



# Hansel AND Gretel



OPERA  
COLORADO

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

Dear Teachers,

Opera Colorado is pleased to provide engaging educational programs and performances for students across Colorado. What follows is a guide that we hope you and your students find useful, as we explore Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*. In the spirit of exploration, we have included various lessons that connect *Hansel and Gretel* with different subjects of learning.

The lessons reference the Colorado Department of Education's Academic Standards: specifically, focusing on the fifth-grade expectations. This does not mean, however, that these lessons should be limited to this age group. While we would be incredibly pleased if you used these lessons in the exact format provided, we encourage you to expand, alter, and adapt these lessons so that they best fit your students' abilities and development. After all, the teacher knows their students' needs best. We would appreciate your feedback on our teacher evaluation form emailed to you after the performance by our Manager of Education & Community Engagement. We hope that you enjoy all that Opera Colorado has to offer!

## THANK YOU!

### CHERITY KOEPKE

she/her

[ckoepe@operacolorado.org](mailto:ckoepe@operacolorado.org)

303.778.0371

Director of Education & Community Engagement  
and Director of the Artist in Residence Program



### KASSANDRA MESTEMAKER

she/her

[education@operacolorado.org](mailto:education@operacolorado.org)

303.778.7250

Manager of Education & Community  
Engagement



Opera Colorado makes every effort to ensure the information provided in this Guidebook is accurate. With the exception of materials used for educational purposes, none of the contents of this Guidebook may be reprinted without the permission of Opera Colorado's Education & Community Programs department. Unless otherwise noted, the materials in this Guidebook were written and created by Cassandra Mestemaker.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Meet the Artists.....	4
Cast of Characters.....	5
Synopsis.....	6
Meet the Composer.....	8
Meet the Librettist.....	10
Lesson One: Sound Waves.....	11
Lesson Two: Gingerbread Geometry.....	14
Lesson Three: Thematic Reflection.....	15
Activity: Design the Witch’s Wig.....	17
Vocabulary.....	18
Bibliography.....	19



PHOTO | Poster for Stadtische Buhnen Theatre in Osnabruck, Germany. 1985.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## MEET THE ARTISTS



**HALLIE SCHMIDT**  
*soprano*  
Gretel



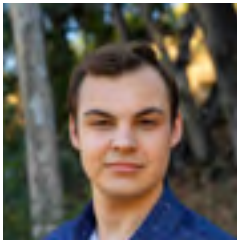
**DANIEL MILLER**  
*tenor*  
Witch



**MELANIE DUBIL**  
*mezzo-soprano*  
Hansel



**JAMES EDER**  
*bass*  
Sandman



**ALEX GRANITO**  
*baritone*  
Father



**OLIVER POVEDA  
ZAVALA**  
*bass-baritone*  
Father, cover



## DID YOU KNOW?

These artists are a part of the Opera Colorado Artist in Residence Program. Over 400 singers audition for the program each year and these six artists made it! They live and work in Denver for eight months with Opera Colorado so that students like you can experience opera in your school.

PHOTO | Matthew Staver/Ellie Caulkins Opera House. 2019.



# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### *Hansel and Gretel*

Music by Engelbert Humperdinck

Libretto by Adelheid Wette (His sister!)

Debuted at the Hoftheater in Weimar, Germany, on December 23, 1893

- **Gretel** (soprano) – a girl, Hansel’s sister
- **Hansel** (mezzo-soprano) – a boy, Gretel’s brother
- **Father** (baritone; bass-baritone, cover) – their father
- **Witch** (tenor) – lives in a candy house designed to trap children lost in the forest
- **Sandman** (bass) – a mysterious, positive figure for the siblings when they are lost

## FOLKLORE FOUNDATION

Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm are the folklore authors behind The Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales (originally titled Children’s and Household Tales) published in 1812. The tale of *Hansel and Gretel* was first published as a part of this collection of folklore stories. Since then it has become a classic tale adapted to a variety of art forms including literature, ballet, film, theater, animation, opera and more!

