



**EXPLORE
& LEARN**
CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY

GLENCORE

Ensemble Studio School Tour



La serva padrona

GIOVANNI BATTISTA PERGOLESÌ

2013-2014

STUDY GUIDE

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Cover: The original set maquette by designer Michael Gianfrancesco for the COC Glencore Ensemble Studio School Tour production of La serva padrona.

Right: A painting of Ekaterina Nelidova as Serpina by Dmitry Levitzky, 1773



Welcome

Opera 101

Dear Educators,

Opera is a living, breathing art form. It's for anyone, anywhere.

So it's great news that the Canadian Opera Company's 2013 Glencore Ensemble Studio School Tour is once again bursting out of the opera house to bring incredible singing, gripping drama and magical sets and costumes to your schools and communities! Every year over 15,000 students in southern Ontario and beyond are treated to some of the best young singers, directors and musicians this country has to offer. It is our mandate to create opera of the highest quality and many of our school tour performers have gone on to grace the stages of the world's major opera houses.

The COC is thrilled to present *La serva padrona*, a delightful piece by Italian composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. In the history of the school tour, this is the first time we have programmed a production especially for high school students. Our hope is that this unabridged opera, with its bold characters and witty banter, will inspire students to become engaged with the operatic art form, and all that it encompasses, in a meaningful way.

The COC has created this study guide to serve as the starting point for your own operatic experience. A brief history of the opera, a synopsis and a section describing the visual design elements will enhance your appreciation of this production. We have also provided discussion questions to encourage students to examine the opera thoughtfully and critically, as well as make connections between *La serva padrona* and the larger worlds of music, expression, literature and imagination.

Happy travels,

Vanessa Smith
School Programs Manager
Canadian Opera Company

WHAT IS OPERA?

The term "opera" comes from the Italian word for "work" or "piece," and it is usually applied to the European tradition of opera. Opera is a story told through music, drama and design. Musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling. The COC presents works in the western European tradition.

