



OPERA VISION

# Hamlet

## An opera



English Literature, Music,  
History and Society  
Level: 14-18 years old

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## A study of three scenes from Ambroise Thomas's 1868 opera Hamlet

This unit of work looks at three short scenes from the opera to stimulate discussion, analysis and further enquiry. The scenes in question are the death of Ophelia (Hamlet Act IV, scene vii), the grave digger's scene (Hamlet Act V, scene i) and the return of Laertes and the death of Hamlet (Hamlet Act V, scene ii). Key themes in this opera include corruption, revenge, the concept of reality and the consequences of one's actions.

This unit uses videos available for free on [\*\*\*OperaVision\*\*\*](#). Links to the individual videos can be found below.

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# Music



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## HAMLET

Music by Ambroise Thomas

Libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier, based on a French adaptation by Alexandre Dumas, père, and Paul Meurice of William Shakespeare's play Hamlet.

Romantic-period grand opera in five acts first performed in Paris in 1868

Full performance: Hamlet

<https://operavision.eu/en/library/performances/operas/hamlet-opera2day>

Excerpt 1: 'Pâle et blonde'

<https://youtu.be/LnG0dFrMSKE>

Excerpt 2: 'Dame ou prince, homme ou femme'

<https://youtu.be/mpd2c8H3oNg>

Excerpt 3: 'Mais qui marche dans l'ombre?'

<https://youtu.be/m7R7rssDABI>

Bonus video 1: An introduction to Ambroise Thomas's Hamlet

<https://operavision.eu/en/library/introductions/introduction-hamlet>

Note: The full performance is available until 13 March 2020, while the excerpts and bonus video will remain available beyond this date.

# Composer

AMBROISE THOMAS (1811-1896)

Ambroise Thomas was a French composer and teacher. Born into a musical family in 1811, he learnt the violin and piano as a child before going to study at the Paris Conservatoire. In 1832 he was awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome and soon devoted himself entirely to composition. His first opera, a one-act comedy called *La double Échelle*, opened at Paris's Opéra-Comique in 1837. It was well received, with Hector Berlioz (winner of the Prix de Rome two years before Thomas) praising it for its 'extreme vivacity and wit.'

Thomas now wanted to write serious opera but because of competition from established composers such as Jacques Fromental Halévy, Daniel Auber and Giacomo Meyerbeer, he had to make do with writing more comedies. His first successful three-act work, *Le Caïd*, opened at the Opéra-Comique in 1849, and *Le Songe d'une nuit d'été* premiered the following year. Described by *The Musical Times* as 'a little masterpiece', this latter work is an example of the composer's interest in William Shakespeare, with the Bard appearing as one of the characters along with Queen Elizabeth I and Falstaff.

In 1856, Thomas became a professor of composition at the Paris Conservatoire, where he taught until his death forty years later. Over these years his students included the composers Jules Massenet, Gaston Serpette, and, late in his career, George Enescu.

Thomas's great breakthrough came in 1866 with *Mignon*. Based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, it was the composer's response to Charles Gounod's earlier opera *Faust*, which premiered in 1859. *Mignon* proved a popular success at the Opéra-Comique and was given more than 100 performances in its first season there. Thomas had also been spending years slowly writing an opera based on *Hamlet*, so when Gounod's own Shakespeare adaptation, the opera *Roméo et Juliette*, appeared at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1867, it provided additional impetus for him to finish composing it.

Hamlet premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1868 and appeared the following year at London's Royal Italian Opera (now the Royal Opera House). Along with Mignon, it is considered Thomas's greatest success, and was further staged in Leipzig, Budapest, Brussels, Prague, New York City, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, and Vienna within five years of the Paris premiere.

On the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Thomas, though aged nearly sixty, volunteered to serve in the Garde Nationale. The following year he was appointed director of the Paris Conservatoire. In 1889 the Paris Opéra staged Thomas's next treatment of a Shakespeare play, the ballet *La Tempête*. Five years later, Mignon was given its 1,000<sup>th</sup> performance at the Opéra-Comique, after which the octogenarian composer was embraced on stage by Giuseppe Verdi and decorated with the ribbon of the Grand-Croix de la Légion d'honneur by President Carnot.

