiti* also provided the source for Shakespeare's comedy *Measure for Measure*, written around the same time.

Otello was Verdi's second Shakespeare adaptation, following his early masterpiece *Macbeth* (first performed in 1847 and extensively revised two decades later). Verdi was a devoted student of Shakespeare, and although he only knew his works in Italian translation, his enthusiasm for them was such that the prospect of composing an opera on *Othello* succeeded in luring him out of retirement. Together with his librettist Arrigo Boito, Verdi condensed and streamlined the original play so that all the action takes place on the island of Cyprus over the course of just a few days.

ACT I: *The harbor of Cyprus.* As a storm is raging, the people of Cyprus anxiously await the return of their governor and general of the Venetian fleet, the Moor Otello, who has been fighting the Muslim Turks. Otello guides his victorious navy to safe harbor, and the people celebrate with a great bonfire. In Otello's absence, the young Venetian nobleman Roderigo has arrived in Cyprus and fallen in love with the governor's new wife, Desdemona. Otello's ensign Iago, who pretends to be the governor's friend, in fact hates Otello for promoting the officer Cassio and not him to be his captain. Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona will soon tire of Otello and promises to help Roderigo win her.

While the citizens celebrate their governor's safe return, Iago launches his plan to ruin Otello. Knowing that Cassio easily gets drunk, Iago proposes a toast. Cassio declines to drink, but abandons his scruples when Iago salutes Desdemona, who is a favorite of the people. Iago then goads Roderigo into provoking a fight with Cassio, who is now fully drunk. When Montano, the former governor, tries to separate the two, Cassio attacks him as well. Otello appears from the castle to restore order, furious about his soldiers' behavior. When he realizes that Desdemona has also been disturbed by the commotion, he is enraged, takes away Cassio's recent promotion, and commands everyone to leave. Finally alone, Otello and Desdemona reflect on their love, kiss, and return to the castle.

ACT II: *A chamber in the castle.* Iago advises Cassio to present his case to Desdemona, arguing that her influence on Otello will secure his rehabilitation. Alone, Iago reveals his bleak, nihilistic view of humankind. When Otello arrives, Iago makes dismissive

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:

SOPRANO

the highest-pitched type of human voice, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO

the female voice whose range lies between the soprano and the contralto (Italian “mezzo” = middle, medium)

CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

COUNTERTENOR

a male singing voice whose vocal range is equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano, or (less frequently) a soprano, usually through use of falsetto

TENOR

the highest naturally occurring voice type in adult males

BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS

the lowest male voice

remarks about Desdemona's fidelity. Otello's jealousy is easily aroused, and his suspicions are raised when Desdemona appears and appeals to him on Cassio's behalf. Otello evasively complains of a headache, and Desdemona offers him a handkerchief to mop his brow. He throws it to the ground. Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's maidservant, retrieves it, and Iago seizes the handkerchief from her.

Otello dismisses everyone and is left alone with Iago, who fans the flames of the governor's growing suspicion. He invents a story of how Cassio had spoken of Desdemona in his sleep and mentions that he saw her handkerchief in Cassio's hand. Seething with jealousy, Otello is now convinced that his wife is unfaithful. The two men join in an oath: they will punish Cassio and Desdemona.

ACT III: *The great hall of the castle.* Iago's plot continues to unfold. He tells Otello that he will have further proof of his wife and Cassio's betrayal. When, moments later, Desdemona approaches Otello and once more pleads for Cassio, Otello again feigns a headache and insists on seeing the missing handkerchief that he had once given her as a gift. When she cannot produce it, he insults her as a whore and orders her out, then gives in to his desperation and self-pity. Iago returns with Cassio and Otello hides to eavesdrop. Iago cleverly leads his conversation with Cassio in such a way that Otello is convinced they are discussing Cassio's affair with Desdemona. Cassio mentions an unknown admirer's gift and produces the telltale handkerchief, which in fact had been planted by Iago in his lodgings. Otello is shattered and vows that he will kill his wife. Iago promises to deal with Cassio.

A delegation from Venice arrives, led by Lodovico, who recalls Otello to Venice and appoints Cassio as the new governor of Cyprus. At this, Otello loses control and explodes in a rage, throwing Desdemona to the floor and hurling insults at her. He orders everyone away and finally collapses in a seizure. As the Cypriots are heard from outside praising Otello as the “Lion of Venice,” Iago gloats over him, “Behold the Lion!”

ACT IV: *Desdemona's chamber.* Emilia helps Desdemona prepare for bed. Desdemona is distraught and bids farewell to Emilia, then says her evening prayers. Otello enters and wakes her with a kiss. When he starts talking about killing her, Desdemona is horrified and protests her innocence. Unmoved, Otello strangles her. Emilia enters with the news that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Shocked to find the dying Desdemona, she summons help. Iago's plot is finally revealed and Otello realizes what he has done. Reflecting on his past glory he pulls out a dagger and stabs himself, dying with a final kiss for his wife.

WHO'S WHO IN *OTELLO*

CHARACTER		PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Otello (in Italian; Othello in English)	The Governor of the Venetian colony of Cyprus and a great naval hero, identified as a "Moor"	oh-TELL-oh	tenor	A great leader who is respected by his followers, Otello's insecurities and volatile nature make him prey to Iago's manipulation.
Desdemona	Otello's wife, a native of Venice	dez-DAY-moe-nah (in Italian; in English, dez-deh-MOE-nah)	soprano	Desdemona is devoted to Otello; she loves him purely and unquestioningly. She is also merciful and sensitive to the plights of others.
Iago	Otello's ensign and his closest advisor, but secretly his enemy	YAH-go	baritone	Otello trusts Iago as a good-hearted friend, but Iago plots for his leader's downfall and is a self-professed villain.
Cassio	A captain in the navy of Venice	CAH-see-oh	tenor	Cassio is trusting and devoted to Otello's service. He has been promoted ahead of Iago, earning him the malice of the ensign.



The winged Lion of Saint Mark, an emblem of Venice

Otello History



1565 Giovanni Battista Giraldi, called Cinzio (or Cinthio), publishes a collection entitled *Gli Ecatommiti* (“The Hundred Stories”). It includes the story of a Moorish general who is led astray by his ensign and unjustly provoked to kill his wife.

1603 Using Cinzio’s story as his source, William Shakespeare writes *Othello*.

1813 Giuseppe Verdi is born in a small village in northern Italy.

1816 Gioachino Rossini composes an opera based on Shakespeare’s *Othello*. It is a loose adaptation of the story and only follows the original play closely in the final act.



1836 Verdi’s first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*, successfully premieres at La Scala in Milan.

1842 His third opera, *Nabucco*, creates a sensation and establishes Verdi as the leading Italian composer of the day. Over the next 11 years, he produces 16 operas, including *Macbeth* (1847), based on Shakespeare’s play, and his three most enduringly successful works, *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata* (both 1853).

1863 The young librettist and composer Arrigo Boito recites a poem that crudely insults the current state of Italian music. Verdi, as the reigning master of Italian opera, takes great offense and nourishes a grudge against Boito for the next 15 years.

1868 Boito’s opera *Mefistofele*, based on Goethe’s *Faust*, premieres at La Scala but is not well received. Verdi comments: “He aspires to originality, but succeeds only in being strange.”

1871 Following the successful premiere of *Aida*, Verdi, at the height of his popularity, decides to end his career and retire to the country.