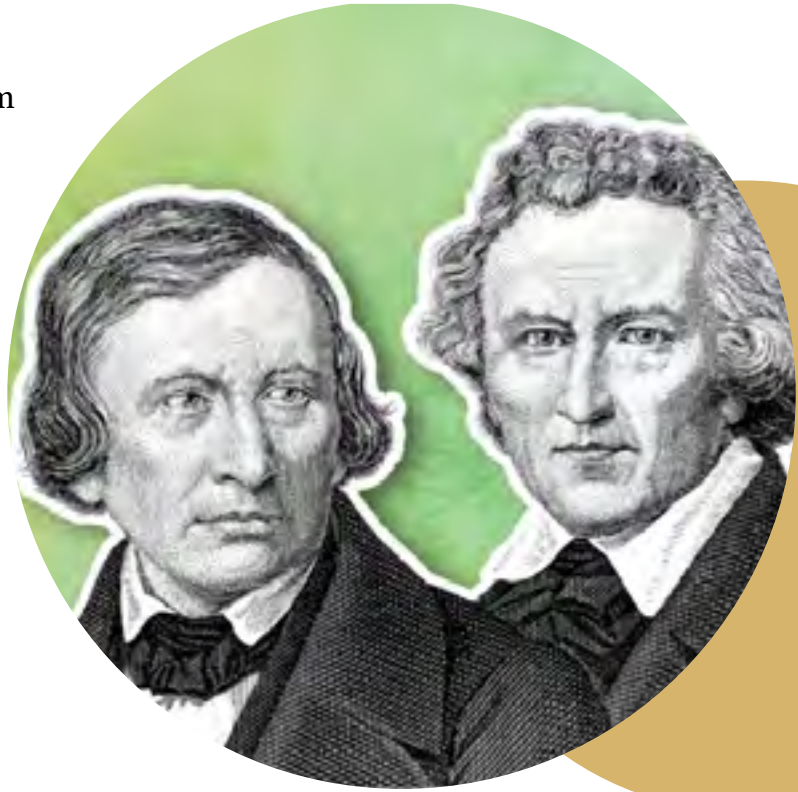


PHOTO | Digital Illustration by Ruhey/Getty Images

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## SYNOPSIS

Two Acts. Sung in German.

Adapted to English libretto by Cherity Koepke for the Opera Colorado abridged production.

Adapted from the fairytale, *Hansel and Gretel*, by the Brothers Grimm.

“The next morning, a beautiful gingerbread house appears in the forest, and the children begin to eat the home...”

### SETTING: A FOREST FAR, FAR AWAY

Hansel and Gretel live with their father at the edge of the woods. They are supposed to be working on their chores, but instead, they dance around the cottage. When Father comes home, he turns to punish them for their laziness, and in his ranting, accidentally knocks over a jug of milk. Frustrated, he sends them into the woods to pick strawberries.

In the forest, Hansel and Gretel once again play, but then a fight breaks out, and Hansel eats all of the berries. Gretel laments that they will now have to pick twice as many berries, and as night falls, they begin to see strange shapes and lights. Gretel cries out for her parents, and the Sandman appears to put the children to sleep. They sing a prayer asking the angels to protect them and fall asleep in the forest.

The next morning, a beautiful gingerbread house appears in the forest, and the children begin to eat the home, believing it to be the house of their dream angels. As they eat, they hear a strange voice from inside the house. Nevertheless, both children convince themselves that it is only the wind. Soon, however, they find that they are not alone, and the horrible witch grabs them and reveals that she