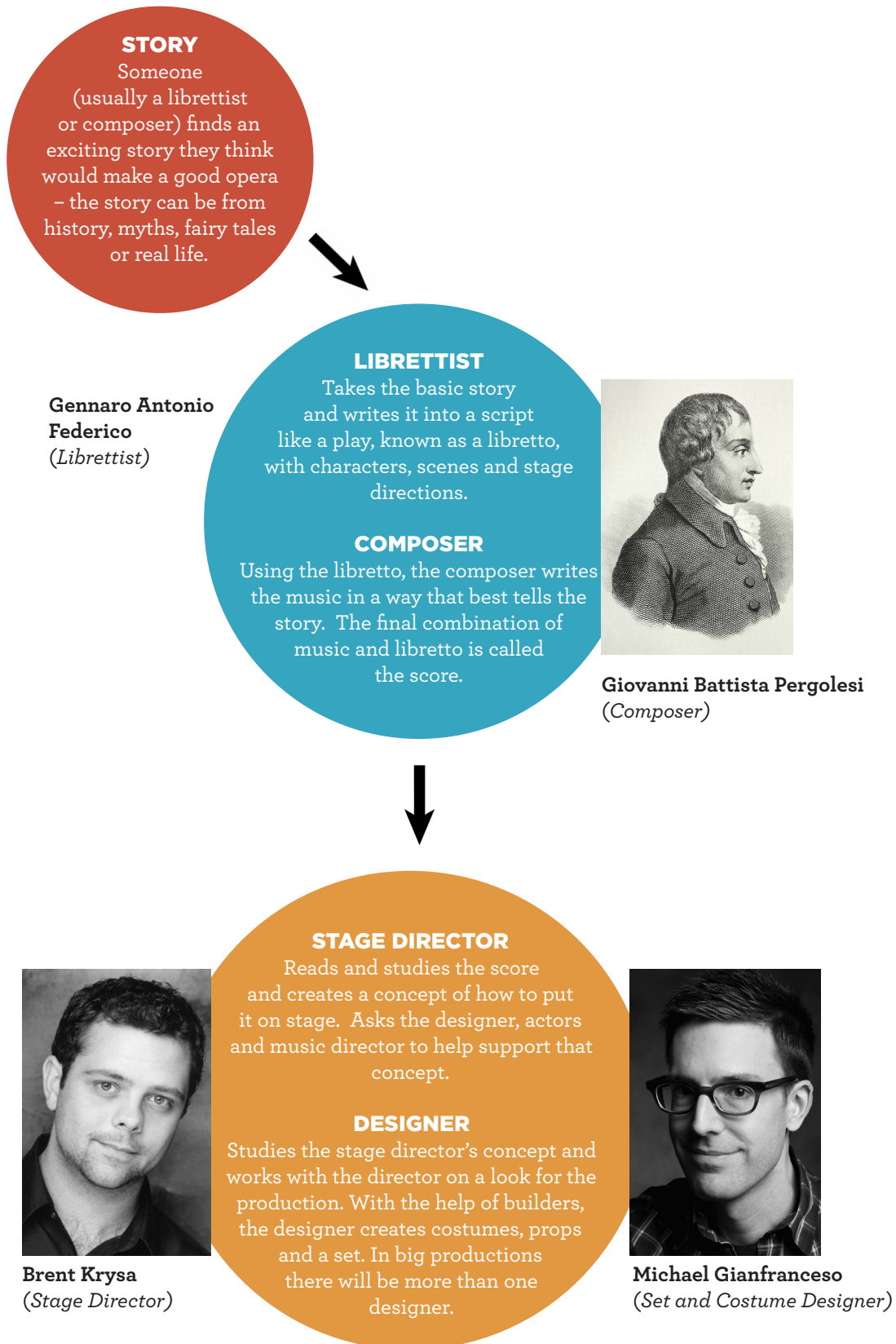
HISTORY OF OPERA - IN TWO MINUTES OR LESS!

Opera started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy, at the beginning of the Baroque period of music. The first opera composers took many of their ideas from the ancient Greeks, who combined music and drama to tell a story more effectively. The Greeks also used a chorus to further the plot and comment on the action of the story.

Early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, opera used many different stories: some serious (called *opera seria*) and some light-hearted (called *opera buffa*). Since then, operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), and children's stories (*The Little Prince*).

You probably know more about opera than you realize, as music from Bizet's *Carmen*, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and Verdi's *Rigoletto* (to name just a few) are featured in countless movies, cartoons and television commercials.

How an Opera is Created



MUSIC DIRECTOR

Teaches the cast how to sing the music and plays the piano for performances. In larger operas, the piano is replaced by a full orchestra, which is led by the conductor.



Jenna Douglas
(*Music Director*)



Michael Lewandowski
(*Stage Manager*)

STAGE MANAGER

Helps the stage director manage the rehearsals and performers. She or he writes down where people and sets move in the opera. Manages all performances once the stage director is finished with the rehearsal process.



CAST

A group of singers act out the roles of the opera with the help of the music director, director and stage manager. The cast are the people you see when enjoying an opera.



Gordon Bintner
(*Uberto/Gatone*)



Sasha Djihanian
(*Serpina*)



Clarence Frazer
(*Uberto/Gatone*)



Claire de Sévigné
(*Serpina*)



AUDIENCE

What would a show be without an audience?
Performing in front of an audience is what makes all the hard work worth it!

Voice Types

Just as each person's speaking voice has a certain range and sound, each singer's voice falls within a certain range and possesses a unique tone or quality. In the same way that no two people are physically identical, no two voices sound the same. There is a tremendous variety within each vocal range.