Boito, left, visits Verdi at his country house,

1879 Verdi's publisher, Giulio Ricordi, joins forces with Boito to interest the composer in the idea of creating an opera from Shakespeare's *Othello*. Despite their earlier estrangement, Verdi agrees to work with Boito as librettist and the two eventually develop a relationship of mutual reliance and respect. Before embarking on *Otello*, they collaborate on a revision of Verdi's 1857 opera *Simon Boccanegra*.

1884 By March, Verdi begins composing the first act of *Otello*. Work on the opera continues through 1886.

1887 *Otello* premieres at La Scala in Milan. It is a huge success and garners 20 curtain calls.

1893 Verdi's final opera, *Falstaff*, also based on Shakespeare and with a libretto by Boito, premieres at La Scala.

1901 Verdi suffers a stroke and dies on January 27. During the funeral procession, almost a quarter of a million people crowd the streets of Milan.



Francesco Tamagno, above, and Victor Maurel, below, created the roles of Othello and Iago in 1887.



A promotional book issued by Verdi's publisher at the time of *Otello*'s premiere. It had been seventeen years since his last new opera, *Aida*, and Italian audiences were eager to hear his latest work.

English/Language Arts

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the reproducible resources available at the back of this guide, as well as the audio selections from *Otello* available online or on the accompanying CD. You may also wish to distribute copies of the synopsis and/or the sidebar entitled *Otello and his Literary Forebears*.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

English/Language Arts, Creative Writing, Drama, Humanities

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To identify the techniques and modes of speech used in a range of literary and musical genres
- To analyze how different forms of expression and narrative modes convey meaning
- To explore how live performance shapes the impact of spoken drama and opera
- To prompt curiosity about the interpretation of *Otello* as seen in the *Live in HD* production

Iago: Three Faces of a Villain

Verdi's Iago is one of the most unapologetically evil characters in opera. The purposeful orchestrator of *Otello's* downfall into jealousy and murder, he proclaims that he was "born vile" and exults in his wickedness, to the accompaniment of highly expressive and dramatic music. Verdi and his librettist, Arrigo Boito, successfully transformed and adapted Shakespeare's character for the operatic stage. But Iago did not originate in the play *Othello*. Shakespeare in turn had been inspired by a 16th-century collection of stories by the Italian humanist and poet Giovanni Battista Giraldi, known as Cinzio. Cinzio's tale features a Moor who is duped by his duplicitous ensign into believing that his wife is unfaithful. The story ends with her murder at the Moor's hands.

This activity will introduce students to the idea of literary provenance. They will also explore three modes of storytelling—narrative, play, and opera—and gain insight into the nuances unique to each medium. Students will:

- examine excerpts from three versions of the *Othello* story, focusing on the character of Iago
- become familiar with the character and motivation of Iago in preparation for viewing the Met's HD transmission
- engage in textual performance both in groups and individually
- listen to and analyze some of the music in advance of the Met's HD transmission

STEPS

In this activity, students will engage in close reading, contrasting texts from different literary genres. Through performance, discussion, and listening, they will explore how these different mediums convey information about characters. They will also have an opportunity to explore another mode of narration through which to represent Iago's character.

STEP 1: Begin the class by introducing the notion of operatic plot source material. You may want to open the discussion by inviting students to offer examples of plot sources. Based on students' previous experience with opera, can they think of a work based on a Greek myth? A famous novel? A story from the Bible? A historical event? If students' experience with opera is more limited, they may find it easier to think of examples from musical theater or movies. The conclusion you'll want to elicit from students is that operas are usually based on a pre-existent story of some sort (although some feature wholly original plots).

STEP 2: Guide the discussion towards the opera *Otello* by noting that the works of William Shakespeare have provided a rich trove of material for many opera composers and librettists. Verdi's *Otello* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, which itself is an expansion and dramatization of an Italian story from the mid-16th century. First,

introduce students to the plot of Verdi's opera either by summarizing the action verbally or by having them read the synopsis. Optionally, you may also refer students to the sidebar *Otello and his Literary Forebears*, which will provide insight into how these three versions vary in their telling of the story of the jealous Moor.

STEP 3: Now it's time to delve more deeply into the differences among the three treatments of the story by closely considering the character of Iago. Distribute Part 1 of the reproducible handout at the end of this guide. Explain that this is an excerpt from the original story and that it introduces the character of the (nameless) Ensign, who will become Iago in Shakespeare's and Verdi's versions. Ask for a volunteer to read the paragraph aloud.

Lead a discussion in which students offer observations about the character of the Ensign in this passage. Guiding questions may include:

- What do we learn from this excerpt? (The Ensign is one of Otello's officers; he is handsome, wicked, two-faced, hypocritical; his appearance and way of speaking make him seem like an honorable and heroic person; etc.)
- How do we learn this? (Answers will vary, but students may note that the reader is merely told about the Ensign's character; a narrator, who does not seem to be a character in the story, communicates this. Link these observations to the concepts of

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND OTELLO

This activity directly supports the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.7

Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.9

Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

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

Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.



third-person perspective—a narrative point of view in which the narrator recounts the actions of others using third-person pronouns such as “she,” “he,” and “they” rather than first-person pronouns such as “I” and “we”—and the omniscient narrator—a third-person narrator who knows and recounts everything that characters think and do in a story. The narrative mode of this passage is that of an omniscient, third-person perspective.)

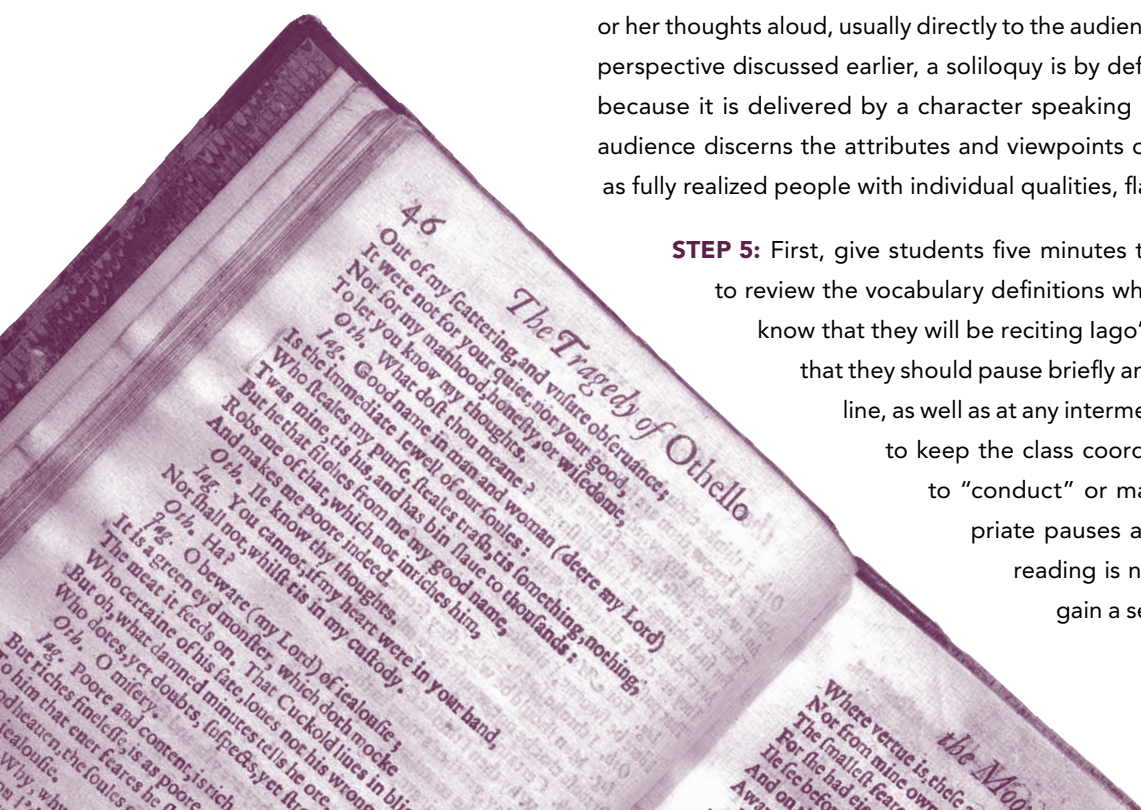
- How do you feel about this character after reading this section?
- What else would you want to know about the Ensign that is not provided here? What might make his character seem more concrete or demonstrate his true nature?