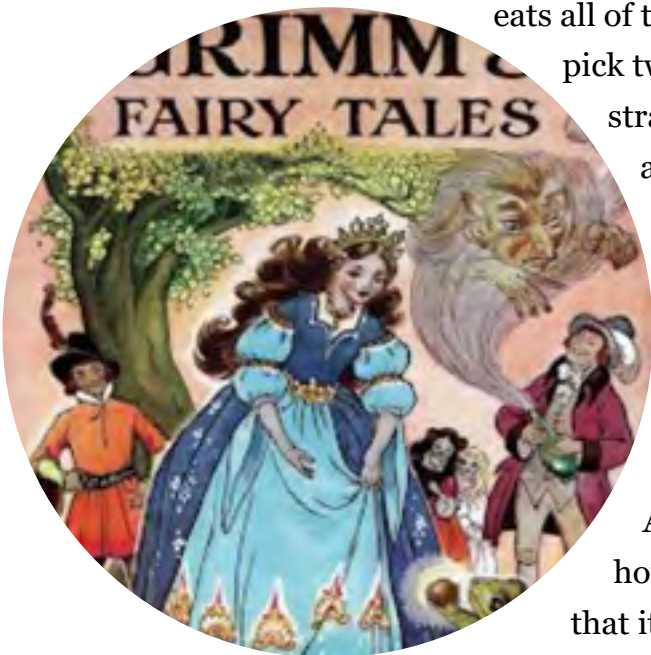


PHOTO | Illustration by Hilda Boswell, 1960.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## SYNOPSIS (CONTINUED)

will eat them. The witch freezes Gretel with a spell and leads Hansel into a cage. After the witch departs, Hansel tells Gretel that he has a plan.

When the Witch returns with a basket of sweets, she orders Hansel to eat and sends Gretel to set the table for supper. As Hansel pretends to sleep, he overhears the Witch reveal her plan to bake and eat Gretel first.

When the Witch wakes Hansel to see how fat he has grown, Hansel tricks the nearly blind witch into thinking that he is still too skinny to eat by presenting her with a thin stick instead of his plump finger. While the Witch feeds Hansel, Gretel grabs the Witch's magic wand and recites the unfreeze spell. Hearing Gretel mumbling, the Witch asks her what she has said, but Gretel merely replies that Hansel will never get fat, which angers the Witch. The Witch then goes to check the oven, and Hansel warns Gretel to be careful. The Witch then calls Gretel over to check the oven, but Gretel pretends not to understand her. Annoyed, the Witch sticks her own head into the oven unaware of the fact that Hansel has crept out of his cage. Hansel and Gretel shove the Witch into the oven; bang the door shut; and rush from the house. The children are saved!

Father is heard in the distance sadly calling for Hansel and Gretel. When he arrives, Hansel and Gretel rush into his arms. Safe at last, the children give thanks to their good fortune and family.



PHOTO | Hansel and Gretel, RKO Radio Pictures. 1954.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## MEET THE COMPOSER: ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK



**WHO WROTE THE  
MUSIC?**

**ENGELBERT  
HUMPERDINCK**

*Hansel and Gretel* was such a success that Humperdinck lived off of the royalties!

Engelbert Humperdinck was born on September 1, 1854, in Siegburg, Germany into a musical family. His father was an amateur musician while his mother was a singer. He studied at the Cologne Conservatory and later at the University of Cologne, where he earned a degree in music theory and composition. In 1876, Humperdinck moved to Munich to study composition under the guidance of the renowned German composer, Franz Lachner.

At the age of 25, Humperdinck won the coveted Mendelssohn prize, which enabled him to study in Italy. While in Italy, he met the aging Richard Wagner, who affectionately took the young composer under his wing, calling him Humpchen or, “Little Hump”, indulging in the German fondness for nicknames. Humperdinck assisted his mentor in the preparation of the first performance of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth, and the two became fast friends. More prize money enabled Humperdinck to continue to travel in Italy, France, and Spain, where he

eventually taught at the Barcelona Conservatory.

Returning to Germany at the end of 1887, Humperdinck began composing the music for *Hansel and Gretel* at the request of his sister, Adelheid Wette. The composition originally involved four folksongs, but Humperdinck received such enthusiastic support from his family that he turned *Hansel and Gretel* into a full-fledged opera. Although the work had a slow start, it quickly grew in popularity. Humperdinck came to America for the premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, but his failing health made a return trip to Germany imperative. Once home again, he decided to devote himself completely to composition, but nothing ever matched the intricacies of *Hansel and Gretel*. It was so successful that Humperdinck was able

PHOTO | Engelbert Humperdinck. Cabinet Photograph. Date unknown.



# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## MEET THE COMPOSER: ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK (CONTINUED)

to retire on the royalties it provided (which was rare!) and devote himself to his family and his art. His last work, a Sonatine in G Major for four violins, was published in 1921. In September of that year, while attending his son's production of Weber's *Der Freischütz*, he suffered the first of what would be two heart attacks in less than twelve hours. He died early in the morning on September 27, 1921.



### An Opera for All Ages

Humperdinck originally conceived *Hansel and Gretel* as a Christmas opera for children. Humperdinck composed it as a gift for his sister's children, and the fairy tale setting, complete with a whimsical, magical atmosphere, was meant to appeal to young audiences. The opera's success, however, far surpassed its original intent, and it quickly became a staple of the operatic repertoire worldwide.

PHOTO | Aleksandra Kurzak in The Metropolitan Opera, 2008.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## MEET THE LIBRETTIST: ADELHEID WETTE



### WHO WROTE THE TEXT?

### ADELHEID WETTE

Wette was an influential female librettist of the German Romantic operatic period.

Adelheid Wette (Humperdinck) was born on September 4, 1858 in Siegburg, Germany to an artistic family who encouraged her natural interest in the arts, folksong and fairytales. She was drawn to literature and poetry, and after being introduced to opera by her brother, she found her way into the world of opera libretti.

Wette is best known for her work on the libretto for *Hansel and Gretel* (1893) which remains one of the most beloved works for German opera. She played a key role in shaping the early 19th-century German operatic landscape by crafting accessible and artistically rich librettos that appeal to audiences of all ages. However, her contributions have been somewhat overshadowed by male composers and librettists of the time.

Little is known about her later life and while she was not widely recognized during her lifetime, recent historians have re-visited her contributions to German opera in shaping some of the most iconic works.

### Women in Opera

Historically, women in opera have faced restrictions, both in terms of their roles onstage and their participation behind the scenes as composers, librettists, and conductors. Female composers faced significant challenges in gaining recognition for their operatic works until the late 20th century, when the works of composers like Kaija Saariaho and Unsuk Chin began to receive greater attention. Today, there is growing recognition of women as both performers and creators in opera, though the need for equality and broader representation continues.

PHOTO | Photograph of Adelheid Wette. Date unknown.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## LESSON ONE: SOUND WAVES

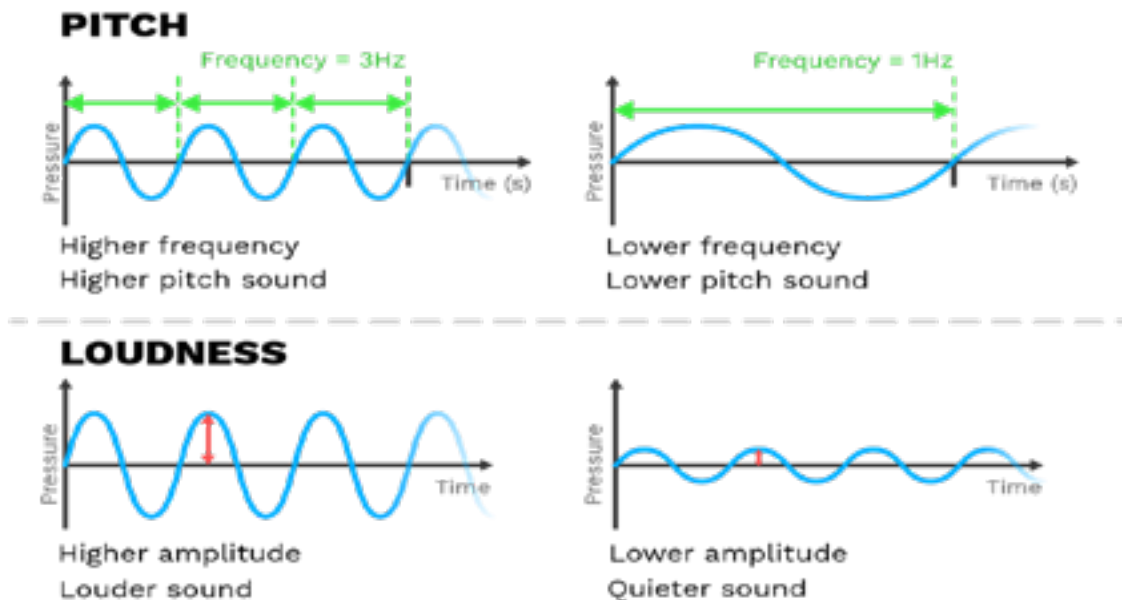
- Colorado Academic Standard: Fifth Grade, Physical Science
- GLE: Make sense of natural phenomena that require understanding of structure, properties, and interactions of matter.