FEMALE VOICES

Soprano: The soprano is the highest of the female voices. Some are able to sing very high notes and skip through rapid passages with ease (coloratura soprano). Others specialize in singing with great intensity and power (dramatic soprano). Still others have voices of exceptional beauty that can sustain long melodies (lyric soprano). Sopranos tend to play the heroines (lead female characters) in opera. Isabel Bayrakdarian is a well-known Canadian soprano. [Click here](#) to watch her perform!

Mezzo-soprano: These are lower female voices. Mezzo-sopranos have a darker sound and can reach low notes beneath the range of a soprano. Mezzo-sopranos often sing the roles of mothers, witches, confidantes, or even young male characters. Allyson McHardy is a notable Canadian mezzo-soprano and you can watch her by [clicking here](#).

Contralto: This is the lowest female voice. This voice type is often written for a very strong character, such as a goddess. Canadian Marie-Nicole Lemieux is a famous contralto. [Click here](#) to see her in performance.

MALE VOICES

Countertenor: A countertenor is a falsetto male voice with a very high register, so much so, that at first hearing he can sound similar to a female operatic voice. Daniel Taylor is a famous Canadian countertenor. To listen to him perform, [click here](#).

Tenor: The tenors are the higher male voices, and like the soprano, cover a wide variety of vocal colours. Ramón Vargas is an example of a "lyric tenor" with his ability to soar through melodies, while Canadian Ben Heppner exemplifies the darker-hued intensity of the "dramatic tenor." They often play the hero. Michael Schade is a Canadian tenor, famous for his mastery of many Mozart roles. [Click here](#) to hear him.

Baritone: These are the middle male voices. Composers only began to write for this range in the 19th century. As with all the ranges, there are a number of types of baritones. Russell Braun is one of the world's leading lyric baritones. [Click here](#) to see him in performance. Many baritones have extremely flexible wide-ranging voices. They play the villains, fools, friends, fathers and other character parts.

Bass: The lowest of all voice types, the bass has a rich sound particularly suited to the wiser, older or evil characters in opera. Composers often challenge basses by writing notes at the extreme low end of their range. Robert Gleadow is a well-known Canadian bass. [Click here](#) to hear him.

Characters and Story

CHARACTERS

Character	Pronunciation	Description	Voice-type
Uberto	oo-BEHR-toh	An elderly gentleman	Bass
Serpina	sehr-PEE-nah	Uberto's servant	Soprano
Gatone	gah-TOH-neh	Another servant	Silent

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Uberto is upset and sings about how his servant Serpina is neglecting her duties. When Serpina enters without the coffee Uberto had requested, she asserts that she will no longer take orders from him. Angry about Serpina's increasingly insubordinate behaviour, Uberto declares that he must put Serpina in her place by giving her a mistress to serve. Therefore, Uberto decides, he must get married. He orders Gatone to find him a wife but Serpina objects, saying that he should marry her instead. Act I ends with a duet by Serpina and Uberto, arguing over his choice of bride.

ACT II

In order to make Uberto jealous, Serpina decides she needs a suitor of her own. She solicits the help of Gatone who agrees to disguise himself as a soldier asking for her hand. Gatone waits offstage while Uberto enters and Serpina declares her intention to marry her "suitor." While she goes to get Gatone Uberto tries to figure out his true feelings for Serpina. Serpina returns with her suitor and sings an aria* about how Uberto will miss her when she is gone. The act closes with Uberto's realization that having Serpina is better than losing her. Uberto declares that he will marry her himself.

**An aria is a song for one singer that provides an opportunity for the singer to express his or her artistic skill. It allows a character to express emotions and reflect on the events of the drama.*

The Composer of *La serva padrona*



GIOVANNI BATTISTA PERGOLESI
(1710 – 1736)

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi was born on January 4, 1710 in Iesi, Italy. Although he was not born into a musical family, he began taking music lessons at an early age in his home town, learning to play the violin. He was later sent to the Conservatory in Naples to study.