STEP 4: Following the discussion of the excerpt from Cinzio’s story, turn students’ attention to Shakespeare’s version. In preparation, you may want to discuss or distribute the material in the sidebar *Othello and the Theater of Shakespeare’s Time* to provide some background information about the conventions of theatrical performance in the Elizabethan era.

Proceed to distribute Part 2 of the reproducible handout. Explain that this page contains a speech from Shakespeare’s *Othello* by the character of the ensign, now named Iago. Introduce the context for the excerpt by explaining that it is Iago’s speech at the end of Act I, Scene 3. Iago has just finished a conversation with Roderigo, who is in love with Desdemona, in which he has laid the groundwork for his revenge on Othello. Immediately after Roderigo leaves the stage, Iago delivers this soliloquy.

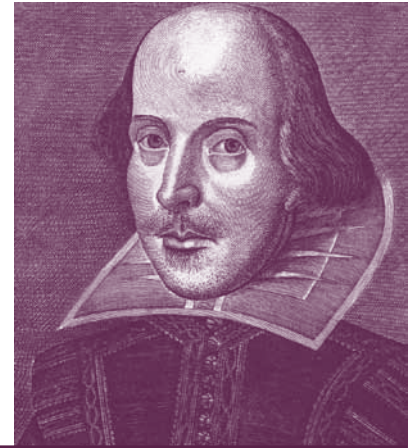
At this point, it will be helpful to examine the notion of the soliloquy and define the term if needed. (It is an extended speech in drama, in which a character expresses his or her thoughts aloud, usually directly to the audience.) In contrast to the third-person perspective discussed earlier, a soliloquy is by definition in first-person perspective because it is delivered by a character speaking on stage. In staged dramas, the audience discerns the attributes and viewpoints of characters by listening to them as fully realized people with individual qualities, flaws, and opinions.

- STEP 5:** First, give students five minutes to read over Iago’s soliloquy and to review the vocabulary definitions where applicable. Then let students know that they will be reciting Iago’s speech aloud as a class. Explain that they should pause briefly and take a breath at the end of each line, as well as at any intermediate punctuation marks. In order to keep the class coordinated, it may be helpful for you to “conduct” or make hand gestures at the appropriate pauses and starts. The goal of this initial reading is not only to encourage students to gain a sense of the physicality of dramatic



performance, but also for them to begin to understand the rhythmic and metrical aspects of Shakespeare's verse.

After this first reading, lead a discussion in which you and the class refine and direct how the speech should be performed. As a class, have students work through the speech line by line, mapping out the decisions Iago makes, the internal dialogue he has with himself, and the problems he seeks to solve. Call attention to how punctuation provides a guide for breaking up the speech into units, and ask what emotions students detect in the word choice and syntax. Ask them to think about how they'd communicate these shifts in performance through pauses, the words they emphasize, the tone of voice they employ, and their facial expressions.



Othello and the Theater of Shakespeare's Time

If Shakespeare's audience could have magically attended a production of Verdi's *Otello*, there would have been a lot they might have recognized: the basic plot, the personality traits of the main characters, the themes of jealousy, love, and betrayal. But the way these aspects are depicted in Verdi's opera would have appeared completely foreign to a 17th-century audience. Theater in Shakespeare's time followed conventions considerably different from those of the modern age.

Today, when we walk into an auditorium, we expect to see a stage with a proscenium, curtains, and often elaborate sets. The audience typically watches the action from one direction only—directly facing the stage. Shakespeare's plays were presented in a circular structure open to the sky. The actors performed on a platform that thrust out into a yard at the center. Many audience members would stand in the yard to watch the play, while those who paid more could sit in roofed galleries that ringed the stage, so

that the action was viewed from different angles. Sets therefore were typically quite minimal and included whatever pieces of furniture could be easily carried by the actors.

For most of Shakespeare's career, plays were performed during daylight hours, since it was considered unsafe (and too expensive) to light the stage with candles. As a result, there were no blackouts between scenes, and no way to dim the lights for a nighttime scene. Instead, to indicate it was dark, characters would talk about the darkness or carry torches. (The opening scene of *Hamlet*, which includes numerous verbal references to the nighttime setting, is a perfect example.)

To a Renaissance audience, one of the most surprising things in modern theater would have been to see a woman on stage. In Shakespeare's time, women were not allowed to act, and all female characters were played by adolescent boys. These young performers were highly trained and often praised for their portrayals of women.

The Question of Race in *Otello*

In Verdi's source, Shakespeare's *Othello*, the character of the Moor is clearly identified in terms of his race. Othello himself speaks of his African descent, and he is called "black" and "dark" throughout the play.

These aren't neutral descriptions. In Shakespeare's day (as in later periods), members of the dominant white culture often connected darker skin tones with undesirable characteristics. Shakespeare's play both incorporates and subverts these stereotypes.

Iago in particular equates Othello's skin tone with savagery; he calls Othello "an old black ram" (to Desdemona's "white ewe"). Even Othello characterizes his darkness as negative:

*My name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.*

But in other ways, Shakespeare works against these expectations, showing Othello to be a sort of superman among the Venetians. The Duke of Venice alludes to Othello's race to emphasize his goodness (though by way of a negative),

telling Desdemona's father that "your son-in-law is far more fair than black." But the description still turns on Othello's blackness, which is coded as negative.

In Verdi's version of the story, Otello's racial identity is made less explicit. In contrast to Shakespeare's description, Otello's "blackness" is alluded to only occasionally:

- Iago refers to Otello as a Moor.
- The assembled gentlemen in Act III describe him as "*nero*," or black.
- During their Act I love duet, Desdemona and Otello refer to his skin color ("*mie tenebre*", my darkness; "*tue tempie oscure*," your dark temples).
- In Act II, Scene 4, Otello sings to Desdemona: "*Forse perchè ho sul viso quest'atro tenebror*"—perhaps it's because I have this darkness on my face.

In these few references, the negative associations with blackness so apparent in Shakespeare's version are muted. Furthermore, Verdi rejected a costume design that would have presented the Moor as a savage African king, instead preferring him to be costumed as a Venetian.

After this analysis, invite one student to read the soliloquy aloud as a performance in front of the class, using everything the students have uncovered about the speech's meaning. If time permits, you may wish to open it up to the rest of the class and ask other volunteers to offer their own performances. Challenge your students to come up with competing interpretations of how to perform the speech, and if students are willing, have them vote for their favorite performance. Which was the most convincing? The most interesting? Which was the most true to the sense of the text and Iago's character?

