

AUSTIN OPERA

OFRENDA

Composed by Jorge Sosa with Libretto by John de los Santos



INTERACTIVE RESOURCE GUIDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	TABLE OF CONTENTS
3	Welcome and About <i>Ofrenda</i>
4	About Austin Opera
5	TEKS: Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills
6	Content Warning
7	Synopsis
9	Character Relationship Chart
10	What to Expect at the Opera
11	What is opera?
12	The Operatic Voice
13	Who Works at The Opera
14	Meet A Key Player: Claudia Chapa
15	Cast & Cast Interview
16	Creative Team
17	The Composer & Librettist/Director
18	The Origins of <i>Día de los Muertos</i>
19	“What’s on an Ofrenda?”
20	The Music of <i>Ofrenda</i>
21	Memory Journaling Activity
22	Make a Paper Nicho
23	Make a Paper Nicho: Printable Template

AUSTIN OPERA STAFF

Annie Burrridge, General Director & CEO
Timothy Myers, Sarah & Ernest Butler Music Director
Jennifer Basten, Chief Advancement Officer
Andréa Ochoa, Director Community Impact & Events
Janine Llewellyn, Education Manager
Dr. Charles D. Carson, 2026-2027 Season Scholar-In-Residence

CURRICULUM DESIGN

Janine Llewellyn, Curriculum Design and Illustration
Susan Branch Towne, Character Sketches
Laura Carrisosa, Graphic Design

Welcome to the Interactive Resource Guide for *Ofrenda*

Welcome to the Interactive Resource Guide for *Ofrenda*, Austin Opera's very first commissioned production! Composed by Jorge Sosa with a libretto by John de los Santos, this bilingual chamber opera is the culmination of a three-year journey, and its world premiere also marks the opening of our new Butler Performance Center.

Ofrenda follows Macaria, a hospital custodian whose acts of kindness lead to an extraordinary gift from La Señora – Death herself. Woven throughout the story are themes of remembrance, healing, and the ties that bind families across generations. *Ofrenda* draws on the traditions of *Día de los Muertos* to tell a story that celebrates Mexican-American identity through its universal message of connection and sacrifice.

In this TEKS-aligned Interactive Resource Guide, you and your students will find:

- A look behind the scenes at how this opera came to life
- The history of *Día de los Muertos* and a visual guide to understanding the meaning of *ofrendas*
- An introduction to the huapango music woven into the score
- Hands-on activities to help you connect the opera's themes to their own lives and memories

Whether this is your first opera or you are a longtime fan, we hope this guide deepens your experience of *Ofrenda*.

Enjoy, and we'll see you at the opera!



Janine Llewellyn
Education Manager



About AUSTIN OPERA

Austin Opera, voted “Opera Company of the Year” for 2020 in a national BroadwayWorld.com poll, engages 35,000 community members annually through three mainstage productions, as well as a diverse slate of community and educational programming. Serving Central Texas since 1986, Austin Opera inspires audiences with its trademark blend of innovation and artistic excellence. With the leadership of General Director & CEO Annie Burrige and the Sarah and Ernest Butler Music Director Timothy Myers, Austin Opera presents a curated season of grand opera productions at the Long Center, the crown jewel of Austin performing arts venues. Combining the finest

American and international stars with the outstanding local talent of our Orchestra and Chorus, Austin Opera’s productions include accessible takes on classic operas as well as challenging new works that reinforce the continuing relevance of opera. Austin Opera is also a force in hundreds of classrooms across Central Texas, nurturing the next generation of opera audiences through its award-winning education programs. We work directly with educators, community leaders, students, and parents to make opera relevant, educational, and entertaining for students of all ages, offering much of our educational content online for free.

TEKS: Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills

Rule §113.42 World History Studies (One Credit), Adopted 2022

(d) Knowledge and skills.

(6) History. The student understands the characteristics and impact of the Maya, Inca, and Aztec civilizations. The student is expected to:

(A) compare the major political, economic, social, and cultural developments of the Maya, Inca, and Aztec civilizations and explain how prior civilizations influenced their development; and

(B) explain how the Inca and Aztec empires were impacted by European exploration/colonization.

Rule §117.310 Music, Level I (One Credit), Adopted 2013

(c) Knowledge and skills.

