

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Subject: San Francisco Opera
The Bonesetter's Daughter

Disciplines: Music, Theatre, Language Arts

SECTION I - OVERVIEW	2
SUBJECT.....	2
CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS	
OBJECTIVE	
STORY SYNOPSIS	
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES	
INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES	
EQUIPMENT NEEDED	
MATERIALS NEEDED	
INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED	
SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT	3
CONTENT OVERVIEW	
THE BIG PICTURE	
RESOURCES – TEXTS	
RESOURCES – WEB SITES	
VIDEO RESOURCES	
BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS	
SECTION III – VOCABULARY	8
SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK	10



Still image from the SPARK story about the *The Bonesetter's Daughter* Opera, 2008

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

SUBJECT

The San Francisco Opera's Production of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

GRADE RANGES

6-12 & Post-Secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Music, Theatre, Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

To illustrate the process of how a piece of literature can be transformed into another artistic medium, such as opera. To inspire viewers to explore the collaborative process and its creative possibilities.

STORY SYNOPSIS

Beloved Bay Area author Amy Tan has been an acclaimed author for many years. In an exciting new venture, Amy Tan turns librettist, collaborating with friend and composer Stewart Wallace to transform her novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, into an opera for the San Francisco Opera.

***Please note: The San Francisco Opera's live performance of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* contains mature content and may not be suitable for young audiences.**

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Hands-on group projects, in which students assist and support one another

Hands-on individual projects, in which students work independently

Group oral discussion and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing

Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

To foster an appreciation of both Western and Chinese opera and their history

To illustrate the process of working collaboratively

To analyze how a story can be told and retold through different artistic mediums

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

- SPARK story about *The Bonesetter's Daughter* on DVD or VHS and related equipment, or a computer with Internet access, navigation software, video projector, speakers and a sound card
- CD player and musical samples selected from the Resource section of this guide

MATERIALS NEEDED

Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
Access to recordings of both Western classical and Chinese opera and CD player
Pencils, pens, and paper

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Linguistic – the ability to express oneself metaphorically and poetically

Logical-Mathematical – the ability to detect patterns, reason deductively and think logically

Musical Intelligence – the capability to recognize and compose musical pitches, tones, and rhythms

Interpersonal – awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Intrapersonal – awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Bodily-Kinesthetic – the ability to use one's mind or control one's bodily movements



See more information on [Multiple Intelligences](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education) at www.kqed.org/spark/education.

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Bay Area author Amy Tan is a critically acclaimed novelist with a literary resume that includes [The Joy Luck Club](#), [The Kitchen God's Wife](#), [The Hundred Secret Senses](#) and, more recently, [The Bonesetter's Daughter](#).

Like Tan's other novels, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* revolves around the complicated relationship between an immigrant Chinese mother and her American-born daughter. But this story is Tan's most personal, written while her mother was dying of Alzheimer's disease. During her mother's illness, Tan learned more about her family history, in particular about her grandmother, who took her own life when Tan's mother was young after being raped by a wealthy man. In Tan's story, the ghost of the grandmother leads the daughter to learn the secrets of her mother's past.

For her birthday in 2001, Tan's friend and composer Stewart Wallace turned the first few lines of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* into an a cappella musical composition for three women's voices. Wallace composed the piece without reading the book and was unaware that the story coincidentally revolved around three main female characters. Tan was pleased and surprised by this musical offering, and Wallace was unable to get the story and music out of his head. This musical gift became the seed of inspiration for what was to become a full-length opera.

Tan became the librettist for the opera. She and Wallace embarked on a five-year collaboration that involved several trips to China to explore Chinese music and culture. They visited towns and villages, and attended gatherings where traditional Chinese music was performed, including a rural funeral. They listened to Chinese musicians and instruments, and were introduced to professional Chinese opera singers and conductors who understood how the

music, lyrics and emotional heart of the story are intertwined. In the process, Wallace discovered how to evoke the spirit of China in his score by incorporating Chinese instruments and sounds into the musical narrative.