STEP 6: Once you've completed the performance component of the activity, lead the students in a discussion of the text's interpretation. Ask students:

- What do we learn about Iago in this speech?
- How do we learn it? Can you describe Iago's style of communication?
- How is this different from the information we gained from Cinzio's version?
- What new things have we learned about this character? What does Iago think of his supposed ally Roderigo? Does he give a reason for his hatred of Othello?

Guide students to understand that a soliloquy provides the opportunity to see how the character's mind works—by concrete demonstration rather than mere assertion. In this example, as is often the case in Shakespeare, the soliloquy is an opportunity for characters to communicate their true feelings when they are operating under a campaign of pretense. Rather than the impartial descriptions we saw in the example by Cinzio (i.e., "Iago is deceptive and malicious"), in Shakespeare's soliloquy, we hear it from Iago's own mouth and glimpse his mind in action.

STEP 7: Next, distribute Part 3 of the reproducible handouts, which includes the text to Iago's central aria from Verdi's opera. Let students know that this speech has no direct parallel in Shakespeare's play; Boito and Verdi created it from scratch rather than drawing it from their source.

Then provide the context for the excerpt: Iago has just convinced Cassio, who is out of favor with Othello and has lost his post as captain, that he should ask Desdemona to speak in his favor to Othello. Noting that Desdemona rules Othello's heart, Iago convinces Cassio that she will be able to secure his pardon. Following this conversation, Cassio exits, leaving Iago alone on stage.

Explain that this piece is usually referred to as Iago's "Credo," based on its first line. If needed, define credo—a creed or statement of belief. Students may be familiar with the term from their religious backgrounds. Ask students what they would expect to hear in a credo from Iago.

Ask for a volunteer to read the English translation of the aria's text (provided in Part 3 of the reproducible handouts). Then lead a discussion about what the text

FUN FACT: Although Verdi had a lifelong fascination with Shakespeare—and his *Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff* are counted among the most masterful adaptations of the Bard's plays in any medium—he did not speak or read English.

conveys. Invite students to summarize what we learn about Iago in this piece. Guiding questions may include:

- How does this text compare to the treatments of Iago from Cinzio and Shakespeare from earlier in the lesson? Do we learn anything new here?
- Does Iago give a reason for his hatred of Othello, or does he rather seem to prefer evil for evil's sake?
- Compare the way the Credo conveys information about Iago with the two earlier pieces. How does Boito's libretto express this information? You may wish to



encourage students to consider the terminology discussed earlier (omniscient narrator, third-person perspective, soliloquy). Do any of these terms apply?

STEP 8: Next, remind students that in opera, the meaning of the text is amplified and expanded by the musical setting. Play **Track 1** for students, asking them to follow along to the text as they listen to the music.

Invite students to comment on their initial impressions of the musical atmosphere, asking:

- How does this music make you feel? Peaceful? On edge?
- How would you describe the singer's voice? High? Low? Full? Tender? Strong?
- What does that sound convey about the character? What kind of person would you expect this character to be like based on the sound of his voice alone?

Play the excerpt again, now having students pay special attention to the words they perceive as receiving a particular musical emphasis. They may find it helpful to underline portions of the text on the handout and to make notes in the margins with their impressions. In this discussion, it is not necessary to have a specialized musical vocabulary. Rather, students can call attention to more general shifts such as between loud and soft, fast and slow, pauses in the vocal line, and other kinds of emphasis.

After this second listening, lead a discussion about what students noticed. What did the musical setting add to their understanding of Iago as a character? Which textual sections are emphasized by the musical setting? You may ask students to call out the words or phrases they underlined on their handouts. Write these words on the whiteboard or chalkboard and invite students to comment on how these particular words

FUN FACT: In addition to his three completed operas based on Shakespeare—*Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*—Verdi also considered adapting *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and, most notably, *King Lear*. The *Lear* project occupied him, on and off, for several decades. A full libretto by Antonio Somma, his collaborator on *Un Ballo in Maschera*, survives, but Verdi never set it to music.

Otello and his Literary Forebears

Here are some of the key differences between the three versions of the story of the Moor of Venice.

Cinzio's *Gli Ecatommiti*

The story opens by recounting that a lady named Disdemona fell in love with and married the Moor. The Moor is sent to Cyprus to command during peacetime; Disdemona insists on going with him.

The Ensign is in love with Disdemona but thinks that she loves the Moor's Captain, so he grows to hate her. He plots the death of the Captain and plans to win Disdemona's love.

The Ensign steals Disdemona's handkerchief and plants it in the Captain's bed. The Ensign's wife knows of her husband's plot but does not reveal it for fear of him.

The Moor consults with the Ensign to plan Disdemona's murder. The Ensign beats her to death, then they pull down the roof of the house to hide the murder. The Moor later regrets his actions and is slain by Disdemona's kinsmen.

Shakespeare's *Othello*

The play opens in Venice, where Desdemona has just wed Othello. Her father disowns her. Othello is sent to Cyprus to ward off the attacking Turks; Desdemona pleads to accompany him.

The ensign, Iago, offers several different explanations for his hatred of Othello and the captain, Cassio, including that he was passed over for promotion in favor of Cassio.

Iago's wife, Emilia, steals the handkerchief for her husband, but doesn't know why he wants it. Cassio finds it in his bedchamber.

Convinced of Desdemona's guilt, Othello smothers her, then kills himself when he learns the truth. Iago flees but is caught and threatened with torture.

Verdi and Boito's *Otello*

Skipping Shakespeare's first act, the opera opens in Cyprus. During a raging storm, citizens of the island watch and wait for Otello's safe return from battle.

After setting in motion his plot for Otello's downfall, Iago, in his "Credo" aria, declares that he was made evil by a corrupt God.

Emilia picks up the handkerchief and Iago forcibly takes it from her.

As in Shakespeare, Othello smothers Desdemona. Iago escapes, and Otello kills himself.



FUN FACT: While writing his opera, Verdi at one point intended to call it *Jago* (in the name's Italian spelling), but he eventually realized this was a mistake—Iago, he said, is “a provoker, not a protagonist.” On the subject of being compared to Rossini, who had presented his operatic version of *Otello* 70 years earlier, Verdi commented to Boito, “I prefer it if they say, ‘He tried to fight a giant and was crushed,’ rather than, ‘He tried to hide behind the title of *Jago*.’”

demonstrate something about Iago's character. Finally, ask students to summarize their impression of Iago in Verdi and Boito's opera. How is Verdi's Iago different from Shakespeare's? Can students summarize how Verdi's musical setting creates that changed impression?

STEP 9: Wrap up the activity by asking students to think back to the three treatments they have studied and try to characterize how their differing genres—narrative, drama, and opera—demonstrate the qualities of a character. You may wish to have them create a chart—either individually or on the board—where they contrast the techniques used in each genre.

FOLLOW-UP: As homework, ask your students to choose another mode of storytelling and use it to convey Iago's character. Choices could include a poem, a diary entry, a movie trailer, a letter to a friend, a pantomime, a song, a TV commercial, or another medium of their choosing. Students should think carefully about the narrative style of their chosen medium and consider whether their work should be presented in first person, second, or third person, and the stylistic implications of that choice. Students can present their completed Iago portrayals to the class.

Storm Music

There is a long tradition in classical music of the depiction of musical storms, in which composers ingeniously utilize melody, harmony, rhythm, and orchestration to craft a musical image of nature at its wildest. In opera, the storm has the potential to be a thrilling “special effect,” with the musical depiction amplified by specialized percussion instruments as well as visual effects on stage.