At the conservatory, Pergolesi began taking composition lessons and premiered his first pieces. In 1731, he left the conservatory and began his musical career as an opera composer in Naples. Composers were paid on commission, which meant they were given a sum of money to write a specific piece for a specific patron. These patrons were members of the local nobility who were wealthy enough to hire composers like Pergolesi regularly for their musical services. Receiving opera commissions depended on a composer's popularity and reputation. For financial security, Pergolesi relied upon several patrons throughout his life. He was responsible for all the musical activities in his patrons' service, at times conducting or composing music for special occasions.

Pergolesi died on March 16, 1736, at only 26 years of age. Though not a very prominent musical figure during his lifetime, his fame as a composer grew after his death. His best-known work for the stage remains *La serva padrona* (1733), which had a tremendous influence on the development of comic opera, but he also made significant contributions to choral music, where his name and compositions are famous to this day.

In addition to sparking a great debate over the merits and artistry of Italian *opera buffa* (for more information, see page 9), *La serva padrona* bridges the gap between the Baroque and Classical compositional styles. The changing composition of opera audiences from aristocracy to the developing middle class resulted in a shift of subject matter, as opera began to reflect the interests of its new audience. The story's commentary on contemporary

society and the use of "everyday" characters was a change from the Baroque era's distinctive treatment of ancient myths, legends and royalty as the basis for operas. Musically, Pergolesi's attempt of more seamless transitions between recitatives* and arias, the repetition of melodic phrases, and more challenging writing for the singers became the foundation of the pre-Classical style.

Though his fame was mainly secured by *La serva padrona*, his compositional output included a number of secular instrumental works as well as some sacred pieces. Legend has it that he died having just completed his *Stabat Mater*, a musical setting of a liturgical hymn. This emotionally expressive work would provide great inspiration for sacred compositions in the latter half of the 18th century.

***Recitative:** a type of singing unique to opera when words are sung in a way that imitates speech. It has no recognizable melody and is meant to carry the action forward rather than express the emotions of the character.

Historical Background: The Pamphlet War

When it was performed in Paris, *La serva padrona* sparked a controversy which would greatly influence the development of French opera.

Based on a play by Jacopo Angello Nelli, *La serva padrona* was written by composer Pergolesi and librettist Gennaro Antonio Federico as an *intermezzo*,* a short piece to fill the intermission of Pergolesi's full opera *Il prigioniero superbo* (The Proud Prisoner). Although initial audience reception was cool, when *La serva padrona* was coupled with *Acis and Galatée* (a full opera by Lully) in 1752, it received much more recognition.

La serva padrona was one of several operas performed in Paris in the early 1750s by an Italian *opera buffa* troupe. This style of Italian comic opera created a divide amongst opera-goers: those who liked the new Italian opera buffa, and those that preferred the traditional, and more serious, French lyric opera. This divide was known as *la Querelle des Bouffons* (war of the comic actors) and was a source of great contention. It initiated a flurry of pamphlet-making known as a "Pamphlet War," during which printed leaflets, booklets, and other publications were used by both sides of the controversy to sway public opinion and attempt to convince readers that one opera style – whichever was being propagated and defended by the author – was superior.

Pamphlets were a popular form of publication during the 18th century because they allowed authors to express their thoughts simply and anonymously to a wide audience. They were easy to produce, could be distributed cheaply and were a means of responding to current events or contributing to public debate rapidly.

The subject matter of *La serva padrona* added to the controversy. The opera told the story of a defiant servant who eventually marries her master and becomes the mistress of the household, thereby subverting social structures and prescribed roles. Later in the 18th century, the question of class structure would be of great importance during the French Revolution.



Title page from a French first edition of *La serva padrona*, 1752

La Querelle des Bouffons lasted approximately two years, until French society became accustomed to the Italian style facilitated by the performance of several other comic operas from 1752 – 1754, some using music by Pergolesi. The Italian comic opera was here to stay.

