CALGARY OPERA

THE WITTY SQUIRREL

STUDY GUIDE

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge that we live, work and play on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut'ina, the Iyarhe Nakoda Nations, the Otipemisiwak Métis Government of the Métis Nation within Alberta Districts 5 & 6, and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.

ABOUT CALGARY OPERA

Founded in 1972, Calgary Opera is one of Canada's most innovative and ambitious professional opera companies. With more than 50 events during the 2024-25 season, curious listeners of all ages can experience the wonder of opera all throughout the school year, whether as grand events at the Jubilee Auditorium or in diverse community experiences throughout our city and beyond.

Since 2007, we've offered an annual school tour production, performing for young audiences around Southern Alberta.

For over 25 years, we've offered the in-school music program Let's Create an Opera, reaching over 60,000 students.

This season, we are thrilled to partner with Elder Saa'kokoto and the teachers and students of Sundance School for Let's Create an Opera, which will culminate in an original children's opera performed in English, French, and Blackfoot.

Throughout its 52-year history, Calgary Opera has championed new works and Canadian artists and stories. We have produced:

- 8 new works, including the internationally acclaimed opera "Filumena"
- 27 new productions (new versions of existing operas), and
- 8 Canadian premieres.

Calgary Opera's mission is to serve its entire community with innovative and inspiring stories told through the bold medium of opera. We're thrilled you'll be joining us!

To stay connected and learn more, sign up for our newsletter here.

DISCOVERING OPERA

Opera is a vibrant and ever-changing artform that combines the dramatic intensity of the theatre, heightened through music and singing.

- Operas can be long or short, with any number of people involved.
- Operas can be sung in any language.
- Operas can tell stories about any time, place, person, or issue.
- Operas are still being written today.

Operas are created by the cast, crew, and artistic production team including:

- composers, who write the music
- librettists, who write the words or "libretto"
- directors
- conductors
- singers
- instrumentalists
- dancers
- set, lighting, special effects designers
- costume and makeup designers
- choreographers
- stage managers and technical crew
- and the audience

We understand music on its own terms by making music! By singing its melodies and harmonies, playing it and especially by improvising, we bring the music into our ears, bodies, and spirits.

To increase our musical understanding, we begin by learning by heart the melodies and rhythms we encounter. As the music of more artists becomes familiar, we begin to encounter unfamiliar music with more musical understanding.

Whether you've heard an opera once or a hundred times, there's always more to discover.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE SHOW

HOW LONG IS THE OPERA?
The Witty Squirrel is 35 minutes long and will be followed by a 10 minute Q&A with the artists. Remember to bring your questions!

HOW WILL I KNOW WHAT THEY'RE SAYING?
Although originally an Italian children's opera titled *Lo scoiattolo in gamba*, Calgary Opera commissioned American librettist and dramaturg Kelley Rourke to translate **The Witty Squirrel** into English. The opera was also written to sit in a comfortable vocal range that allows for clear understanding of the text.

WHY IS THE SQUIRREL PLAYED BY A YOUNG FEMALE SINGER BUT CALLED "HE" BY THE OTHER CHARACTERS?
In Italian, the original language of this opera, the word for Squirrel has a masculine gender. To follow the original language, the translator kept the pronouns "he" for the Squirrel.

DO OPERA SINGERS USE MICROPHONES?
In almost all operas, microphones are not needed. Instead, opera singers use their voices and bodies to naturally amplify the resonance of their vocal folds.

WHO WILL PERFORM?
Four vocalists in this touring production will be accompanied on the keyboard by Music Director Evan Mounce.

CHARACTERS

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	ABOUT
The Squirrel An orphaned young squirrel	soprano or mezzo-soprano	The clever and quick-thinking young Squirrel suffers, as he has no teeth for chewing on nuts and fruit! When the King offers him a set of golden dentures, the Squirrel agrees although quickly discovers he has no talent for cooking and needs to improvise a solution!
The King A pompous and gluttonous king	baritone or bass	The King's only talent is for eating! When the Squirrel promises a delicious feast in return for a pair of golden dentures, the King cannot refuse!
The Chamberlain An important advisor to the King	baritone	The Chamberlain tries to outwit the Squirrel, but winds up in a mad dash around the kitchen
The Minister The driver of the king's Rolls Royce and another adviser to the King	tenor	Another member of the king's court who is looking forward to the delicious feast

Calgary Opera attracts world class talent to perform for our audience, including the McPhee Artists who apprentice at Calgary Opera who are featured in **The Witty Squirrel**. For more information about the performers who bring these characters to life, please visit us here.