The storm that opens Verdi’s *Otello* is one of the most famous musical storms in the operatic repertoire. Verdi marked the crashes of thunder and lightning directly in the score and used different orchestral instruments as the representation of wind, raging water, and Otello’s ship rocking in the waves. The following activity is designed to engage students in close listening and musical analysis as they compare four thrilling examples of musical storms in the operatic repertoire. The different musical storms featured in this activity are drawn from a variety of composers from different eras in music history. Each composer approaches the construction of the musical storm differently, which will provide students with an opportunity to contrast the music of different stylistic periods.

In this activity, students will:

- learn about various composers’ approaches to creating stage effects musically
- become familiar with specialized percussion instruments
- describe the characteristics of storm music from different musical eras

STEPS

The opening scene of *Otello* hurls the audience into a storm already violently in progress. It is a dazzling and aggressive gesture, and one created by Verdi’s masterful use of melodic, harmonic, and orchestral color. In this activity, students will contrast four musical storms from the operatic repertoire, culminating with the example from *Otello*. They will listen to audio excerpts of each storm as a class, and will use appropriate musical vocabulary to create descriptions of the different musical elements in each storm. Because interpretation is a highly individual response, each student will understand musical representation differently, leading to a rich classroom discussion.

Music

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the reproducible resources available at the back of this guide as well as the audio selections from *Otello* available online or on the accompanying CD.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Music, Humanities, Art

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To introduce and/or reinforce knowledge of musical terminology
- To listen to musical examples critically and to identify their basic harmonic and melodic shape, as well as their characteristic elements of orchestration
- To contrast musical examples by different composers, analyzing them for the ways they evoke a specific mood

The image shows a page from a musical score for the storm scene in Verdi's *Otello*. The tempo is marked "Allegro agitato. (♩ = 76.)". The score is for various instruments, including Flauti I. II., Ottavino e Flauto III., Oboi., Clarini in Do., Fagotti I. II., III. IV., Corni in Fa., Corni in Do., Cornette in Do., Trombe in Do., Tromboni I. II. III., Trombone basso, Timpani, G. Cassa e Piatti, Tam-tam, Altra G. Cassa, Lampi e Fulmini, Tuono e Organo, Violini, Viole, Violoncelli, and Contrabassi. The score includes dynamic markings like *ff* and *pp*, and a note "L'Organo sulla scena mett Contrabassi e Timpani, e contemporaneamente." The page is numbered 76 at the top right and bottom right.

**COMMON CORE STANDARDS
AND OTELLO**

This activity directly supports the following ELA–Literacy Common Core Strands:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2
Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5
Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

STEP 1: Begin the class by distributing copies of the *Ten Essential Musical Terms* and reviewing them with your students. Students may be familiar with some terms but others may be entirely new. Using the audio excerpts on the accompanying CD or online, ensure that students have a firm grasp of these concepts before moving on to the next portion of the activity. A list of audio examples is below.

TRACK MUSICAL TERM

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| 2 | Major |
| 3 | Minor |
| 4 | Sequence |
| 5 | Staccato |
| 6 | Thunder Sheet |
| 7 | Tremolo |
| 8 | Walking Bass |
| 9 | Wind Machine |

STEP 2: Now that students are familiar with the terms and concepts they will be using in their analysis, distribute the handout for this activity, found at the back of this guide. Begin by reading the brief synopsis of the relevant scene, to provide a context for your students’ study of the storm music. Then, listen to the corresponding audio track. Students will benefit from repeated listening.

On the handout, space is provided for students to make notes on each scene’s use of melody, harmony, rhythm and tempo, dynamics, and orchestration. In these boxes, students should draw on their understanding of the concepts contained in the *Ten Essential Musical Terms*. Feel free to adjust the level of detail and specificity required based on your students’ abilities.

In the final box, space is provided for students to compose a summary description of the example’s overall representation of the storm, using their own interpretive and descriptive faculties.

A completed exercise is provided on pages 20–23 for your convenience.

Ten Essential Musical Terms

Accent and Articulation

Accent refers to the prominence given to a note by a change in volume, duration, or attack. Articulation is a related term, meaning the amount of separation between notes, on a range from short and detached (“staccato”) to connected (“legato”). To indicate which note should receive an accent, a composer notates a symbol above the note. There are many different kinds of accents in music—for example, “marcato” indicates that a note should be “marked” or stressed; “martellato” indicates a “hammered style” both loud and short, and “tenuto” indicates that a note should be sustained for its full length. Accent and articulation are some of the many elements of composition and performance that combine to create musical expression and meaning.

Dynamics The relative intensity in the volume of musical sound. When indicated in a score, dynamics are communicated by a set of standard Italian terms and symbols (such as *f* for forte, *p* for piano, *mf* for mezzo-forte, and so on). The concept of dynamics comprises not only the degree of loudness, but also the movement between different volume levels (as in crescendo, “growing louder,” and diminuendo, “growing softer”).

Major and Minor Western music written since around 1600 has been built on two basic tonal principles: major and minor. Although the terms can be used to describe scales, intervals, harmonies, or keys, in their most basic application they refer to the overarching tonal organization of a composition, or its mode. Pieces in the major mode typically sound bright, cheery, or optimistic, while pieces in the minor mode may sound somber, plaintive, or sinister.

Sequence Musical repetition at different pitch levels. Melodic sequences involve the exact or near-exact repetition of a melodic snippet or phrase, whereas harmonic sequences involve the transposition of a series of chords. Sequences are a common feature of the Baroque style, as well as the exploratory middle section (known as the development section) of Classical sonata form. Sequencing is also a common technique used by Romantic composers in the repetition and transformation of leitmotifs.

Staccato Italian for “detached.” Staccato articulation is a method of playing in which a note is shortened and separated from the note that follows it by not being sustained for its complete duration. Staccato performance usually also includes an element of accentuation or emphasis. Staccato is the opposite of legato.

Tempo Literally “time” in Italian, tempo refers to the speed of a given piece of music. Tempo is indicated in a score by a variety of conventional (often Italian) words—allegro, adagio, vivace, moderato, grave, and many more—that not only provide direction on the composer’s desired rate of speed, but also carry associations of gesture and character. For instance, vivace indicates not only a brisk rate of speed but also a lively spirit. There are also additional tempo markings that indicate when a composer wants a section of music to speed up (such as “accelerando”) or slow down (such as “rallentando”).

Thunder Sheet A percussion instrument used to create the musical special effect of thunder. It is constructed from a large piece of flexible metal, suspended from a frame. The percussionist shakes the metal sheet to make it vibrate, creating a realistic approximation of the sound of thunder. Thunder sheets are occasionally used in orchestral and operatic scores from the late 19th century onwards.

Tremolo Italian for “trembling” or “quivering,” tremolo is a musical term indicating the rapid repetition of a single note. On string instruments, it requires that players move their bows back and forth across the string as fast as possible. A solo string player performing a tremolo may not sound very powerful, but when all the string instruments in the orchestra play a tremolo together, it creates an impressive effect.

Walking Bass A musical texture in which the lowest instruments proceed continuously in a rhythmically regular, melodically stepwise motion. Typically this texture is set in contrast to the rhythm and melody of the instruments above.

Wind Machine A percussion instrument designed to imitate the sound of wind. It is shaped like a large cylinder, with a hand crank to rotate the device. A sheet of fabric is draped and fixed around the exterior of the cylinder. When the cylinder is rotated, the friction between the moving wooden surface and the fabric drape create the sound of rushing wind. The pitch can be modulated by varying the speed at which the crank is turned. While a wind machine is only occasionally called for in orchestral scores, it is a common tool in the theater, where it has been used for special effects since the Baroque era.