Bringing the opera to the stage of the San Francisco Opera has required the talents of hundreds of American and Chinese singers, musicians, acrobats and behind-the-scenes personnel, including director Chen Shi-Zheng, who directed *The Peony Pavilion* (a 19-hour Chinese opera that previously had not been presented in its entirety for 500 years); Li Zhonghua, master percussionist and director of the Beijing Opera; mezzo-soprano Zheng Cao (she played Suzuki in *The San Francisco Opera's* 2007 production of *Madama Butterfly*); mezzo-soprano Ning Liang, who plays the mother; and the star of *The Peony Pavilion*, Qian Yi, who plays the role of the ghost of the grandmother.

The end result of this highly collaborative effort is a distinctly American opera with its roots in traditional Chinese music. It is a compelling account of a contemporary human story that merges the past and the present, love and loss, grief and forgiveness, as expressed through Chinese and American voices.

BIG PICTURE

"Sing in me muse, and through me tell the story..."
- *The Odyssey*, Homer

Throughout history, storytellers, actors and singers have delivered the great mythic narratives of humankind to audiences hungry for knowledge, wisdom and universal truth. Through the centuries these performing artists have employed every genre and medium imaginable and have often brought diverse art forms together in order to provide a comprehensive and profound audience experience. It was through this process of synthesis that Western opera evolved into what it is today.

Opera composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) described opera as “Gesamtkunstwerk,” or “total artwork,” in which music and song is combined with drama and visual arts to provide a complete multi-sensory experience. Like most composers, Wagner used epics and legends as the basis for the librettos (or scripts) he wrote. But few people realize that even a great master like Wagner required assistance from stage directors, conductors, costume and set designers, choreographers, technicians, singers, musicians, dancers and actors to create his “gesamtkunstwerk.” In short, artists and artisans from several different disciplines must effectively collaborate in order to create a great operatic work.

Since the birth of Western opera in the sixteenth century, composers and librettists have used everything from Greek and Norse mythology to Shakespearean plays and Romantic novels, to the secret rituals of the Freemasons as inspiration for their storylines. In recent years however, many opera composers have turned away from the ancient texts and embraced the cultural relevance of modern and contemporary fiction. The Little Prince, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood, The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald and The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck have all recently been adapted into operas. Even Annie Proulx’s short story, Brokeback Mountain, is destined for the opera stage, scheduled to premiere at the New York City Opera in 2013. This new trend seems to signify that contemporary composers are eager to explore the intricacies and challenges of modern relationships as well as distinctly contemporary social issues such as poverty, reproductive rights and homosexuality. These new operas succeed when contemporary audiences are presented with characters, situations and conflicts that are immediately recognizable and at the same time inspired by the epic nature of their own everyday lives. In essence, when these contemporary stories are well-adapted and presented on the grand operatic stage, they become a part of the cannon of a vital new mythology.

Perhaps the most essential aspect of any successful opera production is a strong collaborative relationship between the composer and the librettist. In their new opera, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, composer Stewart Wallace and novelist Amy Tan

worked together for four years adapting Tan’s novel of the same title into a fully staged opera. The novel explores a Chinese American woman’s difficult relationship with her aging mother and the redemptive revelations of her mother’s tragic past.

Wallace began the process by creating a short concert piece for three female voices which he based on the book’s opening lines. After this piece was presented to Tan, Wallace realized the potential for setting the entire story to music and creating a fully developed opera. After Tan authorized the project, Wallace convinced her to write the libretto herself. A writer adapting their own novel into a libretto is highly unusual as this job is generally performed by poets or composers who possess an intricate understanding of rhythm and musical language. Capturing the essence of a story through good poetry while maintaining the strength of characters can be a tricky process -- “You have to shred the book up into little pieces,” says Mark Adamo, librettist for Houston Opera’s 1998 production of *Little Women*, “and see what you can use. You can’t rely on the strength of your subject matter. You have to get beyond it. The opera is not a footnote to the novel.”¹

Tan admitted that she didn’t know what to do at first. But Wallace said he would guide her through the process. He edited her initial draft of the first scene down from six pages to two, and once she saw how he took the essence of the story and reduced it to simple poetic phrases, she understood how to approach it.

According to Tan, the librettist usually completes the libretto first and then the composer sets it to music. In the case of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Tan and Wallace wrote simultaneously and continually fed material to each other throughout the process and by all accounts they were both continually inspired by one another’s work.