THE STORY

The orphan squirrel complains of his cruel fate: he has not only lost his parents, but also his teeth. King Pappone (King "Papaunchy" in the Calgary Opera version) comes to his aid and presents him with a set of golden teeth.

The squirrel promises to prepare a sumptuous meal for him and his attendants as a reward for his help. The king accepts this offer, but threatens the squirrel with its life if it doesn't fulfil its part of the bargain.

One month passes and the impatient king sends an ultimatum to the squirrel to honour his promise. The squirrel swiftly sets to work, but suddenly discovers that his teeth have grown back!

Now he has no further need of the king's gift. He hides the dishes he has prepared, runs back into the wood and enjoys life while the king and his attendants collapse from hunger. —*Schott Music*

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

Who is the composer? The person who writes the music of an opera.

- **Giovanni Rota Rinaldi** (better known as Nino Rota) was an Italian composer, best known for his film scores, including Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather and The Godfather, Part II, for which he won an Academy Award.

- Rota was born on December 3, 1911 in Milan, Italy.

- Rota was a child prodigy. By the time he was 13, Rota had written an opera and an oratorio (a sacred musical work for soloists, chorus, and instruments, that has a story and plot, but it typically not staged.)

- After studies at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute he began writing film scores. He was extremely prolific, writing over 150 works including as many as 13 film scores in one year.

- Rota wrote 10 operas, 5 ballets, and many other instrumental works, in addition to film scores.

- From 1950 to 1978 he served as director of the Liceo Musicale, a conservatory in Bari.

- Rota had a long association with the celebrated Italian film director, Federico Fellini. Rota wrote the musical score to Fellini's films including: La dolce vita and La strada.

- Rota is quoted as saying: "I'd do everything I could to give everyone a moment of happiness. That's what's at the heart of my music."

ABOUT THE LIBRETTIST

Who is the librettist? The person who writes the words (dialogue and lyrics) of an opera.

What does "libretto" mean? In Italian, libretto means "little book." Early Italian opera houses printed off "little books" for audience members that had all the words written inside, so that attendees could follow what was being sung.

- **Eduardo De Filippo** was a celebrated Italian playwright, actor, director, and screenwriter, who wrote the libretto to *Lo scoiattolo in gamba* (The Witty Squirrel).
- De Filippo was born on May 1, 1900 in Naples, Italy.
- He first appeared on stage at the age of four and then worked professionally as an actor from the age of 14 to 27.
- In 1931, Eduardo formed a theatre company with his brother playwright Peppino and sister Titina, called Compagnia del Teatro Umoristico I De Filippo. They invented a new genre and a unique artistic approach, rooted in commedia dell'arte, an Italian theatrical tradition rooted in stock characters and improvisation.
- De Filippo wrote over 25 plays, over 50 screenplays, and the libretto for several operas.
- In 1972, De Filippo was honoured with the Antonio Feltrinelli Award for his lifelong contribution to theatrical arts. De Filippo was praised for his poetic approach and for opening Neapolitan culture to the world.

LUISELLA'S STORY

- The libretto of **The Witty Squirrel** was inspired by a story that the daughter of the librettist, Eduardo De Filippo, wrote.

- De Filippo's daughter Luisella (*pictured second from right, below*) was 9 years old when she wrote the story of the The Witty Squirrel in a notebook for her father.

- Luisella would bring her father a gift every day after school, and one day, instead of a gift, she wrote him the story of an orphaned squirrel who is promised a set of golden teeth by a king.

- Tragically, Luisella died a year after writing the story. Eduardo was stricken by grief, and several years later decided to write the libretto for the children's opera after her delightful story. —FanPage.It

Luca, Eduardo, and Luisella De Filippo, and Thea Prandi

LEARN THE AUDIENCE SONG

This opera has a delightful moment that calls for some audience participation!