**Outcomes:** Make observations of natural materials based on their properties, seen or unseen.

### Step 1: Theme Exploration & Personal Connection

Opera singers produce sound through a complex process of vocal technique that involves the coordination of the respiratory system, vocal folds, and resonating cavities (throat, mouth, and chest). When the singer exhales, air passes through the trachea and into the larynx (voice box), where the vocal folds (also known as vocal cords) are located. The vocal folds are two flexible, muscle-controlled flaps that vibrate when air passes through them. These vibrations create sound waves. The pitch of the sound depends on the tension and length of the vocal folds: tighter folds produce higher pitches, while looser folds produce lower pitches.

Once sound is created by the vibration of the vocal folds, it travels upward through the throat (pharynx), mouth (oral cavity), and nasal passages. These cavities act as resonators, amplifying and enriching the sound. Opera singers use these resonating chambers to adjust the tone, resonance, and projection of their voice. The goal is to produce a rich, full sound that can project over an orchestra in a large theater without the aid of microphones.



# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## LESSON ONE: SOUND WAVES (CONTINUED)

Sound is created by vibrations that travel through the air in waves. These sound waves can be visualized as oscillations moving outward from the source.

- **Frequency:** The number of vibrations per second (measured in Hertz, Hz). High-frequency sounds are high-pitched, and low-frequency sounds are low-pitched.
- **Amplitude:** The height of the wave, which determines the volume of sound.
- **Pitch:** The perceived frequency of the sound (e.g., a high note vs. a low note).

### Step 2: Theme Exploration & Personal Connection

1. Play [Abendsegen duet](#) and the [Witch's Aria](#) from *Hansel and Gretel*.
2. Ask students to identify the pitch and volume in the music.

#### Discussion:

- How does the orchestra help convey the emotion in the opera?
- How do the loud and soft sounds create tension or peace?

#### Experiment with Sound:

Have students create sound waves with a tuning fork, plucking a string, or tapping a desk and observe the vibrations. Create a “sound lab” where students can experiment with different objects to see how they produce different sound waves (e.g., a rubber band stretched over a box vs. a drumstick on a drum).

Use a simple app such as [WaveVisual](#) to show a visual representation of frequency and amplitude. This can help students link the theory of sound to the music they hear in the opera.



PHOTO | Soundwave Visual of the Witch's Aria via WaveVisual.



# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## LESSON TWO: GINGERBREAD GEOMETRY

- Colorado Academic Standard: Fifth Grade, Geometry
- GLE: Classify two-dimensional figures based on their properties.

**Outcomes:** Classify two-dimensional figures and manipulate scale.

The Witch’s house in *Hansel and Gretel* is a key feature of the opera and is made entirely out of candy. It is designed with a variety of geometric shapes like squares, triangles, and rectangles. Inspiration pictures for the set design of Opera Colorado’s rendition of the Witch’s House in *Hansel and Gretel* are provided below. These helped inform the design of the touring production set.

### Activity:

#### Step 1: Identification and Dimension

1. Have students draw a simple outline of a gingerbread house on graph paper, focusing on geometric shapes.
2. Ask them to classify each shape they used, and then to calculate the area of the house’s walls (rectangles), roof (triangles), and the base (a square or rectangle).
  - For example: If the house is 6 inches tall and 4 inches wide, ask students to calculate the area of the walls (length  $\times$  height).