According to Wallace he initially did not intend on “bridging worlds,” but after conducting intensive research on Chinese opera and folk music forms, everything changed. During this research phase, Wallace was introduced to several individuals who became important to the work. He met acclaimed Chinese director Chen Shi-Zheng, whose wealth of

¹ Singer, Barry. “Opera’s Book Club”, *Opera News Online* August 2008.

expertise about Chinese Opera made him a perfect candidate to direct *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

Wallace also made several trips to China where he met percussionist Li Zhonghua, who possessed a deep understanding of the form's intricate rhythmic language and was able to reveal ways of telling story through music and sound, and not necessarily dialogue. Wallace's meetings with artists and cultural experiences in China eventually became his inspirational core for the musical landscape of the opera.

The collaboration between Stuart Wallace and Amy Tan is remarkable because the process was never based on preformed rules or orthodoxies. Both the creative process and the resulting work illustrate the importance of learning from traditions, while at the same time allowing contemporary themes and ordinary life-stories to be mythologized. If the piece succeeds and endures, it will no doubt earn a place among the great operatic works that have defined and redefined our cultural mythology and identity through the ages.

For more in-depth information, download the San Francisco Opera's curriculum guide on *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, which includes detailed information about the history of Western and Chinese opera and the making of the piece:
<http://sfopera.com/uploads/education/BonesetterStudy.pdf>

RESOURCES – TEXTS

Shih Chung-wen, *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama*
Princeton University Press. 1976

Smith, Ken. An Excerpt from *Fate! Luck! Chance! The Making of The Bonesetter's Daughter Opera*.
<http://sfopera.com/o/265.asp>

Singer, Barry. *Opera's Book Club*. Opera News
Online, August 2008
<http://www.metoperafamily.org/operanews/issue/article.aspx?id=4950&issueID=324>

Tan, Amy. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.
G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York. 2001

Tommasini, Anthony. New York Times online: *A Sprawling Novel's Turn as an Epic Opera: 52 Soloists and 1 Horse*
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/12/arts/music/12peac.html>

RESOURCES – WEB SITES

The San Francisco Opera's official web site:
<http://sfopera.com/>

Amy Tan's Web site
<http://www.amytan.net/>

Chinese Opera, Kunju Opera
www.wikipedia.com

A resource for theater improvisational games and activities: <http://improvencyclopedia.org/>

RESOURCES – AUDIO/VISUAL

L' Orfeo by Claudio Monteverdi performed in Italian
Conductor Leopold Stokowski - 1960(LI)
Orchestra - New York City Opera
Mitridate, Ponto PO 1046 2006

Madama Butterfly by Giacomo Puccini performed in Italian
Conductor Giuseppe Morelli - 1977(LI)
Orchestra - New York City Opera
Premiere Opera Ltd. CDNO 1257-2 2004

Tristan und Isolde by Richard Wagner performed in German. Conductor Thomas Beecham - 1937(LC)
Orchestra - London Philharmonic Orchestra
Discocorp, Recital Records RR 223

Das Rheingold by Richard Wagner performed in German
Discocorp «Recital Records» RR 223

Little Women: An Opera in Two Acts, by Mark Adamo
Ondine Records, 2001

The Great Gatsby, by John Harbison
Associated Music Publishers Inc. 1999

The Grapes of Wrath, music by Ricky Ian Gordon,
libretto by Michael Korie. P. S. Classics B00182Z7F2
2008

The Forest on Fire/Princess Hundred Flowers
Buda Musique, B000001N9B 1995

Introduction to Chinese Opera, Vol. 1-4
Marco Polo, B000004669 1995

Korea - The Art Of Pansori (Import)
Columbia River Entertainment Group, 2007

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

San Francisco Opera – View their website for upcoming performance opportunities, assemblies and residencies for your school. <http://sfopera.com/>

International Dragon Boat Festival, Treasure Island
October 4th and 5th, 2008
<http://www.sfdragonboat.com/>

Moon Festival, Grant Street, San Francisco
September 6th, 7th, 2008
<http://www.moonfestival.org>

Opera Piccola
An educational theatre company in Palo Alto, CA
<http://www.opera-piccola.org/>

SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY AND EDUCATOR GUIDE

A Cappella

Music sung without an instrumental accompaniment

Accompany

To play a vocal or instrumental part that supports or complements a solo part played by another musician.

Blocking

A theater term that describes the determining of physical movements and action on-stage.

Direct

In theater and opera, the act of guiding the actors or musicians in the rehearsal and performance of a work.

Freemasons

A member of a guild of skilled itinerant masons during the Middle Ages.

