

A Study Guide for

The Mikado

by Gilbert and Sullivan

from the

**Opera Guild
of San Antonio**

in cooperation
with

The San Antonio Opera



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Julia Stone Grace, President, Opera Guild of San Antonio
Margaret King Stanley, Vice President Educational Development

Introduction

The Mikado is an operetta,* sung in English and composed during the late 19th century in England. At that time, there was a growing fascination in the West with Japan and China. These countries had been closed to foreign trade and travel during most of the previous centuries, but were recently accepting more contact with the West. Gilbert and Sullivan were famous for composing operettas that were satires of the events of their times. In *The Mikado*, they poke fun at England's newfound interest in Asia, a place most Westerners had never personally visited and of which they had a limited knowledge. Think of this operetta as a kind of living cartoon, meant to be light-hearted and funny, with just some serious thoughts to ponder now and then. Nothing in the operetta should be taken as historical fact, although the D'Oly Carte, the opera company that first performed *The Mikado*, did hire members of a visiting Japanese entertainment group to help with costuming and to teach the English actresses how to walk in the period Japanese sandals—just the way Japanese ladies of the time did.

* For definitions, see pages 8 and 9

SYNOPSIS: *The Mikado*

Cast of Characters:

Mikado Emperor
Nanki-Poo son of the Mikado
Pish-Tush nobleman
Ko-Ko Lord High Executioner

Pooh-Bah Lord High Everything Else
Yum-Yum a school girl
Peep-Bo a school girl
Pitti-Sing a school girl
Katisha a noble woman

Setting—a fictional town of Titipu in Japan

Act One

Nanki-Poo is in love with Yum-Yum, but she is promised to marry Ko-Ko. Nanki-Poo has returned because he heard that Ko-Ko is to be put to death for flirting, leaving Yum-Yum free. (1) Pish-Tush crushes his hopes by explaining that Ko-Ko was made Lord High Executioner, and, since he cannot cut off his own head, he is still alive. This has stopped all other executions as well.

Pooh-Bah explains that since Ko-Ko was only a common tailor when he was promoted, the other officers of state were insulted and so resigned. Pooh-Bah happily took up all their vacated offices (and salaries) and became "Lord High Everything Else."

Ko-Ko enters singing about his good fortune, and a list he is keeping of people he wants to get rid of—if executions become legal one more.

(2) Yum-Yum and her two girlfriends enter, excited about leaving school and Yum-Yum's upcoming wedding—that very day. They see Nanki-Poo and he declares his love for Yum-Yum. The two meet later. Nanki-Poo reveals he is the Mikado's son, but is disguised because the law says he has to marry Katisha. Yum-Yum loves Nanki-Poo but is afraid to break the law. They sadly part.

(3) Ko-Ko learns from Pish-Tush and Pooh-Bah that the Mikado has decreed that an execution must take place within a month. When Nanki-Poo returns with a noose, intending to kill himself, Ko-Ko makes a deal to behead him instead (and so save himself). Nanki-Poo agrees, but only if he can marry Yum-Yum and live with her a month before dying.

The townspeople are joyous, and when Katisha enters, looking for Nanki-Poo, they drown her out. Angrily Katisha goes to tell the Mikado what is going on.

Act Two

Yum-Yum's friends and family help her prepare for her wedding. When they leave, she admires her own beauty in the mirror. Nanki-Poo enters and reveals the bargain he has made. The sweethearts are happy and sad at the same time.

(4) Ko-Ko enters and brings the couple more bad news: There is a law that the wife of a beheaded man must be buried alive. The three decide she should marry Ko-Ko after all. Nanki-Poo decides to kill himself immediately. Ko-Ko begs him not to, since Ko-Ko will be beheaded if he cannot behead Nanki-Poo. Then Ko-Ko has an idea: Why execute anyone? All he needs to do is to bribe Pooh-Bah to write an affidavit that an execution has taken place.

(5) The Mikado enters with Katisha, his "daughter-in-law-elect" and (6) explains his philosophy that the "punishment should fit the crime." Ko-Ko, Pooh-Bah and Pitti-Sing enter with the death certificate and tell wild tales about the "execution" of Nanki-Poo. The Mikado says he has come to Titipu to search for his son, who is disguised as a musician. Everyone realizes he is talking about Nanki-Poo. Thinking Nanki-Poo dead, Katisha gives a cry and the Mikado retires to decide how to punish those who killed his son.

Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum are on the way to their honeymoon. The condemned try to persuade him to "come alive" but Nanki-Poo believes that they would all soon be executed. He convinces the horrified Ko-Ko to marry Katisha—and thus solve the problem for everyone.