TRACK 10: *The Enchanted Island*, Act 1, “Storm,”
Music by André Campra, from his 1712 opera *Idoménée*

Brief Context: A spell has been cast to conjure a storm at sea, with the goal of shipwrecking a passing boat and bringing its occupants to the shores of the island.

MELODY: Running scales and repeated patterns set in ascending and descending sequences.

HARMONY: Mostly major, with minor moments throughout, and a strong major ending.

RHYTHM & TEMPO: Fast, dense rhythms, constant motion in the strings.

DYNAMICS: Loud (*forte*) throughout.

ORCHESTRATION: String-dominated (with harpsichord). Wind machine and thunder sheet used for effect. Chorus integrated into the storm scene.

DESCRIPTION OF MUSICAL STORM: The texture evokes a storm at sea. A wind machine is heard right from the beginning, while driving, fast patterns in the strings suggest the sudden turbulence of the water and the rushing of wind. The strings drive onward unrelentingly, while a thunder sheet creates a rumbling thunder sound. As the chorus enters singing of the “arising tempest,” they add to the majestic portrayal of nature’s power. The strings move through swirling patterns, imitating wind and water, and then suddenly wind down, as if the storm disappeared and the weather returned to calm almost as quickly as it had appeared.

SALCE
SALCE
SALCE

MUSICAL SNAPSHOT

THE WILLOW SONG: A high point of Act IV (and indeed the entire opera) is Desdemona’s mournful aria “*Piangea cantando*,” known as the Willow Song. Filled with sadness and envisioning her own death, Desdemona recalls a song sung by her mother’s poor maidservant who was in love with a man who abandoned her. The song’s plaintive refrain “*Salce! Salce! Salce!*” (“Willow! Willow! Willow!”), a repeating descending minor third sung without accompaniment, is an effective illustration of Desdemona’s sorrow. After reciting the song’s final line (“He was born for glory, I to love”), Desdemona bids a passionate farewell to Emilia. The full text of the Willow Song is contained in the reproducible handouts at the back of this guide; a recording of the aria is on **Track 14** of the audio examples.

TRACK 11: Gioachino Rossini, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Act II, “Storm”

Brief Context: A thunderstorm in Seville, Spain. Count Almaviva and Figaro are fighting against the storm to position a ladder to Rosina’s window, so that Almaviva and Rosina can run away together.

MELODY: Opens with a delicate step-wise melody, and moves on to a dramatic section of melodic sequences and flourishes, finally returning to the delicate opening over a low drone.

HARMONY: Beginning in the major, followed by the middle and most dramatic part of the storm in minor, with a quiet major ending.

RHYTHM & TEMPO: Begins with staccato rhythms in a moderate tempo. The tempo speeds up and the rhythms become faster as the storm builds. Then the tempo slows again as the storm dies away.

DYNAMICS: Starts quietly, then increases in volume through the most dramatic part of the storm with loud flourishes, finally closing with a diminuendo.

ORCHESTRATION: String-dominated, with woodwinds and prominent thunder rolls.

DESCRIPTION OF MUSICAL STORM: A major-inflected staccato melody in the strings and flute represent the slow start of rain, with brief tremolos in the low strings imitating gusts of wind or rumbles of thunder. Then the storm begins to intensify, with a sudden turn towards the minor, accompanied by tremolos in the low strings. The violins outline a minor scale while the low strings ascend and descend with flourishes, suggesting the movement of wind and rain. The whole orchestra enters, building towards a forte crash representing thunder and lightning. Then the low strings reduce in volume and build again through ascending patterns to the next full orchestral crash of thunder. The descending pattern in the violins imitates heavy falling rain and beating wind. Tremolos in the high strings bring the storm to a climax, with full-orchestra crashes of thunder and lightning and more literal thunder rolls played by a thunder machine. The woodwinds continue to suggest driving rain, with brass and thunder rolls punctuating their melody. Suddenly, a more delicate melody enters in the upper strings, smoothly moving downward, suggesting that the storm is beginning to abate. The low strings play a sustained note, while the woodwinds and upper strings return to the major-inflected staccato music of the opening, signifying the storm’s abatement and the return of delicate rain drops. The storm ends on a major chord, as if all is at peace again.

FUN FACT: At roughly 3,500 lines, *Othello* is among Shakespeare’s longer plays. (An average Renaissance drama had about 3,000.) Boito’s libretto contains fewer than 800 lines—a testament to the prodigious work of condensing and streamlining required in any operatic adaptation of a literary work.

TRACK 12: Richard Wagner, *Die Walküre*, Prelude to Act I

Brief Context: During a raging storm, Siegmund is looking for shelter. He fights against the storm to make his way to the closest house.

MELODY: Repeated sequences and sustained tremolos in the low strings; dramatic descending patterns in the upper strings.

HARMONY: Minor throughout.

RHYTHM & TEMPO: Consistent driving rhythm, with strong accents. The rhythm becomes more complex when the upper strings enter.

DYNAMICS: Many fluctuations in volume.

ORCHESTRATION: String-dominated, with some woodwind and brass. Prominent use of timpani drum rolls.

DESCRIPTION OF MUSICAL STORM: The orchestra begins with an accented chord, and the violins immediately begin a sustained tremolo, evoking the storm's unrelenting intensity. Underneath the sustained tremolo, the low string instruments sequence through a foreboding walking bass line. As the tremolos and walking bass continue, certain moments receive accents, demonstrating the unpredictable nature of a storm as it whips and advances across a landscape. The sustained tremolo and persistently foreboding bass line create a feeling of unrelenting struggle. The brass and woodwinds enter briefly, imitating the howling of the wind. The backdrop of sustained tremolo and walking bass begins to change, as the upper strings and brass interject with ascending flourishes. A timpani roll signals that the storm has reached a climax. As it slowly dies down, the persistent walking bass line continues, but in a less aggressive style, moving towards a calmer state, although a foreboding, minor harmony persists. The character of this music is reminiscent of a storm moving across a landscape.

TRACK 13: Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act I Opening Chorus

Brief Context: Otello (aboard his ship, invisible off stage) struggles against a storm at sea to bring his fleet safely back to harbor. The people on the shore watch, fearing that the ship will sink.

MELODY: Melodic material is highly segmented, reflecting rapid changes to the dramatic situation. Different instrumental groups and voices enter with individual melodic material—including oscillating melody in the brass, running scales/flourishes in the woodwinds, and repeated patterns and sequences in strings.

HARMONY: Minor throughout, with a strongly dissonant opening chord.

RHYTHM & TEMPO: The tempo fluctuates as the storm varies in intensity, and the rhythm switches between slower sections and dense, driving moments.

DYNAMICS: Many fluctuations in volume, starting with the fortissimo opening chord, followed by crescendos and decrescendos. Soft moments juxtaposed with loud crashes.

ORCHESTRATION: Full orchestra used in crashing moments of lighting and thunder. Strings, brass, woodwinds, and percussion all play important roles. Chorus integrated into the storm scene.



In the storm scene that opens *Otello*, Verdi depicts the ominous sound of faraway thunder. The organ sustains a dissonant tone cluster of C-C#-D at the bottom of the keyboard for 235 measures.

FOLLOW-UP: After students have completed their charts, open up the floor to a general discussion about each example's musical depiction of a storm. Which example did students think was the most literal in its representation? Did any of them stand out as more dramatic? Which did they find the least exciting? Students will enjoy using their critical observations to compare the effects of listening to each example.