#### Step 2: Scaling Up the House

**Scaling** is the process of enlarging or shrinking a geometric figure proportionally. This means all dimensions are increased or decreased by the same factor while maintaining the original shape. This is called “**scale factor**.”



# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## LESSON TWO: GINGERBREAD GEOMETRY (CONTINUED)

How would the house change if the dimensions were doubled? Tripled?

1. Use the formula for area to demonstrate how scaling up the measurements affects the total area.
2. Have students calculate the new areas if the dimensions of the house were multiplied by two or three. Discuss the concept of **proportionality**: two line segments are proportional if they are parallel to each other.
  - For Example: If the original base of the house is 4 inches by 6 inches (area =  $4 \times 6 = 24$  square inches), what is the area if each side is doubled (8 inches by 12 inches)?

### Step 3: Construction

Challenge students to design their own “fairy tale house” using geometry concepts. Ask them to draw each part of the house (walls, roof, floor) and cut them out. They should label each shape used and include the area of the shape on each cutout. Then, using tape, instruct them to assemble the house into a three-dimensional form. If all pieces are measured correctly, the house should have no gaps and stand on its own.



PHOTO | Illustration by Birdara Freeman. Date unknown.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## LESSON THREE: THEMATIC REFLECTION

- Colorado Academic Standard: Fifth Grade, Drama and Theater Arts, Critically Respond
- GLE: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

**Outcomes:** Assess how technical and narrative elements represent the theme of a creative drama.

*\*This lesson is intended to be completed after students have seen the performance. Share the exercise with students in advance for preparation.*

### Step 1: Theme Exploration & Personal Connection

After watching the opera, lead a group discussion based upon the following questions:

- What are common emotions the characters portrayed in the performance?
- How does the music reflect the mood of the story (e.g., is it playful, ominous, or frightening)?
- Which themes can you identify in the scene (e.g., innocence vs. danger, family, etc.)?

Elaborate on the themes students identified and review the following:

- 1. Childhood Innocence vs. Danger** (Ex: the Witch's house made of candy.)
- 2. Family and Responsibility** (Ex: The sibling bond between Hansel and Gretel.)
- 3. Good vs. Evil** (Ex: Concepts of justice and morals are exemplified between the Witch (evil) and the children (good).)

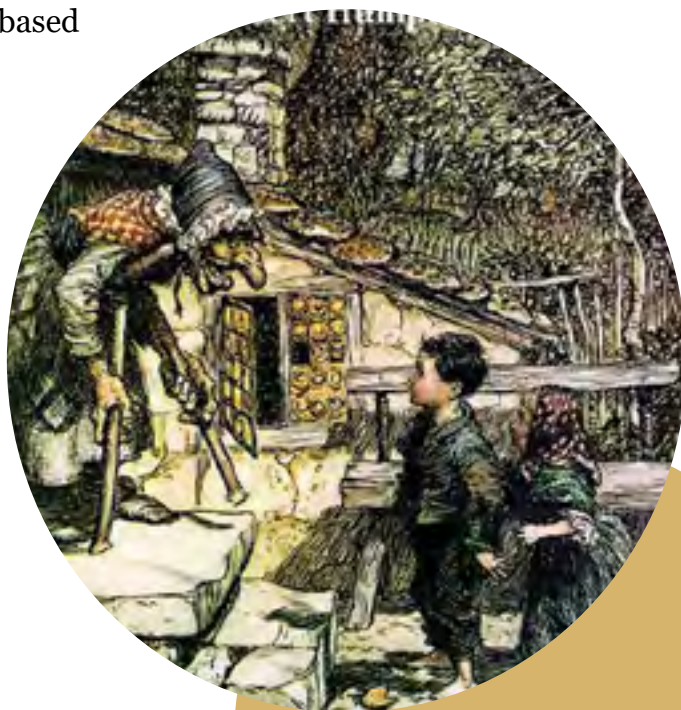


PHOTO | Dover Edition Vocal Score cover, 1995.

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## LESSON THREE: THEMEATIC REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

- 4. The Power of Imagination** (Ex: Present in narrative elements (candy house) and the visual elements of the performance.)
- 5. Greed and Temptation** (Ex: The candy house symbolizes indulgence and greed.)