Ko-Ko finally wins over Katisha and they discover they are actually very much alike.

The Mikado calls the criminals before him and Katisha pleads for their lives. Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum enter, all is explained—and the story ends happily.

Classroom Activities

Before Going to the Opera

<p>Connect and motivate. Discuss with everyone:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What rules or laws do you think are unfair? Why? • What punishments for breaking rules or laws do you think are unfair? Why? <p>Discuss each issue below in small groups, have an opinion and give supporting reasons, and then share with the rest of the class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think flirting should be a crime? • Do you think bribing officials should be okay? • Do you think lying to a government leader should be against the law? • Do you think the President should be able to make laws instead of Congress? • Do you think it is okay for one person to hold several offices (and receive several salaries) at the same time? • Do you think the government should be allowed to decide whom you marry? • Do you think most crimes should get the death penalty? 	<p>TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4.</p> <p>SOCIAL STUDIES. 4.24, 5.27, 6.11, 6.12, 6.23, 7.23, 8.32. High School. American History. 26. World History, 15, 27.</p> <p>MUSIC. 4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5. High School, I, II, 5.</p> <p>THEATER. 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4, High School, I, II, 4.</p>
<p>Read and discuss. Read and discuss the Rules of Etiquette.</p> <p>Read about the composer and historical context.</p> <p>Try to predict what the opera will be about, just from the title.</p> <p>Read a synopsis (summary) of the story.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to infer what the characters are feeling and predict what will happen next. • Since the story is complicated, you may wish to give puppets or masks of the characters to volunteers to display appropriately, as the story is being read. 	<p>TEKS. MUSIC: 4.5, 4.6, 5.5, 5.6, 6.5, 6.6, 7.5, 7.6, 8.5, 8.6. High school I. 5, 6.</p> <p>THEATRE: 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4, High school I.4. ART: 4.3, 5.3, 6.3, 7.3, 8.3, High school I.3.</p> <p>LANGUAGE ARTS: 6.14, 6.23, 7.14, 7.23, 8.14, 8.23 High School I. English 1, 9, 20.</p> <p>SOCIAL STUDIES: 6.18, 8.27, High school, World History, 20.</p>
<p>Listen and discuss. Opera music sounds very different from popular music. Analyze songs from the opera. (See Memorable Songs below, which are keyed to parts of the Synopsis.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the mood? (Funny? dramatic? romantic? sad? scary?) • What does the music express about the opera or characters? • How does the music make you feel? • How many voices do you hear singing? 	<p>TEKS. MUSIC. 4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5, High School, 5.</p>

Memorable Songs

TEKS: MUSIC. 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High school I.1.

LANGUAGE ARTS: 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.9, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.9, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.9, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 7.9, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.9, High School English, 6, 15

(Keyed to numbers in the Synopsis)


- (1) **"Our Great Mikado, Virtuous Man"** sung by Pish-Tush and the Chorus. Try singing or chanting the chorus, "And I am right, and you are right, and all is right as right can be!"
- (2) **"Three Little Maids From School Are We,"** a trio sung by Yum-Yum, Peep-Bo and Pitti-Sing. Notice the form of the song: Each girl sings a solo line and all sing the chorus. Try singing along on the line, "Three Little Maids from School!"
- (3) **"I Am So Proud,"** a trio sung by Ko-Ko, Pooh-Bah and Pish-Tush. To understand the structure of the ensemble: Divide students into three groups. Give each a line to repeat over and over: "So I object." "I must decline." "I don't much care." Start groups one after the other, until they are all chanting at the same time.
- (4) **"Here's a How-De-Do,"** a trio sung by Yum-Yum, Nanki-Poo and Ko-Ko. Notice which lines are solo and which are sung together, overlapped or spoken.
- (5) **"Mi-ya, sa-ma,"** sung by the Chorus. How does the music sound Asian? How are drums and violins used? What is the rhythm and tempo? What kind of procession can you imagine taking place to introduce the Mikado?
- (6) **"A More Humane Mikado Never Did in Japan Exist,"** sung by the Mikado and Chorus. Analyze the words. Do you agree with the "punishments" suggested by the Mikado? (For example, people who dye their hair should have their faces stained.)
- (7) **"For He's gone and Married Yum-Yum,"** the finale with everyone. Do you like the ending music? Can you hear Yum-Yum and other rhyming words?