Thomas died in his flat in the Conservatoire in 1896, aged 84.

# Characters

## HAMLET

Prince of Denmark, son of the late King murdered by his Uncle. He in love with Ophelia until he learns of her father's involvement in the conspiracy. He then rejects her and upon hearing of her death is filled with remorse.

## OPHELIA

The beautiful young daughter of the Chief Minister of Denmark, Polonius, who was involved in the death of the King. Rejected by Hamlet, she loses her sanity and in sadness kills herself.

While following the themes of Shakespeare's play, Thomas's opera adaption focuses strongly on the characters of Hamlet and Ophelia, with the role of Ophelia greatly expanded.

## LAERTES

Brother of Ophelia, devoted to his sister and blames Hamlet for her death.

## THE GRAVEDIGGERS

Two Shakespearean clowns or fools who look for humour in their work and are philosophical about the inevitability of death.

# Synopsis

## EXCERPT 1 – THE DEATH OF OPHELIA

<https://youtu.be/LnG0dFrMSKE>

Ophelia cannot understand or accept the fact that Hamlet has rejected her. Dressed as a bride, sings about the Willis (water spirits) who lure lovers to their deaths, dragging them under the water until they drown: ‘And now listen to my song. Pale and fair, sleeping under the deep waves...’ This aria replaces Shakespeare’s ‘Tomorrow is St. Valentine’s Day’, the bawdy words of which may have been considered inappropriate at the Paris Opéra.

Ophelia sings: ‘There he is! I think I hear him!’ As she leans over the water, holding onto the branches of a willow with one hand, and brushing aside the rushes with the other, she repeats some fragments from her love duet with Hamlet in Act I. She is seen floating in her white gown as the current carries her away. In this production by OPERA2DAY, she has also cut her wrists. The dramatic action follows Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s death in Act IV, scene vii of Shakespeare’s play.

## EXCERPT 2 – THE GRAVEDIGGER SCENE

<https://youtu.be/mpd2c8H3oNg>

Two gravediggers are digging a grave while considering the equality of death regardless of sex, status or age. Hamlet appears in the distance and slowly approaches them. They drink and sing of the pleasures of wine. Hamlet asks for whom the grave is intended but the gravediggers do not remember. Hamlet, realising that Ophelia has gone mad, but still unaware that she is dead, begs forgiveness for his ill treatment of her in the soliloquy, ‘Like a delicate flower’.

## EXCERPT 3 - THE RETURN OF LAERTES AND THE DEATH OF HAMLET

<https://youtu.be/m7R7rssDABI>

Laertes appears in the distance, covered by a cape. Hamlet calls out to him, and he answers and comes nearer. Knowing of Ophelia's death, he seeks revenge, and challenges Hamlet to a duel. As they are about to fight, Hamlet hears the sound of a funeral march and asks Laertes who has died. Laertes, in an aside, is amazed that Hamlet does not know.

The funeral procession appears, led by a choir of men and women. Ophelia's body is carried in, with the King and Queen, Polonius, Marcellus, Horatio and the courtiers following behind. Hamlet finally realises who has died and is overwhelmed with grief. Intent on revenging his father's death, he shoots the king and then himself whilst the chorus cry out: 'All Hail King Hamlet!'

# Insights

## A POWERFUL PLAY

After more than 400 years, Shakespeare's plays still fire the imagination, as if they were written yesterday. No other author created such overwhelming tragedies based on utterly human motives such as love, idealism, jealousy and revenge. Hamlet is Shakespeare's longest play and is one of the most powerful and influential works of world literature.

## SHEER DRAMA

Ambroise Thomas's opera meets every expectation of what a Hamlet opera should offer. There's King Claudius's degenerated court in all its pomp and circumstance, an intense inner struggle of the hero, a mysterious appearance of his father's ghost, and Ophélie has one of the best insanity scenes ever written. The librettists, who earlier provided texts for Gounod's Faust, brought the play back to its very core to transform Shakespeare's play into a striking work of music theatre.

