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I Hear America Singing

Performance Guide

In his 1860 poem, "I Hear America Singing," Walt Whitman heard not a single anthem but "varied carols" of the laborers, mothers and pioneers who built a nation. Dayton Opera Artists in Residence take this vision of America into the 21st Century through Broadway and opera, spirituals and folk songs. Audiences join a living poem full of the melodies of a people in constant motion, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in discord—but always singing.

This performance guide includes:

- Artist bios
- A warmup activity and discussion prompt
- Background information
- Key vocabulary
- Suggested Q & A questions
- Post-show discussion questions
- An opera extension activity
- Related Ohio Learning Standards

BEFORE THE SHOW

Meet the Artists

Dayton Opera was founded in 1962 to enrich the cultural life of the Miami Valley. In 2003, Dayton Opera moved from its long-time home of Memorial Hall to its current home at the Benjamin and Marian Schuster Performing Arts Center. Many accomplished and well-known singers have been heard in Dayton Opera productions throughout the years.

The Dayton Opera Artists-in-Residence Program was established in 1987 to serve as a professional training program for young singers as a bridge to move from the university/conservatory education experience into the arena of a professional opera company.

Read about the Artists in Residence: https://daytonperformingarts.org/artists-in-residence/.

Hanna Atsedewoin
Soprano

Kade Bennett
Baritone

Sarai Burgos
Mezzo-soprano

Alex Gushrowski
Tenor

Calvin Stovall
Pianist

Find **@daytonopera** on Twitter and Facebook and **@daytonoperaofficial** on Instagram**.**

Classroom Warmup

When you watch opera singers perform live on stage, you are watching an athletic event! Opera singers train their voices to be strong enough to reach the back of a theatre without amplification. And when they sing Broadway songs, they must physically shift gears.

Let's contrast two Broadway selections that you will hear in today's performance:

1. Hugh Jackman Sings "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" (Official Lyric Video)

Oklahoma! (1943) was written when actors had to project over an orchestra without the aid of a microphone—just like opera singers still do today. The lyrics are long and sweeping, which naturally helps an unamplified voice to travel.

2. Hamilton: "You'll Be Back"

Hamilton (2015) was written for modern actors wearing wireless body microphones, so the lyrics can include a lot of fast, percussive text and still be understood.

Predict: How do you think the Artists in Residence will adjust their technique to handle the fast, rhythmic text of *Hamilton* compared to the long, sweeping melodies of *Oklahoma!*?

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Think While You Watch

Observe how the singers approach the songs from the warmup. Remember, neither singer is using a microphone. They are both relying entirely on the acoustic resonance of their bodies to fill the room.

While you watch and listen, keep this central question in mind:

"How do the physical shapes of the words and the speed of the storytelling change the way each singer uses their voice?"

The Program

1. "All the Livelong Day" from *Working* by Stephen Schwartz
2. "Lady of the Harbor" by Lee Hoiby
3. "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" by Yip Harburg & Jay Gorney
4. "I, Too" by Langston Hughes
5. "I, Too, Sing América" by Julia Alvarez
6. "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" from *Oklahoma!* by Rodgers & Hammerstein
7. "I Bought Me a Cat" folk song, arr. by Aaron Copland
8. "Ain't It a Pretty Night" from the opera *Susannah* by Carlisle Floyd
9. "You'll Be Back" from *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda
10. "Walk Together, Children" traditional spiritual, arr. by Moses Hogan
11. "Seize the Day" from *Newsies* by Alan Menken & Jack Feldman

Vocabulary

- **Aria:** A song, in opera, for one character to express their inner emotions
- **Art Song:** A musical composition written for a solo singer and a piano in a concert hall.
- **Folk Song:** A traditional song that belongs to the ordinary people of a culture or country, usually passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.
- **Operatic voice types:**
    - *Soprano*: highest female singing voice
    - *Mezzo-soprano*: middle female singing voice
    - *Tenor*: highest common adult male singing voice (*countertenor* is higher but rare)
    - *Baritone*: middle male singing voice
- **Spiritual:** A type of religious song created by enslaved African Americans in the United States, expressing deep faith and a desire for freedom.

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The Q & A

Artists love to answer thoughtful questions! If you are having trouble thinking of a question, here are some that are sure to be well-received.