During the Performance of the Opera

<p>Listen to the music. Listen for the overture, arias and ensembles. Notice the skill of the singers. Which voices are sopranos or other ranges?</p>	<p>TEKS: MUSIC. 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High school I.1. LANGUAGE ARTS: 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, High School English, 15.</p>
<p>Look at the design and style. How does the opera look? Notice colors, sets, costumes, hair, props, lighting, special effects, number of people onstage, etc.</p>	<p>TEKS. ART. 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High School, I, II, 1. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.23, 5.23, 6.23, 7.23, 8.23, High School English, 19, 20.</p>
<p>Listen to the story. How is each character introduced? What is the problem that must be solved? How does the plot unfold?</p>	<p>TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.10, 5.10, 6.10, 7.10, 8.10, High School English. 7.</p>

After Going to the Opera

<p>Retell. What was the main idea of the opera? Who were the main characters? What was the sequence of the plot? Was the opera funny or serious?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write about the performance as if you are a critic. • Retell the entire story in 25 words or less. • Write a headline for a newspaper that expresses the main idea. • Act out your favorite part of the opera using words and gestures. • Turn the opera into a dance and present your favorite part. • Write a song to express a lesson to be learned from the opera. • Draw a picture to illustrate a scene in the opera. 	<p>TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.10, 4.11, 5.10, 5.11, 6.10, 6.11, 7.10, 7.11 8.10, 8.11, High School English. 7, 10.</p> <p>THEATER. 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High School, 2.</p> <p>MUSIC. 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4, High School, 4</p> <p>ART. 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High School, 2.</p>
<p>Describe the characters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of the following words describe or relate to which characters? <i>arrogant, pompous, enamored, avaricious, opportunistic, distraught, incognito, capricious, despotic, callow, impetuous</i> • Create a simile, poem or song to describe your favorite character. • Create a mask for a character. Wear it to present a monologue. • Create puppets for the characters and re-enact a scene, while playing a recording of the music. 	<p>TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.9, 4.10, 4.11, 4.15, 5.9, 5.10, 5.11, 5.15, 6.9, 6.10, 6.11, 6.15, 7.9, 7.10, 7.11, 7.15, 8.9, 8.10, 8.11, 8.15, High School English, 1, 4, 6, 7, 10.</p> <p>ART. 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High School, 2.</p> <p>THEATER. 4.2, 5.2, 6.2, 7.2, 8.2, High School, 2.</p>
<p>Research. <i>The Mikado</i> was originally designed to have authentic Japanese costumes, gestures and movements, but it is actually a satire making fun of English, not Japanese, politicians and traditions. Find out more about the values and government of Victorian times that inspired the theme of the operetta. http://www.victorianweb.org/</p> <p>Research the meanings of the following words and phrases in the operetta: <i>mikado, lose your head, pooh bah, how-de-do, there's lots of fish in the sea, pish, yum-yum</i> How are these words like "baby talk?" <i>nanki-poo, peep-bo, pitti-sing</i></p>	<p>TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. High School English, 9.</p> <p>SOCIAL STUDIES. High School. American History. 20. World History. 20.</p> <p>TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.9, 5.9, 6.9, 7.9, 8.9, High School English, 6.</p>
<p>Create a budget. Have students create a budget for a student or professional opera production. An opera is often quite expensive to produce and requires many artistic and technical jobs. An opera director or docent can provide students with ideas and information.</p>	<p>TEKS. MATH. 4.14, 5.14, 6.11, 7.13, 8.15.</p> <p>SOCIAL STUDIES. 4.13, 5.14.</p>

<p>Draw new costumes. Create new costumes and make-up for the opera. Research kimonos, obis, Japanese sandals, fans and traditional hairstyles. See http://www.japanesekimono.com/index.htm for ideas.</p>	<p>TEKS. ART. 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, 8.1, High School, I, II, 1.</p> <p>LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.23, 5.23, 6.23, 7.23, 8.23, High School English, 19, 20</p>	
<p>Write something original.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write a story, song, poem or skit about being the President, Mikado or Lord High Everything Else • Write a new ending for the opera. • Re-write the opera as if it took place in your community in present time. • Create new songs for the characters. 	<p>TEKS. LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.15, 5.15, 6.15, 7.15, 8.15, High School English, 1. TEKS.</p> <p>MUSIC. 4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5. High School, I, II, 5.</p> <p>THEATER. 4.4, 5.4, 6.4, 7.4, 8.4, High School, I, II, 4.</p>	

Background and Vocabulary

TEKS. SOCIAL STUDIES: 5.22, 6.2, 6.5, 6.15, 6.16, 6.18, 8.27. High school. World history 1, 2, 7, 20, 21.
 LANGUAGE ARTS: 4.9, 4.14, 5.4, 5.14, 6.4, 6.14, 7.4, 7.14, 8.4, 8.14, High School I. 6, 9.
 MUSIC. 4.1, 4.5, 5.1, 5.5, 6.1, 6.5, 7.1, 7.5, 8.1, 8.5, high school 1, 5.