### Step 2: Self Reflection

**Personal Connection:** Ask students to think about their own lives and how these themes might relate to them.

- Have you ever faced a situation where you had to make a choice between what's tempting and what's safe?
- How do you support and care for your family or friends?
- How does your imagination help you in difficult situations?
- What does “good vs. evil” mean to you in everyday life?

**Journal Writing:** Have students write a short reflection on which theme from the opera resonates most with them and why.

### Step 3: A familiar story, reimagined.

In small groups, ask students to brainstorm and create a modern-day version of *Hansel and Gretel* while keeping the core themes intact. They could set the story in a different context (e.g., a city, a school, a virtual world), but the themes identified above should be present.

**Presentation:** Each group will present their modernized version of the story to the class, focusing on how they incorporated the themes.



PHOTO | *Hansel and Gretel*, Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2023.



# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## ACTIVITY: Design the Witch's Wig



Opera Directors must make design choices for the set, props, costumes, wigs and makeup for their production. These are a few of the wig inspirations for the Witch's wig in Opera Colorado's touring production of *Hansel and Gretel*.

Use the space below to design a wig for the Witch to wear!



# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## VOCABULARY

*All definitions are sourced from the Merriam-Webster dictionary.*

**Librettist:** the writer of a **libretto:** the text of a work (such as an opera) for musical theater

**Composer:** a person who writes music

**Composition:** written piece of music especially of considerable size and complexity

**Aria:** a long, accompanied song for a solo voice

**Sonata:** an instrumental musical composition typically of three or four movements in contrasting forms and keys

**Movement:** a distinct structural unit or division having its own key, rhythmic structure, and themes forming part of an extended musical composition

**Chamber music:** instrumental ensemble music intended for performance in a small room or auditorium and usually having one performer for each part

**Symphony:** symphony orchestra concert; a musical composition of complexity or variety

**Chorus:** a large group of singers, typically performing in a group, usually without solo parts; in opera the chorus provides background vocals or ensemble pieces

**Concerto:** a piece for one or more soloists and orchestra with three contrasting movements

**Opera:** a drama set to music and made up of vocal pieces with orchestral accompaniment

**Orchestra:** a large group of musicians playing various instruments

**Amplification:** the act or process of increasing the intensity (as of a sound)

**Diaphragm:** a muscle beneath the lungs and above the stomach

**Pitch:** the highness or lowness of a sound

**Frequency:** the number of occurrences of a repeating event per unit time

**Vibrations:** a rapid oscillation of a particle about an equilibrium position

**Articulation:** the act or process of pronouncing words clearly

**Tone:** a sound considered with reference to its pitch and quality

**Pronunciation:** the act or manner of pronouncing words

**Recitative:** a style of delivery where the singer adopts a speech-like rhythm, often used for dialogue or to move the plot forward

**Forte:** loud or strong; often used to describe the volume of singing in opera

# HANSEL AND GRETEL

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cohen, A. (2006). *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*. Oxford University Press.

Fuchs, R. (2010). *Engelbert Humperdinck: A Biography*. Cambridge University Press.

Griffiths, P. (2009). *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 10th ed. Oxford University Press.

Grimm, J., & Grimm, W. (1812). *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (also titled *Children's and Household Tales*).

Jones, A. (2004). *Engelbert Humperdinck: A Biography*. Oxford University Press.

McCorkle, B. (2006). "Humperdinck's Hänsel und Gretel: Fairy Tale and Operatic Tradition." *Journal of Opera Studies*, 12(2), 45-60.

McClary, S. (2002). *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. University of Minnesota Press.

Müller, H. (2016). "The Role of Women in 19th-Century German Opera: The Case of Adelheid Wette." *Musical Women in History*, 31(4), 192-210.

Smith, J. D. (2007). "Adelheid Wette's Contribution to German Fairy-Tale Opera." *Journal of Opera Studies*, 14(2), 233-247.

Zednik, F. (2010). *Richard Wagner and the Influence on Humperdinck's Musical Style*. Cambridge University Press.