When the King invites his very important friends and dignitaries from all around the world to the Squirrel's feast, the entire court (including the students and teachers from your school) are invited to join in on this chorus:

THROUGH THE DESERT,
OVER OCEANS,
WITH EXCITEMENT,
WITH DEVOTION,
DELEGATIONS FROM ALL NATIONS
HAVE RESPONDED TO YOUR CALL!

Learn the text, melody, and movement to the audience song

Secure acess here: https://vimeo.com/1037936899/4db8b82e89?share=copy

Practice the song along with the performers

Secure acess here: https://vimeo.com/1037935461/41463b3c61?share=copy

REFLECTION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Use discussion and class activities to explore the opera The Witty Squirrel:

What kinds of songs and dances can we hear in The Witty Squirrel?

- Listen actively to the songs and dances of The Witty Squirrel. What are your favourite musical moments?

- In this opera, you heard:
  - the squirrel's **lament** (*"Ahi! Ahi! Ahi! Ahi!"*)
  - a regal (and slightly pompous) **march** that introduces the king (*"Little squirrel, what a pickle!"*)
  - a **"dreamy waltz"** that the Squirrel uses to hypnotize the king and his advisors (*"I will prepare a meal rich and exquisite"*)
  - a cooking **"boogie woogie"** (*"Butter, salt, Havarti, cheddar"*)

See pp. 13 to 15 for musical examples

What other famous examples of different dances or song forms have you heard? Consider:

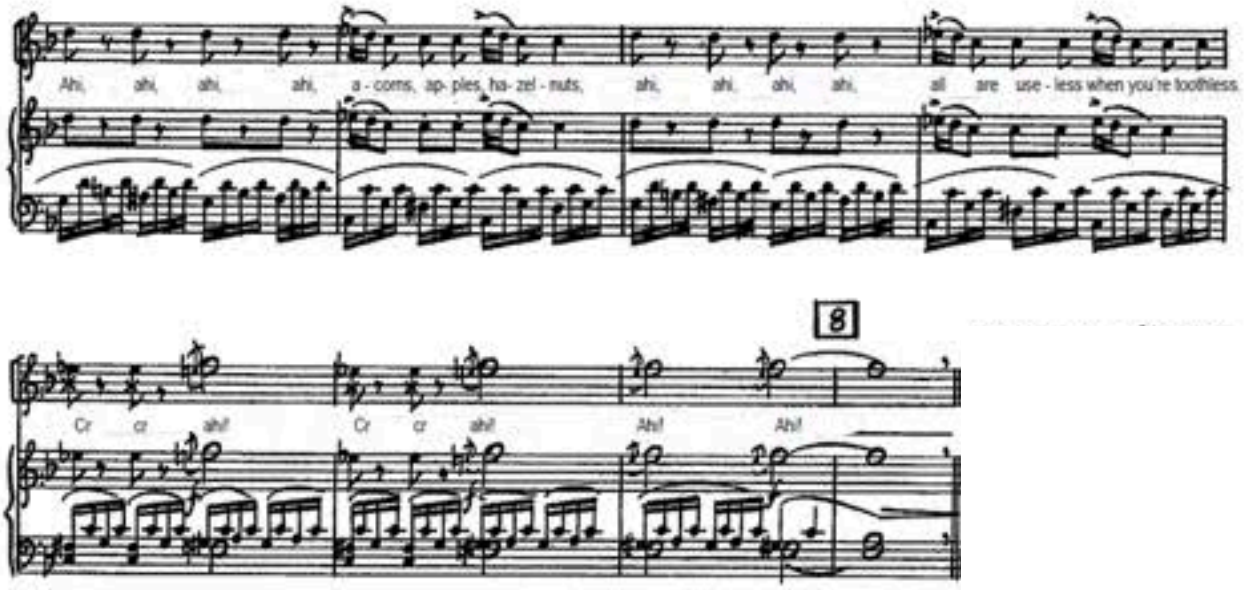
- **Lullaby**: a song of comfort, to inspire sleep
- **Serenade**: a song to the beloved
- **Ballad**: telling a story ("once upon a time...")
- **Lament**: the heart's breaking open in grief
- **Dances**: waltz, polka, tango, habañera, etc.
- **Hybrid forms**: combine elements of different songs and dances

- Perform or play recorded examples of different song forms or dances and invite your students to explore and discuss which they might be.