***Intermezzo:** A short comedic opera normally performed between the acts of a serious opera to lighten the mood. They were often elaborately staged with costumes, set, and staging. This convention began in the early 18th century but today intermezzos are usually performed individually or paired with other short operas.

Meet the Cast and Crew



Gordon Bintner
(*Uberto/Gatone*)

NAME: Gordon Bintner

HOMETOWN: Regina, Saskatchewan

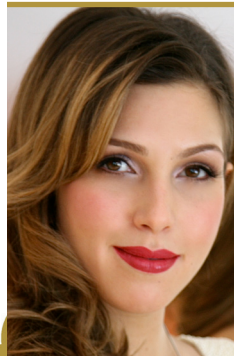
VOICE TYPE: Bass-Baritone

AGE WHEN YOU STARTED SINGING: Eight years old

FIRST TIME ON STAGE: As Winthrop in *The Music Man* at the age of 10.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: *Bohème* in France, Debut with the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, *Manon* with Opéra de Montréal.

FAVOURITE ASPECT OF SCHOOL TOUR: Meeting the kids!



Sasha Djihanian
(*Serpina*)

NAME: Sasha Djihanian

HOMETOWN: Montreal, Québec

VOICE TYPE: Soprano

AGE WHEN YOU STARTED SINGING: 12 years old(I was more into pop), I entered the conservatory at 16.

FIRST TIME ON STAGE: 12 years old

FAVOURITE ASPECT OF SCHOOL TOUR: I love performing for young crowds and find it extremely rewarding and fulfilling on many levels. They are so receptive and fun. They are not there to judge you, they just want to be taken on an exciting journey... therefore you can allow yourself so much freedom and try things you normally maybe wouldn't. If we, as performers, are receptive to that, the whole experience can be very inspiring and magical! Last, but not least, I always hope that in sharing my passion and love for music and singing, I might awaken and inspire similar interest in the audience.



Jenna Douglas
(*Musical Director*)

NAME: Jenna Douglas

HOMETOWN: Barrie, Ontario

AGE WHEN YOU STARTED PLAYING: Three years old, and I still practice on the same piano!

FIRST TIME ON STAGE: Eight years old, I won a competition on my eighth birthday, while I had a crazy high fever.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: Playing *West Side Story* in high school

(my very first show); *The Elixir of Love* (in San Francisco, a very cool city!); and surviving a night playing jazz with my brother's band.

FAVOURITE ASPECT OF SCHOOL TOUR: Seeing all the pianos in all the schools! I love that I get to try them out for a little while each day.



Clarence Frazer
(*Uberto/Gatone*)

NAME: Clarence Frazer

HOMETOWN: Mississauga, Ontario

VOICE TYPE: Baritone

AGE WHEN YOU STARTED SINGING: Seven years old

FIRST TIME ON STAGE: Performing with the Toronto Children's Chorus at Roy Thompson Hall when I was seven years old.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: Previously, singing the title role in *Don Giovanni*, and now, singing with the COC.

FAVOURITE ASPECT OF SCHOOL TOUR: Firstly, sharing the wonderful music, drama and fun with all of you. Secondly, performing for schools in this province which I might be familiar with is a cool thought. And finally, spending time on the road with my cast and crew – they are all amazing people!



Michael Gianfrancesco
(Designer)

NAME: Michael Gianfrancesco

Toronto-based designer Michael Gianfrancesco previously designed the sets and costumes for the COC school tours of *The Magic Flute* and *The Barber of Seville*, and was the set design co-ordinator for *Le nozze di Figaro* (mainstage). He recently completed his 10th season at the Stratford Festival designing *Taking Shakespeare* at the Studio Theatre, and his fifth season at the Shaw Festival

designing *The Light in the Piazza*. Other credits include designs for Against the Grain Theatre, Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, Theatre Calgary, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, The National Ballet of Canada, Canadian Stage, Citadel Theatre, Studio 180 and Young People’s Theatre.