Supporting the Student Experience during *The Met: Live in HD* Transmission

IN PREPARATION

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

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *OTELLO*

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.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

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. Performance activities help students analyze different aspects of the experience and engage critically with the performance. They will consider the creative choices that have been made for the particular production they are watching and examine different aspects of the performance.

Each Performance Activity incorporates a reproducible sheet. Students should bring this activity sheet to the *Live in HD* transmission and fill it out during intermission and/or after the final curtain. The activities direct attention to details of the production that might otherwise go unnoticed.

For *Otello*, the first activity sheet, *Setting the Stage*, encourages students to examine and analyze the set of the opera's Met production. Director Bartlett Sher has noted that his goal was to create "a psychological world of glass and walls" using interlocking pieces of scenery that reshape over the course of the opera to create different locations. While viewing the broadcast, students will take notes on both the physical details of the sets and the interpretations and meanings they suggest.

The second, basic activity sheet is called *My Highs & Lows*. It is meant to be collected, opera by opera, over the course of the season. This sheet serves to guide students toward a consistent set of objective observations, as well as to help them articulate their own opinions. It is designed to enrich the students' understanding of the art form as a whole. The ratings system encourages students to express their critique: use these ratings to spark discussions that require careful, critical thinking.

The Performance Activity reproducible handouts can be found in the back of this guide. On the next page, you'll find an activity created specifically for follow-up after the *Live in HD* transmission.

Otello as Outsider

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. 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? The discussion offers an opportunity to apply the notes on students' *My Highs & Lows* sheet, as well as their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production—in short, to see themselves as *Otello* experts.

While *Otello* is presented as a leader—he is a valued general the people rely on for protection and leadership—he is also an outsider. He's identified as a “Moor,” an uncertain term applied indiscriminately at that time



Acclaimed African-American actor Paul Robeson played the role of Shakespeare's Othello with English actress Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona in 1930.

to people of North African descent, and while he's seen much of the world, he is a relative newcomer to Venetian society. Even his wife, Desdemona, seems to love him for the ways he is different from the Venetians.

One external marker of *Otello*'s status as an outsider is his race. In their version of the story, Verdi and Boito do not emphasize this as much as Shakespeare had. But it's impossible to ignore the few references to race in the opera, especially as they often come from the mouth of Iago and make the offensive connection between *Otello*'s appearance and his nature. To help your students explore the depiction of race in *Otello*, share the sidebar *The Question of Race in Otello* with your students. Then ask them to consider

IN PREPARATION

This activity requires no preparation other than attendance at the *Live in HD* transmission of *Otello*.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To review and synthesize students' understanding of *Otello*
- To discuss the opera's visual representation as an integral aspect of overall interpretation
- To consider the issue of race in the opera
- To draw conclusions about the presentation of *Otello* as a social outsider

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND OTELLO

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

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

FUN FACT: In 19th-century France, it was customary for every opera performance to include a ballet. When *Otello* had its Paris premiere in 1894, Verdi wrote additional dance music for the entrance of the Venetian ambassadors at the start of Act III. The ballet music occasionally appears on recordings but is rarely heard in live performances today.

Otello's status as an outsider, as well as the role race plays in the opera. Some questions to ask may include:

- At what moments in the opera do the other characters seem less interested in seeing Otello as an outsider? When are they more concerned with his outsider status?
- How is it made clear that Otello is as an outsider? How might this outsider status make him vulnerable to Iago's manipulations?
- What did you think of the portrayal of Otello's status as an outsider in the Met production? What cues, visual or otherwise, suggest that Otello is considered different from those around him?
- If you were going to stage *Otello*, how would you communicate his "otherness"? Through costumes? Acting style? Props? Staging and blocking?

To conclude the discussion, raise the point that this production depicts Otello without any visual reference to race or color. Does Otello *need* to be black? Does eliminating his literal blackness change the interpretation of the opera? Students may address this question in a group discussion or as a written homework assignment.

- 1 Iago's Creed
- 2 Ex. Major
- 3 Ex. Minor
- 4 Ex. Sequence
- 5 Ex. Staccato
- 6 Ex. Thunder Sheet
- 7 Ex. Tremolo
- 8 Ex. Walking Bass
- 9 Ex. Wind Machine
- 10 *The Enchanted Island*, Act 1, "Storm"
from the Metropolitan Opera broadcast of January 21, 2012,
conducted by William Christie; with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
and Chorus
- 11 Gioachino Rossini, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Act II, "Storm"
from the Metropolitan Opera broadcast of December 6, 2014,
conducted by Michele Mariotti; with the Metropolitan Opera
Orchestra and Chorus
- 12 Richard Wagner, *Die Walküre*, Prelude to Act I
from the Metropolitan Opera broadcast of May 14, 2011,
conducted by James Levine; with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
and Chorus
- 13 Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act I Opening Chorus
- 14 Musical Snapshot: "The Willow Song"

***Otello* excerpts taken from the
Metropolitan Opera broadcast of
February 10, 1996**

OTELLO

Plácido Domingo

DESDEMONA

Aprile Millo

IAGO

James Morris

EMILIA

Jane Bunnell

CASSIO

Clinton Forbis

Conducted by
James Levine

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
and Chorus

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Iago: Three Faces of a Villain

Part 1

From *Gli Ecatommiti*, written in 1565 by the Italian author Cinzio (i.e. Giovanni Battista Giraldi)

Now amongst the soldiery there was an Ensign, a man of handsome figure, but of the most depraved nature in the world. This man was in great favor with the Moor, who had not the slightest idea of his wickedness; for, despite the malice lurking in his heart, he cloaked with proud and valorous speech and with a specious¹ presence the villainy of his soul with such art that he was to all outward show another Hector or Achilles².

¹ misleadingly attractive

² characters from the Ancient Greek epic poem *Iliad*, figures of great heroism and military prowess

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Iago: Three Faces of a Villain (CONTINUED)

Part 2

From *Othello*, written circa 1603–04 by William Shakespeare, Act I, Scene 3

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse.
For I mine own gained knowledge should profane,
If I would time expend with such a snipe*
But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt* my sheets
'Has done my office*: I know not if't be true,
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety. He holds me well;*
The better shall my purpose work on him.
Cassio's a proper* man: let me see now:
To get his place and to plume up my will*
In double knavery—How, how? Let's see:
After some time, to abuse Othello's ear
That he* is too familiar with his wife.
He hath a person and a smooth dispose*
To be suspected, framed to make women false.
The Moor is of a free* and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose*
As asses are.
I have't. It is engendered.* Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

(This is how I get rich off fools)

(because I'd become stupid)

*fool

*between

*business, job / (i.e. *he's slept with my wife*)

(I'm not sure but I'll proceed as if it's true)

*thinks well of me

(so my plan will work even better)

*good-looking, dutiful

*get what I want

(lie to him)

*i.e. Cassio

*manner

(to appear capable of seducing women)

*unreserved, unsuspicious

(deceived)

*conceived, planned

OTELLO

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Iago: Three Faces of a Villain (CONTINUED)

Part 3

From *Otello* by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Arrigo Boito
Act II, Scene 2

TRACK 1

IAGO: Credo in un Dio crudel che m'ha creato
simile a sè, e che nell'ira io nomo.
Dalla viltà d'un germe, o d'un atomo
vile son nato.
Son scellerato perchè son uomo;
e sento il fango originario in me.
Sì, quest'è la mia fè!
Credo con fermo cuor, siccome crede
la vedovella al tempio,
che il mal ch'io penso e che da me procede
per il mio destino adempio.
Credo che il giusto è un istrion beffardo,
e nel viso e nel cuor;
che tutto è in lui bugiardo:
lagrima, bacio, sguardo, sacrificio ed onor.
E credo l'uom gioco d'iniqua sorte
dal germe della culla
al verme dell'avel.
Vien dopo tanta irrision, la Morte.
Poi? E poi?—La Morte è il Nulla.
È vecchia fola il ciel.