Genealogy

The study of family histories.

Ghost

A spirit or soul of a deceased person.

Instrumentation

A term used to identify what instruments will be played in a given ensemble or piece of music.

Kunju

Also known as *Kunqu*, *Kun opera* or *Kunqu Opera*, is one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese opera.

Libretto

Meaning literally, “little book,” the libretto is the story of the opera, initially printed out so that

audience members could follow along or prepare for the performance by reading the story beforehand.

Novel

A fictional prose narrative of considerable length, typically having a plot that is unfolded by the actions, speech, and thoughts of the characters.

Opera

A form of theatrical presentation in which a dramatic performance is set to music. Opera is the plural of the Latin word *opus*, meaning, “work”.

Resolution

An explanation or solution, as of a problem or puzzle. Also, in music, the progression of a dissonant tone or chord to a consonant tone or chord. This can be metaphorically applied to the previous definition as well, so that an internal dissonance or problem can be consonantly resolved or accepted.

Rhythm

An organized pattern formed by a series of beats or sounds of differing duration and stress.

Subservience

The act of being subservient or under the control and power of another.

Staging

The process of producing and directing a stage play.

Suona

A double-reed trumpet used in Chinese opera.

Technique

The command of fundamental skills needed to perform on any instrument and with an ensemble.

SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Explorations in collaboration

There are many theatre sports activities that can be a valuable tool for getting your class to work together. Samples are below, and more can be found by searching on the Internet.

Machine

Start off with this warm up (or any others you find suitable) for physical movement. The class is going to create a “machine”. Not with any specific function or purpose, just a fantastic machine. One by one, students create physical movements that altogether will function as one. The first student will start off by executing a gesture – a swinging arm or bobbing head, anything simple, and repeating it. The next student will add something complementary – keep it related. Likewise with the next student and the next, until all are doing something simultaneously that makes the “machine” work.

Madrigal

This is a collaborative activity that is great for listening to each other. Have students come to class prepared with the first line of their favorite poem, title of a book, or a headline from the newspaper. Working in groups of four or five, have each student speak their line in a repeated rhythmic fashion, creating an ostinato. Such as “Russian army invades Georgia,” “The Bonesetter’s Daughter,” “somewhere I have never traveled,” “Flubber,” etc. Each student must layer their line upon their classmates’ lines, creating a rhythm “machine.” If they are confident in creating rhythms, challenge them to add melodic ideas to the poetry, so they are singing each line. Try putting the whole class together and record the results! (This is related to what Stewart Wallace did with the initial trio he wrote for Amy Tan, based on the first part of her novel. He took such phrases as “These are the things I know to be true” ...and used them as short motives in the trio.)

Diaries/Journals

Read journals and diaries, such as Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, or A Midwife’s Tale (explores the story of Martha Ballard, a midwife and mother living on the post-Revolutionary Maine frontier), and perhaps one from a student’s own grandparents. What about the subjects’ lives is illuminated through these historical records? What commonalities can we discover?

Have students keep a journal to document their lives, feelings, relationships with their parents. What do they want their journals to document about their own lives? What are some new ways of keeping journals? Besides writing in a book with a pen, there are new media ways to document your lives that are still private methods, but enable students to incorporate more information about themselves and events or pop culture around them. This may include photos, digital photos, song clips, or recordings of their own voices or family voices.

Transforming the story

As Amy Tan says in the Spark episode, her story of the Bonesetter’s Daughter is *emotionally* true, if not factually true. She was able to take certain real events, such as the suicide of her grandmother, and turn them into a fictional story based on those events, without making it totally biographical. Assign your class the task of working collaboratively to transform a short story or fable into another form, such as a song or a poem. Challenge them to distill the essence of the story into simple statements that may or may not rhyme, while keeping the characters and essential plot the same. If your class is proficient, see if they can take their own journals and convert portions into a short story of 500 words, using all the literary devices they have studied. Be sure they develop their plot, with its exposition, tension, climax, and dénouement. Discuss and explore other ways of telling the story through

movement, added musical accompaniment, singing the story, etc.

Lastly, bring the SF Opera’s residency “Book to Bravo” to your school for a complete residency that takes the students on a process to turn a story into a short opera. (See the SF Opera’s website: <http://sfopera.com/p/?mID=21>)

RELATED STANDARDS

Theatre Grade 6

2.2 Creative Expression – Use effective vocal expression, gesture, facial expression, and timing to create character.

3.2 Differentiate the theatrical traditions of cultures throughout the world, such as those in Ancient Greece, Egypt, China and West Africa.