- What kind of training/education did you complete?
- How many years have you practiced singing?
- Do you speak other languages?
- What's your favorite (or least favorite) part about your work? Why?
- What advice would you have for someone wanting to follow in your footsteps?

AFTER THE SHOW

Post-Show Discussion

Teachers can facilitate a conversation or have students write their responses.

Follow-up Questions

- What did you like or dislike about the performance? Why?
- What did you appreciate about the performances by the singers?
- What surprised you?

Student Survey

Tell us about your experience at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GV326NW

Add Your Verse

I Hear America Singing

By Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,

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The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,

The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,

Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,

The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,

Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

In the performance, you heard how Walt Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing" sparked a cross-generational conversation. Langston Hughes responded to Whitman's catalog of workers with "I, Too," and Julia Alvarez further expanded the notion of who is included with "I, Too, Sing América." Hughes' and Alvarez's poems "claim a place in the American chorus that the earlier poem had not made room for."

Now it's your turn to add a verse to the chorus!

Digital Gallery Walk

Working individually or in pairs, you will create a digital tribute to a modern, unsung voice in your community or daily life. Stay true to the style of Whitman, Hughes, and Alvarez, and keep your subject both ordinary and anonymous.

1. Use a shared digital platform (like Padlet, Canva, or Google Slides) to create a slide or page that includes:
    - A rhythmic verse that identifies your subject by their role (e.g., teacher, coach) or actions. Avoid using real names.
    - An accompanying image, graphic, or short video clip that represents their role or why they are important. It can be literal or symbolic.
2. The class will explore everyone's digital creations. Display your work on your screen. Stand up and leave the device on your desk. Circulate the room, browse your peers' submissions and discuss:
    - What is the writer trying to communicate about their chosen subject?
    - How does the writer use tone, word choice, rhythm, and other elements to create meaning?
    - Do you think keeping this person anonymous makes their story feel more powerful or less powerful? Why?
    - How does the chosen image, graphic, or video support the verse?

Reference:

https://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/whitman/i_hear_america_singing.html

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FOR TEACHERS

Related Ohio Learning Standards

The following standards are linked to the artist's performance and/or the activities in the performance guide. Teachers may be able to make additional connections.

Music

Enduring Understandings: Artists/students engage in analysis and interpretation to understand and evaluate artistic works. Artists/students understand and communicate the value of creative expressions in internal and external contexts.	
Responding	
6-7.1RE	Identify the major periods, genres, and composers in the development of music of various cultures.
HSP.1RE	Analyze selected composers and their works.
Connecting	
6-7.1CO	Describe the connection between emotion and music in selected musical works using elements of music.
6.2CO	Attend and critique live music performances and demonstrate appropriate audience behavior for the context and style of music performed.
6-7.5CO	Identify different careers in music.
7.7CO	Recognize and identify historical and cultural contexts (time and place of a music event) that have influenced music.
8.4CO	Discuss the purpose and value of music in various cultures and settings.
HSP.7CO	Identify the social contexts from which music of various cultures evolved.

Drama/Theatre

Enduring Understandings: Artists/students engage in analysis and interpretation to understand and evaluate artistic works. Artists/students understand and communicate the value of creative expressions in internal and external contexts.	
Connecting	
6.1CO	Investigate the time period and place of a drama or theatre work to better understand performance and design choices.
6.2CO	Explain how the actions and motivations of characters in a drama or theatre work impact perspective of a community or culture.
6.7CO	Explain personal reasons for valuing the study of and involvement in dramatic and theatrical performance.
7.4CO	Identify and describe the dramatic arts from various periods of theatre history.
8.6CO	Use different theatrical forms to examine contemporary social, cultural, or global topics.

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HSP.2CO	Investigate, compare, and contrast dramatic and theatrical works as products and reflections of the time period and culture in which they were created.

Writing

CCR Anchor Standard 1	Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
CCR Anchor Standard 4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
CCR Anchor Standard 10	Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Speaking and Listening

CCR Anchor Standard 1	Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
CCR Anchor Standard 2	Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Social and Emotional Learning

Self-Awareness	A4: Demonstrate a sense of personal responsibility, confidence, and advocacy
Relationship Skills	D1: Apply positive verbal and non-verbal communication and social skills to interact effectively with others and in groups D2: Develop and maintain positive relationships
Responsible Decision-making	E4: Explore and approach new situations with an open mind and curiosity while recognizing that some outcomes are not certain or comfortable