I believe in a cruel God, who made me
in his image, and in my anger I call to him.
From the vileness of a seed or some particle,
I was born vile.
I am evil, because I am a man,
and I feel the primordial slime within me.
Yes. This is my faith!
I believe with a heart as steadfast as
that of a widow in Church,
that by the evil which I think and which I do,
I fulfill my destiny.
I believe a just man is a disingenuous actor
in both mind and heart;
that everything about him is a lie:
tear, kiss, gaze, sacrifice and honor.
And I believe man is the plaything of unjust fate,
from the seed of the cradle
to the worms of the grave.
After all this derision comes Death.
And then? And then? Death is Nothingness.
Heaven is an old wives' tale.



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CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Storm Music

The Enchanted Island, Act 1, “Storm,” Music by André Campra, from his 1712 opera *Idoménée*

Brief Context: A spell has been cast to conjure a storm at sea, with the goal of shipwrecking a passing boat and bringing its occupants to the shores of the island.

Melody:

Harmony:

Rhythm & Tempo:

Dynamics:

Orchestration:

Description of Musical Storm:

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Storm Music (CONTINUED)

Gioachino Rossini, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Act II, “Storm”

Brief Context: A thunderstorm in Seville, Spain. Count Almaviva and Figaro are fighting against the storm to position a ladder to Rosina’s window, so that Almaviva and Rosina can run away together.

Melody:

Harmony:

Rhythm & Tempo:

Dynamics:

Orchestration:

Description of Musical Storm:

OTELLO

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Storm Music (CONTINUED)

Richard Wagner, *Die Walküre*, Prelude to Act I

Brief Context: During a raging storm, Siegmund is looking for shelter. He fights against the storm to make his way to the closest house.

Melody:

Harmony:

Rhythm & Tempo:

Dynamics:

Orchestration:

Description of Musical Storm:

OTELLO

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Storm Music (CONTINUED)

Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*, Act I Opening Chorus

Brief Context: Otello (aboard his ship, invisible off stage) struggles against a storm at sea to bring his fleet safely back to harbor. The people on the shore watch, fearing that the ship will sink.

Melody:

Harmony:

Rhythm & Tempo:

Dynamics:

Orchestration:

Description of Musical Storm:

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Musical Snapshot: The Willow Song

TRACK 14: THE WILLOW SONG

DESDEMONA: "Piangea cantando nell'erma landa,
piangea la mesta,

O Salce! Salce! Salce!

Sedea chinando sul sen la testa,

Salce! Salce! Salce!

Cantiamo! Cantiamo!

Il salce funebre sarà la mia ghirlanda."

(to Emilia) Affrettati; fra poco giunge Otello.

"Scorreano i rivi fra le zolle in fior,

gemea quel core affranto,

e dalle ciglia le sgorgava il cor

l'amara onda del pianto.

Salce! Salce! Salce!

Cantiamo! Cantiamo!

Il salce funebre sarà la mia ghirlanda.

Scendean l'augelli a vol dai rami cupi

verso quel dolce canto.

E gli occhi suoi piangean tanto, tanto,

da impietosir le rupi."

(to Emilia, taking a ring from her finger)

Riponi quest'anello.

(rising) Povera Barbara!

Solea la storia con questo

semplice suono finir:

"Egli era nato per la sua gloria,

io per amar..."

(to Emilia) Ascolta. Odo un lamento.

(Emilia takes a step or two.)

Taci... Chi batte a quella porta?

EMILIA: È il vento.

DESDEMONA: "Io per amarlo e per morir.

Cantiamo! Cantiamo!

Salce! Salce! Salce!"

Emilia, addio.

Come m'ardon le ciglia!

È presagio di pianto.

Buona notte. *(Emilia turns to leave.)*

Ah! Emilia, Emilia, addio!

Emilia addio!

"She wept as she sang on the lonely heath,
the poor girl wept,

O Willow, Willow, Willow!

She sat with her head upon her breast,

Willow, Willow, Willow!

Come sing! Come sing!

The weeping willow shall be my crown."

Make haste; Othello will soon be here.

"The streams ran between flowery banks,

she moaned in her grief,

and waves of bitter tears poured forth

from her heart and down her face.

Willow! Willow! Willow!

Come sing! Come sing!

The weeping willow shall be my crown.

Birds flew down from dark branches

towards that sweet song.

Her eyes cried so, so very much that even

stones were moved to share her sorrow."

Put this ring away.

Poor Barbara!

The story used to end

with this simple phrase:

"He was born for glory,

I to love..."

Listen! I heard a cry.

Hush... Who is knocking at that door?

It's just the wind.

"I to love him and to die.

Come sing! Come sing!

Willow! Willow! Willow!"

Emilia, farewell.

How my eyes do burn!

They always do that before I cry.

Good night.

Ah! Emilia, Emilia, farewell!

Emilia, farewell!

SALCE SALCE SALCE

At the Met: *Setting the Stage*

Traditional opera stagings often include lavish sets and costumes that realistically depict the setting. For *Otello* this might include a harbor, grand halls, courtyards, a sunlit garden, an intimate bedroom. But a director may choose to present the setting in different ways—to reflect certain ideas about the characters or their relationships, to indicate symbolic aspects of the location, or to create a specific mood. During *The Met: Live in HD* transmission, take notes on what you notice about the set. What does it look like? How are the pieces of the set used throughout to create different spaces? What sort of mood or meaning do they evoke?

Act I: Exterior of Otello's castle on Cyprus, near the harbor

Describe the set.	Who is on stage? How are they grouped?	What is the effect of the set and staging?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Act II: A hall in Otello's castle, with a view of the garden

Describe the set.	Who is on stage? How are they grouped?	What is the effect of the set and staging?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Act III: The great hall of the castle

Describe the set.	Who is on stage? How are they grouped?	What is the effect of the set and staging?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Act IV: Desdemona's bedroom

Describe the set.	Who is on stage? How are they grouped?	What is the effect of the set and staging?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Otello: My Highs & Lows

OCTOBER 17, 2015

CONDUCTED BY YANNICK NÉZET-SÉGUIN

REVIEWED BY _____

THE STARS	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
ALEKSANDRS ANTONENKO AS OTELLO	*****	
SONYA YONCHEVA AS DESDEMONA	*****	
ŽELJKO LUČIĆ AS IAGO	*****	
DIMITRI PITTAS AS CASSIO	*****	
CHAD SHELTON AS RODERIGO	*****	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN/STAGING
THE STORM MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A CELEBRATION AND A FIGHT MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
OTELLO AND DESDEMONA'S DUET MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
IAGO'S CREDO MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
IAGO PLANTS A SEED OF DOUBT IN OTELLO MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
OTELLO HUMILIATES DESDEMONA MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A DESPERATE OATH MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
A VISIT BY THE VENETIAN AMBASSADOR MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
DESDEMONA PREPARES FOR BED MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
THE MURDER MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5
OTELLO LEARNS THE TRUTH MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5