Brent Krysa
(Director)

TBA



Mike Lewandowski
(Stage Manager)

NAME: Mike Lewandowski

HOMETOWN: Toronto, Ontario

WHEN YOU DECIDED TO BE A STAGE MANAGER: I knew I wanted to be involved in theatre when I saw my first opera at the age of nine. In high school I participated in a school play, and decided to study theatre production in university. While at school I was exposed to acting, design and managing. It was then that I decided I wanted to make a career as a stage manager.

FAVOURITE ASPECT OF SCHOOL TOUR: Travelling around Ontario, visiting all the great communities. We become our own little family for a month, spending lots of time together in a van. And the constant question from the singers: “Are we there yet?”



Claire de Sévigné
(Serpina)

NAME: Claire de Sévigné

HOMETOWN: Hudson, Québec

VOICE TYPE: Soprano

AGE WHEN YOU STARTED SINGING: Five years old

FIRST TIME ON STAGE: In my grade three talent show

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: Queen of the Night in *Die Zauberflöte* with the Music Academy of the West, Servillia in *La clemenza di Tito* with the Canadian Opera Company, Cleopatra in *Giulio Cesare* with the Thirteen Strings Orchestra.

FAVOURITE ASPECT OF SCHOOL TOUR: Sharing and teaching music with young people.

What to Look For

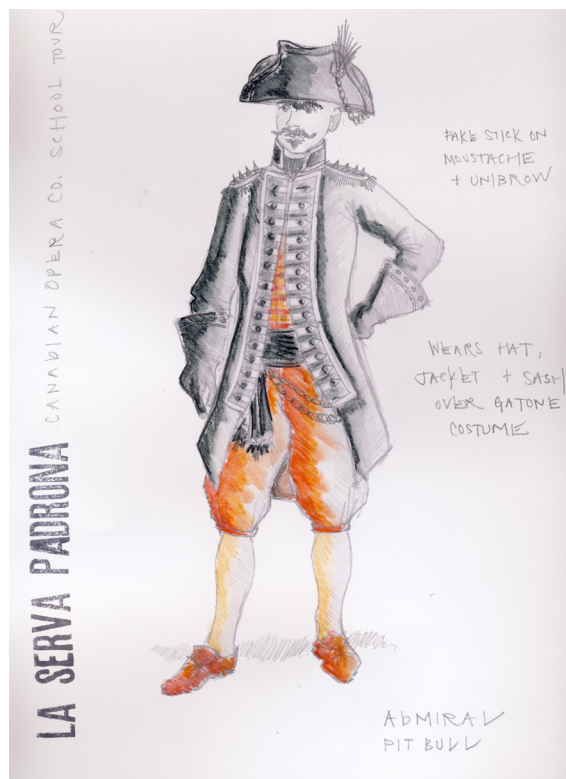
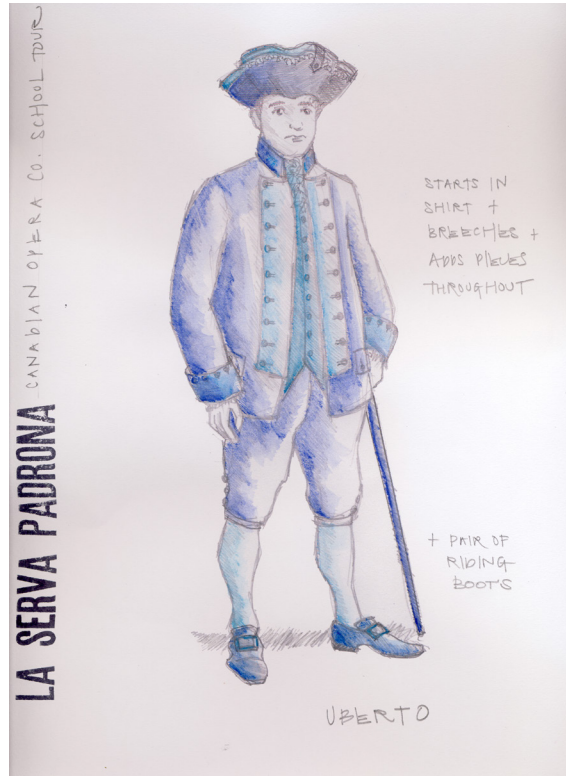
The visual elements – or *design* – of an opera play a vital role in how the story is told. Sets, props and costumes all combine to show location, atmosphere and character while supporting key events of the plot. This production of *La serva padrona* is set in the 18th century, using costume shapes and motifs drawn from the period. Designer Michael Gianfrancesco drew inspiration from 18th-century artist Michael Angelo Pergolesi – whose surname is just a fortunate coincidence, and of no relation to the composer!