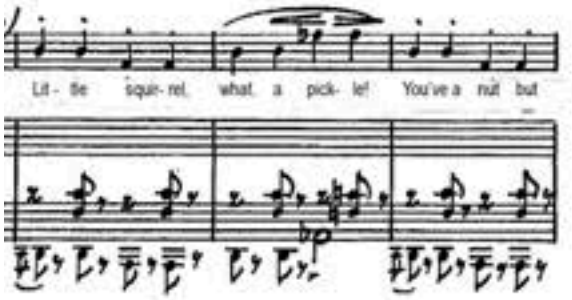
- Choose a song form and create your own version! As a class or individually, write text and add melody to:
  - a squirrel's lament
  - a king's march
  - a hypnotizing dreamy waltz
  - a cooking boogie woogie

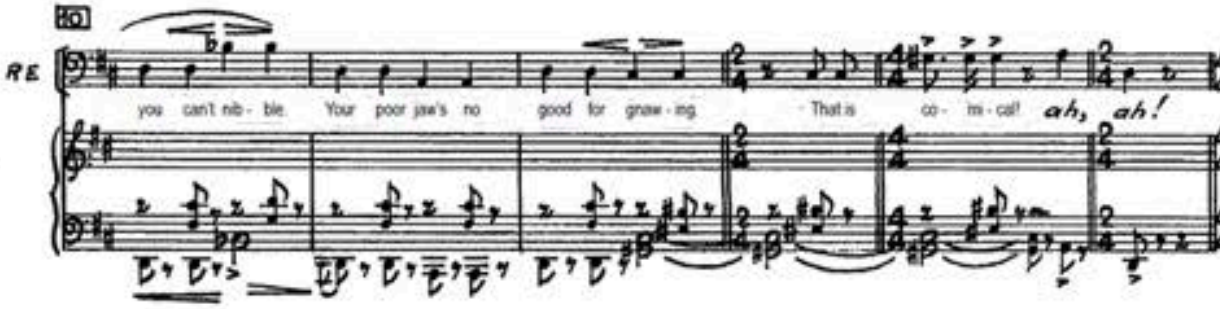
MUSIC EXAMPLES

The Squirrel's Lament



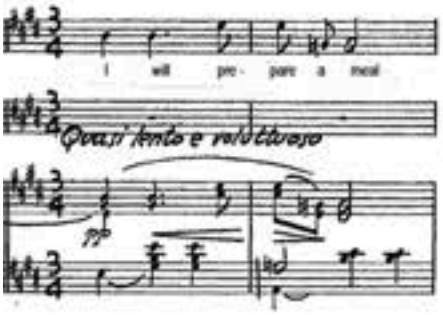
The King's March

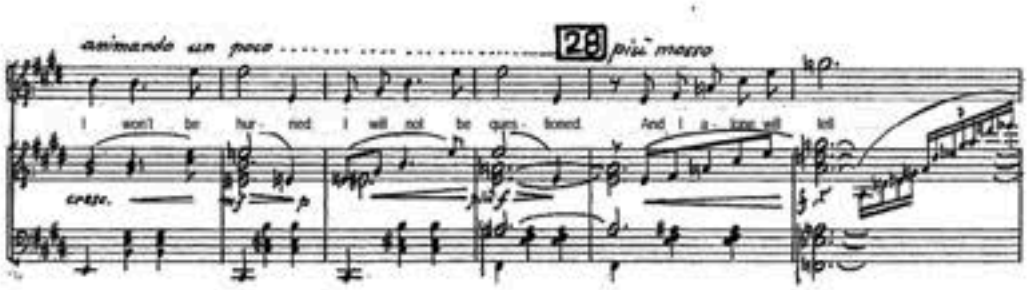


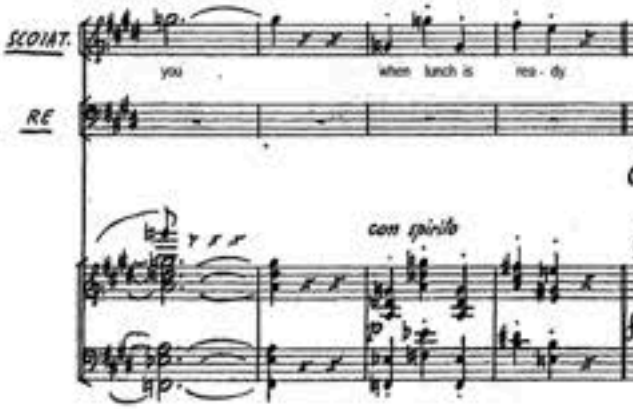


MUSIC EXAMPLES

A "Dreamy" Waltz

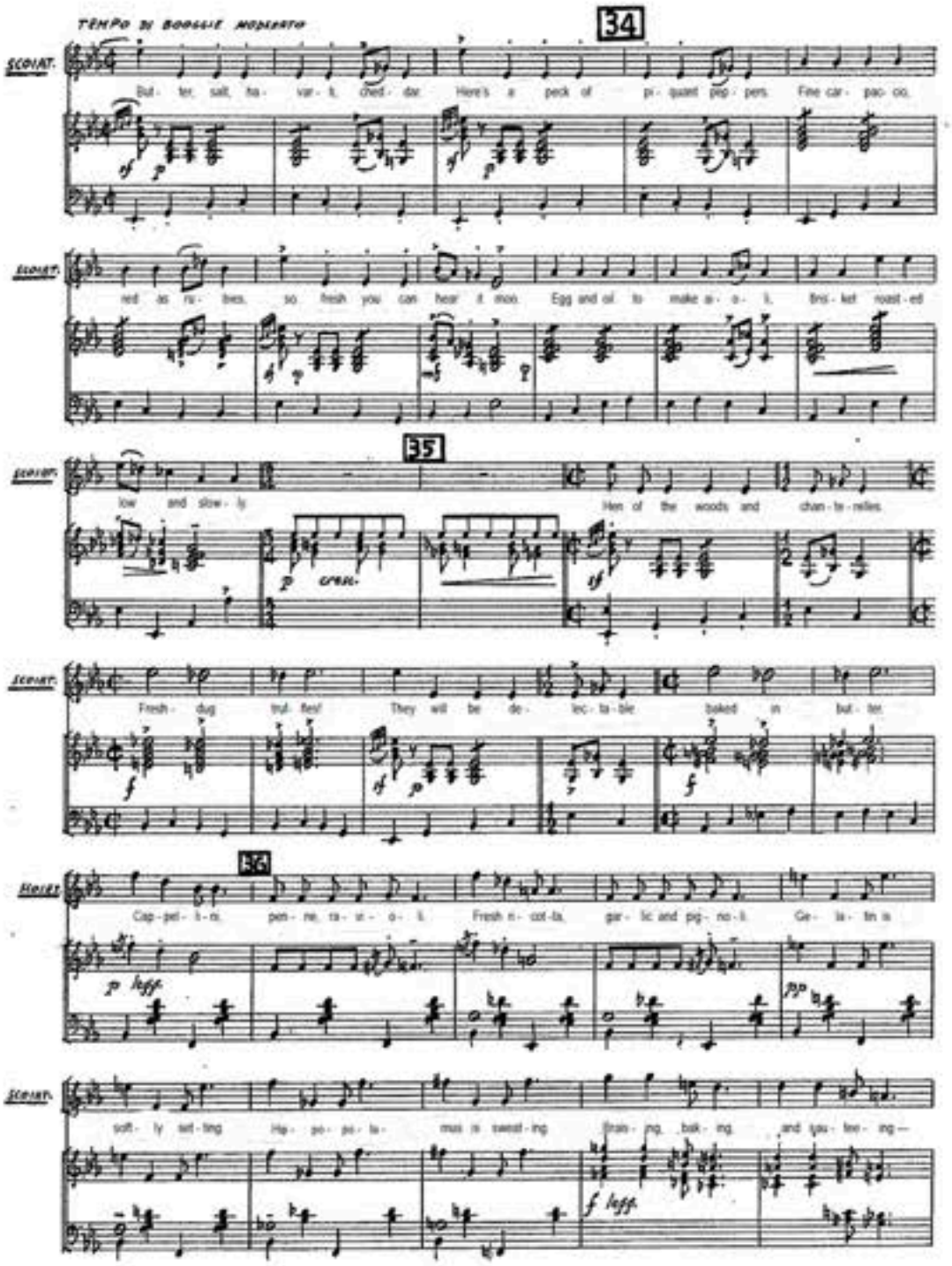






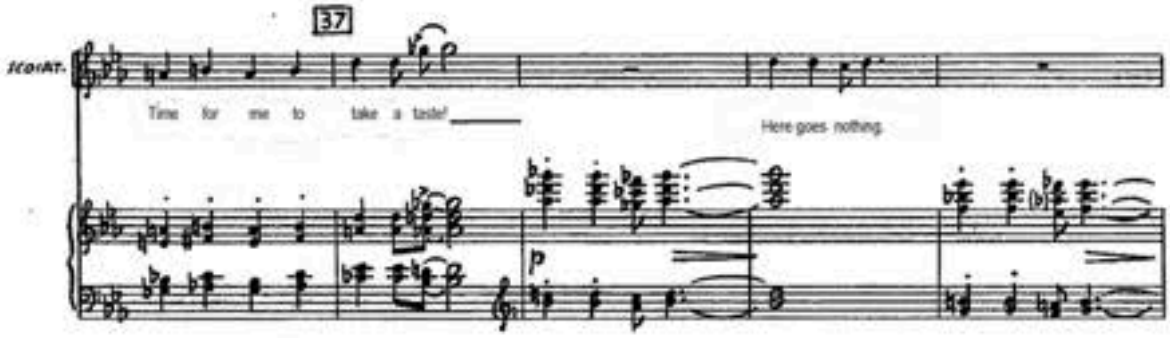
MUSIC EXAMPLES

A Cooking "Boogie Woogie"



MUSIC EXAMPLES

A Cooking "Boogie Woogie", p. 2



CREATE AN ALTERNATE ENDING

Imagine what might have happened had the Squirrel presented a delicious (or disgusting) meal for the king! In 6-8 phrases, you can create an alternate ending to the opera with drama, excitement, and humour.

As a class, take turns deciding:

- What would happen next