Music Grade 7

3.1 Compare music from various cultures as to some of the functions music serves and the roles of musicians.

3.3 Identify and describe distinguishing characteristics of musical genres and styles from variety of cultures.

Literary Arts – Writing Grade 7

2.1 Develop a standard plot line and point of view.

2.3 Write research reports

- a. Pose relevant and tightly drawn questions about the topic
- b. document reference sources

Literary Arts & Analysis Grades 8-12

Narrative Analysis of Grade – level - appropriate text

3.4 Analyze the relevance of the setting (e.g. place, time, customs) to set mood, tone and meaning of text.

Opera and related storytelling traditions

Compare and contrast theatrical traditions of various world cultures. For instance, the Korean *pansori* tradition features a singer who stands in the center of a circle and the only prop she has is a fan. She is accompanied by a single percussionist who follows her vocals. Compare this to other Asian vocal forms such as Chinese opera, and Japanese Noh or Kyogen. Break up the class into three groups and have students work together to conduct their research. Allow each group to give oral

presentations to the class on their findings, including musical examples and pictures. To be included in their research is the history, vocal styles, costuming, as well as common plots and character types.

How do they do it?

Ever wonder just how opera singers can sing so loudly? Investigate the physics of sound production and resonance in the human body to discover how opera singers develop their voices. What is the training like for other types of singing, such as a Chinese opera singer or Pansori singer? Note the differences between opera and musical theater, and how opera singers are trained to use their bodies as resonating chambers, whereas musical theater uses microphones to augment the sound.

How does it make you feel?

Compare western opera with musical theater, such as *Cats*, *High School Musical*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, or *West Side Story*. Bring musical examples to class of famous operatic arias and songs from musicals, or watch/listen to an entire musical and opera over the course of several weeks. Have students take notes on their responses and observations. Lead a discussion on the emotional impact of the music, as well as their likes and dislikes. Encourage students to be specific about their descriptions to develop their critical mind. Because opera includes all these areas, be sure to use musical, theatrical and linguistic terminology during the discussion, such as volume, dynamics, range and types of singers, use of staging and costumes, clarity of diction, plot and character development, antagonist and protagonist, instrumentation and orchestration.

The collaborative process

Theater is, by nature, a collaborative process, and opera doubly so. Investigate famous artistic collaborations, not just opera, but between different areas, such as music and dance, dance and story, poetry and photography, and examine their outcomes. Were they always successful? Were some disastrous? (There is a documentary on collaboration between author Maurice Sendak (*Where the Wild Things Are*) and the dance troupe Pilobolus that serves as a good example).

SPARKLERS*

Topics for further discussion and exploration:

- **Listening quiz** – After studying opera for some time, finish the unit by having a listening competition. Compare different forms of opera and see who can identify famous arias, and in what language people are singing.
- **Compare the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western opera.** Be sure to analyze the plot and, additionally, compare vocal technique, theatrical concepts, staging, costumes, classic archetypes, use of masks and makeup, orchestral instrumentation and accompaniment. Extend this to other forms of Asian opera or sung storytelling and dramatic arts, such as between Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, or other art forms.
- **Act out a story using different themes of music, solo and tutti**
Pick any favorite story or folk tale and act it out using different musical themes for the individual characters or moments in the story. Assign some students the role of the actors, and others the musicians who must provide the background music. Allow for times for the whole ensemble to play together, or tutti, and at other times when an individual is speaking or moving, for there to be a solo.
- **Attend local events** such as the San Francisco Opera or other local companies and festivals. Compare and contrast different groups and analyze the performances using specific criteria for making informed critical evaluations of quality and effectiveness of the presentation.

RELATED STANDARDS

Music

Grades 8-12

Artistic Perception

1.5 Analyze and compare the use of musical elements representing various genres, styles, and cultures, with an emphasis on chords and harmonic progressions.

Historical and Cultural Context

3.5 Classify, by genre or style and historical period or culture, unfamiliar but representative aural example of music and explain the reasoning for the classification

Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Evaluate a performance, composition, arrangement, or improvisation by comparing each with an exemplary model.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/index.asp>.