## MASTERLY MUSIC

The masterly music is a revelation to both opera and Shakespeare enthusiasts. Thomas's music keeps you poised on the edge of your chair, from beginning to end. For the Prince of Denmark, he created one of the most beautiful baritone roles in opera. The soprano singing Ophélie has the opportunity to shine in a dramatic madness scenes with exceptionally moving music.

## WIDESPREAD SUCCESS

For decades after its première in Paris in 1868, Hamlet was one of the most performed operas in the repertoire, and not only in France. It was Ambroise Thomas's greatest operatic success, and was performed in

London, Leipzig, Budapest, Brussels, Prague, New York City, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, and Vienna within five years of the Paris premiere.

## DIFFERENT ENDINGS

Different versions of the finale exist. In the original 'Paris' ending of the opera, Hamlet lives and is hailed as King of Denmark. Thomas knew that this deviation from Shakespeare's play would not be appreciated in London, so he made an alternative 'Covent Garden' ending in which Hamlet dies. In this production by OPERA2DAY, both of these endings are combined, with Hamlet being proclaimed king before he takes his own life.

## OPHELIA FEVER

Harriet Smithson, the muse behind Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, performed the role of Ophelia in 1827 when a touring English company came to Paris for a season of Shakespeare in English. Her interpretation was so good that it triggered an obsession with the character of Ophelia by Parisians, which led to creative responses from across the visual and performing arts.

## FILM NOIR

In OPERA2DAY's production of Hamlet, opera and film merge together as one. The scenery is inspired by the rich tradition of film noir. The result is a unique work of theatre that penetrates deep into the shadowland of Hamlet's mind, where his darkest memories, dreams and visions become apparent.

# Teaching Activities

## **Activity 1: The Death of Ophelia**

Watch Excerpt 1: 'Pâle et blonde' (<https://youtu.be/LnG0dFrMSKE>) and ask your students the following questions.

### LITERATURE

1. Look at the character of Ophelia in this excerpt and write a short character description of her, using only the information you find in this scene.
2. Compare this to the description of her in the original play in Act IV, scene vii. How does the opera's depiction of the death of Ophelia present a more dramatic interpretation of this event?
3. Why do you think the composer and librettist have altered the storyline in this way?
4. How has the use of technology enhanced the storytelling in this excerpt?

### MUSIC

There is very sparse instrumental accompaniment in this scene, which contrasts strikingly with Ophelia's coloratura vocal line. Coloratura literally means 'to colour'. In music, it describes a sung melody that is elaborate, filled with runs of notes, trills, wide leaps, and passages that are generally difficult to sing. It may seem odd to have a virtuosic passage like this just before Ophelia's death, but the composer is making the point that the focus of the scene is not on Hamlet's actions, but on her response to them.

1. Listen to the excerpt and consider how the coloratura technique is used to convey both happiness and madness.

2. How does the composer ensure that the vocal line is clearly heard at all times? What examples of word-painting can you find in the orchestral accompaniment?
3. If you were composing a death scene, what instrumental colours would you choose and why?

## HISTORY AND SOCIETY

This scene is a much expanded interpretation of Ophelia's death from Shakespeare's original play. Ophelia represents femininity and Hamlet uses her to take out his anger regarding his own mother's murderous involvement. During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the tragic-romantic figure of Ophelia became a popular subject. She is depicted in *Ophelia*, a famous painting by John Everett Millais.

1. Symbolism is rife in Shakespeare's plays. In the depiction of Ophelia's death, many symbolic natural objects are mentioned, such as a willow tree, violets, rosemary, pansies and numerous other flowers. What is the relevance of these symbols to the character of Ophelia? How did these symbols become part of our culture?
2. Interestingly, the audience at the opera applauds at the end of the scene, whereas that would not happen in a performance of the play. Is this an example of conflicting traditions and attitudes?

### ***Activity 2: The Gravedigger Scene***

Watch Excerpt 2: 'Dame ou prince, homme ou femme'

(<https://youtu.be/mpd2c8H3oNg>) and ask your students the following questions.