Unlike mainstage performances – which are performed in a “neutral” theatre with black walls, black floors, and black curtains – school tour productions are performed in a wide variety of spaces, including gymnasiums, auditoriums, and cafeteriums. The bright colours in the set and costumes are intended to help the production stand out in these spaces, and create a different world for the opera that is separate from the space in which it’s being performed. Also unlike mainstage performances, school tour productions have to be designed with portability in mind! Using printed fabric as a backdrop helps keep everything lightweight, and all of the items are able to fit in a passenger van to travel around the province. The costumes for all three characters are in solid colours

in contrast to the patterns in the bold background. Uberto wears varying shades of blue. Serpina is in pink, playing on stereotypical feminine colours. Vespone has, in this production, undergone a transformation to “Gatone”. Gatone has a cat-like demeanour, and his costume includes dangling threads that he’s constantly playing with in his fingerless gloves. The patches on his orange outfit reflect the tears he has made in the past. When Gatone is disguised as Admiral Pitbull, he gains an intimidating admiral’s coat, as well as a comically fake unibrow and moustache. This disguise is meant to fool Uberto, but not the audience, who are all in on the joke.

A designer may create many sketches around a basic idea. These ideas are then further developed in rehearsal.





Opposite page: The original set maquette for the COC Glencore Ensemble Studio School Tour production of La serva padrona. Above: Costume sketches from designer Micheal Gianfrancesco. Clockwise from top left: Serpina, Uberto, Gatone, and Admiral Pitbull. Photos: COC

Active Learning

One of the best parts of viewing an opera with your students is the discussion and further exploration the opera can inspire. Take a deeper look into the themes and story of *La serva padrona* with these discussion questions and ideas for further exploration.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

La serva padrona's opera buffa style and controversial content stirred up a Pamphlet War (see page 9 for more).

- ◆ How would this type of public debate happen today? What form of social media would be used in place of pamphlets?
- ◆ Do you think social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) can foster important discussions?
- ◆ What is different about having a written debate versus a face-to-face one? Does the choice of medium change anything?

Reflect on how the libretto illustrates the period in which *La serva padrona* was written. Could you rewrite it to suit modern sensibilities?

What makes Serpina different from how women of that period are often portrayed? Can you think of other characters from opera, literature, or theatre that are like Serpina?

Do you think Serpina and Uberto are truly happy at the end of the opera? Why or why not?

How does the musical accompaniment differ in the recitative versus the aria? How is Uberto's confusion reflected in the music?

How has Uberto's character developed in this opera? How has Pergolesi shown this development in the music?

FURTHER EXPLORATION

What will Uberto and Serpina's life together be like after their marriage? Write a short "day in the life of" scene about their everyday activities.

Rewrite this story from Vespone's point of view.

Did viewing the opera spark some scintillating debates or discussions? Would your students like to share examples of their work with the COC? E-mail us at education@coc.ca. We'd love to hear from you!



The COC offers a wide variety of school programs for Kindergarten to Grade 12.

To find out more, visit our website at coc.ca/Explore or contact:

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La serva padrona Study Guide

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