- Which character would speak and what they might say
- How they might sing those words (create a melody for simple phrases)
- What the accompaniment might be to those melodies

- Incorporate improvised accompaniments or other incidental music from your favourite operas, symphonies, or musical examples to underscore the stage action.

  Some of our favourites include:
  - Rossini's Overture to *The Barber of Seville*
  - Bizet's Overture to *Carmen*
  - Grieg's *In the Hall of the Mountain King*
  - Verdi's Overture to *Macbeth*

- Keep track of your ideas, allow multiple students to try out the parts as you rehearse, and then act and sing them with your biggest operatic energy!

PHOTO CREDITS

Page 3 *Upper right:* Calgary Opera's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*
Lower left: Students participate in Calgary Opera's *Let's Create an Opera*

Page 4 Alessia Vitali in Calgary Opera's *The Witty Squirrel.* HarderLee Photography. 2024.

Page 5 Young audience members attend Calgary Opera's *The Witty Squirrel.* HarderLee Photography. 2024.

Page 7 McPhee Artists perform in Calgary Opera's *The Witty Squirrel.* HarderLee Photography. 2024.

Page 8 Composer Nino Rota at the piano. Keystone Press. 1972.

Page 9 Librettist Eduardo De Filippo with a model of the Teatro San Carlino. Agenzia Ruggieri - Archivio di Teatro Napoli. 1955.

Page 10 Luca, Eduardo, and Luisella De Filippo, and Thea Prandi. Retrieved from https://www.fanpage.it/napoli/la-morte-della-piccola-luisella-figlia-del-grande-eduardo-de-filippo/

Page 13–16 Excerpts from The Witty Squirrel: Nino Rota, composer; Eduardo De Filippo, librettist; Kelley Rourke, translator; Schott Music, publisher.

Page 17 Nicholas Murphy and Alessia Vitali in Calgary Opera's *The Witty Squirrel.* HarderLee Photography. 2024.

Page 19 *Left:* Young audience members attend Calgary Opera's The Witty Squirrel. HarderLee Photography. 2024. *Right:* Young attendees watching Storytime at the Opera. Adrianna Snihura. 2024.

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