## LITERATURE

1. The gravediggers in this play take the role of clowns or fools. Shakespeare often used a fool role to comment on society, with a

lower class of person using their wit and intellect to better their superiors. How do the grave diggers achieve this in this scene?

2. Why might Shakespeare follow so tragic a scene with a comedy?
3. Until this point in the story, Hamlet's actions have been clouded by revenge. What in this scene tells us that this has now changed? Consider the music and text.

## MUSIC

1. What aspects of the music reinforce the comic nature of the opening of this scene?
2. Hamlet sings of his love for Ophelia. How does the way he sings and uses his voice contrast with the way Ophelia sang in the last scene?
3. How is the music truly reflecting Hamlet's mood and the meaning of the words? How does his body language truly reflect the meaning of the words he is singing?

## HISTORY AND SOCIETY

1. Rituals of death have been important to all civilisations since mankind began. How does this scene depict the rituals of a 19<sup>th</sup> century burial?
2. How have the practises of burial in western cultures changes over the years?
3. Why are grave diggers so frequently referenced in Art and Literature?
4. In many cultures, grave diggers are marginalised in society. Find some examples of this and discuss why this may be.

### **Activity 3: The Return of Laertes and the Death of Hamlet**

Watch Excerpt 3: 'Mais qui marche dans l'ombre?'

(<https://youtu.be/m7R7rssDABl>) and ask your students the following questions.

#### LITERATURE

1. Watch the scene and then compare this to Shakespeare's original scene in Act V, scene i. What is the same and what is different?
2. How does Laertes react to the news that Hamlet does not know of Ophelia's death?
3. What dramatic techniques are used to convey Hamlet's remorse on the discovery of Ophelia's death?

#### MUSIC

1. How is music used in the funeral scene as the cortege passes by? Note that the way the music has been composed reflects the person of Ophelia, rather than trying to replicate the funeral march for a grand monarch.
2. As you listen to the music, try and describe the way the composer has used rhythm, melody, harmony and orchestration to create appropriate funeral music for Ophelia.
3. In the final minutes of the excerpt, the music becomes almost film-like in suggesting Hamlet's state of mind and supporting the drama. Identify some instances of this and how the composer has achieved it.

#### HISTORY AND SOCIETY

1. Watch Bonus video 1: An introduction to Ambroise Thomas's Hamlet (<https://operavision.eu/en/library/introductions/introduction-hamlet>). Why does the director of this production believe that historical research is a necessary part of directing Hamlet?

2. Why does Hamlet believe that his actions have ‘condemned Ophelia forever’? What cultural and societal attitudes are reflected here?
3. How has society’s attitude to suicide changed over the years? Would Hamlet’s death be considered a heroic death in this age?

#### ***Activity 4: Big Picture thinking and reflection***

Having watched all three excerpts, ask your students the following questions.

#### LITERATURE

One serious criticism of the opera over the years has been that the story was not true to Shakespeare’s play.

1. Do you think this is true of the excerpts?
2. Are the same themes still to be found, yet expressed differently?
3. What is ‘artistic license’ and where is it appropriate for a creative writer to use it?
4. Can you think of other examples in literature that have an ‘artistic license’ take on a story – whether it be an account of an historic event or an adaption of an existing work of literature?

#### HISTORY AND SOCIETY

Our understanding of history is significantly shaped by the stories told in the performing and visual arts. One example is Shakespeare’s Richard III, which portrayed him the ambitious, evil hunchback King who murdered his nephews. History tells us that Richard III was a reformer who did much to improve living standards, and no proof has been found of his killing his nephews.

1. What examples of this can you think of that have shaped our attitude and understanding of an historical event or person?

2. Do creative artists have a moral responsibility to 'tell it like it was'? Should they?

## MUSIC

Oratorio and Opera have been the two large-scale forms of vocal music in western culture since the Baroque age. The main difference between the two is that one relies purely on the voices and music to tell a story; whilst opera combines all the arts: singing, drama, costumes, sets and theatrical staging.

1. What are the differences in how a singer would prepare to perform a role in an opera compared to an oratorio?
2. What are the similarities and differences in they deliver the performance? Consider use of vocal timbre, use of the face and body, diction, projection and characterisation.