Gilbert and Sullivan. W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911) studied journalism and law, and was a successful playwright before he began writing librettos for operettas to be set to music by Sullivan. Known for his clever lyrics and dialogue, Gilbert also directed his own plays and oversaw production and costumes. Sir Arthur Sullivan (1840-1900) began composing and conducting early and wrote many choral and orchestral works before teaming with Gilbert. Their production of *HMS Pinafore* established Gilbert and Sullivan as an institution in British operetta. *The Mikado* is one of their most enduringly popular works.

Opera. Opera is a visual and aural presentation of music theater that combines words and music to tell a story. An opera is different from a play or musical. In opera, the actors sing the dialogue and the drama is conveyed predominantly through music and songs. This Western classical music art form began in Italy at the end of the 16th century. Operas are usually based on folktales, popular literature, dramas or comedies. Like other forms of theater, opera uses acting, scenery, costumes and other elements to involve the audience. An orchestra or musical ensemble accompanies the singers. Opera may also incorporate dance.

Operettas, such as *The Mikado*, are light operas, shorter in length than other operas, and sometimes comical. Like some operettas, *The Mikado* is a satire and makes fun of political corruption and ludicrous laws, such as facing the death penalty for flirting. Satire is meant to be funny, but often has a serious message as well.

Victorian Age. The Mikado is more about the Victorian Age, than about Japan. Queen Victoria ruled Britain from 1837 to 1901. This was a prosperous time in England, characterized by strong moral, social and civic laws and codes, but also by double standards, hypocrisy, class distinctions, poverty, child labor and other injustices.

Voices—a role in an opera is written for a voice with a specific vocal range:

- **soprano**—highest female voice
- **mezzo-soprano**—female voice lower than soprano but higher than contralto
- **contralto**— lowest female voice
- **tenor**—highest male voice
- **baritone**—medium-range male voice
- **bass**—lowest male voice

Aria—song sung by one singer—often a highpoint in an opera—not only expressing the viewpoint of a character, but also showing off the power and beauty of the human voice

Ensemble—music sung by several singers at the same time. They may sing the same melody together or each singer may express a different feeling and sing a different melody.

- **duet**—two people (sometimes in love) sing together
- **trio**—three people sing together
- **quartet**—four people sing together

Resources

The Mikado, 2-CD set. D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Royston Nash. Decca Record Company. Also, watch the DVD of this company's 1967 production.

To hear the music, read the libretto and songs and see photos from the D'Oyly production:

<http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/>

Audience Etiquette

TEKS. MUSIC. 4.6, 5.6, 6.6, 7.6, 8.6. High School, I, II, 6.
THEATER. 4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5, High School, I, II, 5.
LANGUAGE ARTS. 4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.3, 6.3, 7.3, 8.3, High School English I, 15.

The artists are in the same space as the audience. What the audience does directly and immediately affects the performance. Supportive behavior encourages performers to do better than their best—they feel exhilarated and charged by the audience. A rude audience undermines the confidence of the performers and interferes with their concentration, often resulting in a performance that is less than the company's best. The audience has a vital role in the quality of a performance.

To show your support and consequently get the best possible performance, follow these guidelines:

- Turn off cell phones and other devices that might make sounds.
- Arrive on time.
- Listen quietly and watch closely. Performers can sense when an audience is "with them."
- Do not talk to others in the audience, even if it is about the performance. (Wait for intermission!)
- Try not to make distracting noises or movements of any kind. Anything that would take another person's attention away from the stage is not acceptable behavior.
- If something happens on stage that is meant to be serious (such as a love scene), do not laugh—even if you find it funny. You might spoil the moment for others. Go ahead and laugh at the funny parts of a comic opera.
- Do not leave your seat unless it is a serious emergency.
- At the end of each act, applaud if you liked what you saw and heard. Some audiences will also clap at the end of a very good aria or other part of the performance. You may join them, if you wish.
- At the end, if the opera was one of the best shows you have ever seen, you can give the performers a standing ovation by standing, clapping and saying, "**Bravo!**"

This guide was developed by Dr. Cynthia Herbert, drcherbert@aol.com