1) Foundations: music literacy. The student describes and analyzes music and musical sounds. The student develops organizational skills, engages in problem solving, and explores the properties and capabilities of various musical idioms. The student is expected to:

(A) experience and explore exemplary musical examples using technology and available live performances;

(D) define concepts of rhythm and meter using appropriate terminology and counting system;

(E) explore elements of music such as rhythm, meter, melody, harmony, key, expression markings, texture, form, dynamics, and timbre through literature selected for performance;

5) Historical and cultural relevance. The student relates music to history, culture, and the world. The student is expected to:

(B) identify music-related vocations and avocations;

6) Critical evaluation and response. The student listens to, responds to, and evaluates music and musical performance in both formal and informal settings. The student is expected to:

(A) practice informed concert etiquette as a performer and as an audience member during live and recorded performances in a variety of settings;

CONTENT WARNING

***Ofrenda* is recommended for audiences ages 13 and up (PG-13).** This story explores complex, mature themes and moments of emotional intensity. We encourage educators to review the content in advance and consider how best to prepare themselves and their students for the experience. The performance will include:

- Profanity
- Death
- Mentions of sex
- Mention of self-harming behavior
- Mention of suicide

If performance's themes raise anything difficult for a student, or if you or a student need support, **help is available 24/7:**

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** — Call or text 988.
Press 2 for service in Spanish.
Chat online at 988lifeline.org.

SYNOPSIS

Scene 1

In the trauma ward of St. Margaret's Hospital, the administrative head, Carla, is outside the room of a young patient in critical condition. She argues with a nurse, Gary, who has grown disillusioned with the overcrowding of patients and perpetual understaffing. They both leave as a hospital custodian named Macaria completes her duties. A strange figure, Señora enters the young patient's room.

Scene 2

In Macaria's apartment, her daughter, Pina, awaits a call from her boyfriend. Macaria prays by an ofrenda for her late husband, and insists Pina join her.

Macaria mentions that she thinks she saw her father in the form of a monarch butterfly. Pina mocks her mother's belief that all monarchs are the spirits of the dead.

Macaria makes a sandwich with leftover turkey from a work party and advises her daughter to not waste her time on boys, and to complete her college scholarship applications. If Pina ever works in a hospital, Macaria urges her to be a nurse or doctor.

Suddenly, Pina is struck with great pain. Macaria holds her, and they breathe and rock together until it subsides.

Scene 3

Carla, overwhelmed by both professional and personal stress, struggles with a mountain of paperwork in her office. Her mind wanders between her exhausting romantic life and budget cuts at St. Margaret's.

Scene 3

A city bus, on which Señora is the only passenger, drives through the night. Macaria gets on after finishing a late shift at the hospital. She takes a seat across from Señora and eats her turkey sandwich. Señora looks on with longing, so Macaria shares it her and tells her a joke.

Macaria recognizes that Señora is the figure of Death. She asks if her time has come, but Señora assures her it is not. In appreciation for her kindness, Señora takes Macaria's water bottle and cries into it. She explains that the tears have the power to heal those who are dying, but they must not be spilled, and once they are gone, the

magic is through. Macaria refuses the gift, but Señora leaves it up to her to decide what to do with the bottle.

Scene 5

Carla is once again dealing with continuing work problems in her office. Gary arrives and enables her to relax.

Scene 6

In Macaria's apartment, she finds Pina asleep in terrible pain. Señora appears and informs her that her daughter has stomach cancer.

Macaria takes a water bottle from her bag and pours a little water into Pina's mouth. Señora extends her hand over Pina's body, and both Macaria and Señora recite a prayer. Afterward, Señora assures Macaria that Pina will live. She reminds Macaria to keep the water bottle safe.

Scene 7

The following morning, Pina tells Macaria she feels better than she has in a long time. Pina asks her mother what happened last night, but Macaria refuses to reveal the whole truth. They reminisce over the past and discuss the future. Macaria then remembers her water bottle and desperately searches for it. She finds it in the trash that Pina had taken out and feels a wave of overwhelming relief.

Scene 8

In a hospital room, a man is connected to a heart monitor. Señora appears, while Macaria sneaks in and administers some of her water. After a moment, the man's eyes open.

Scene 9

Señora drifts among mortals as time passes.

Scene 10

Having been home sick for a few days, Carla calls Gary at the hospital. She begs him to visit her, but he refuses as the hospital is in disarray. He explains that numerous patients with terminal illnesses have been inexplicably recovering, and none of the doctors can find the source. Staff have dubbed the miracle worker the "Angel of St. Margaret's". Gary is convinced that the miracles will eventually result in something terrible.

SYNOPSIS

Scene 11

Months have passed since Macaria received Señora's gift. While on a bus on her way to work, Macaria considers whom she will heal today. She fears that once the water is gone, she will return to being unseen again. She wonders if there is magic within her.

Scene 12

Pina rereads a college rejection letter, deeply bitter at the odds stacked against her. Carla and Gary continue to argue, still on completely different pages in their affair.

Macaria pleads for more magic, but Señora rejects this request. Macaria decides to heal one last patient, but Gary catches her. He grabs her arm, causing her to drop the bottle, spilling the water. Gary pulls Macaria out of the room, and the patient's breathing becomes short and rapid. Señora appears and kisses him. He dies as she vanishes.

Scene 13

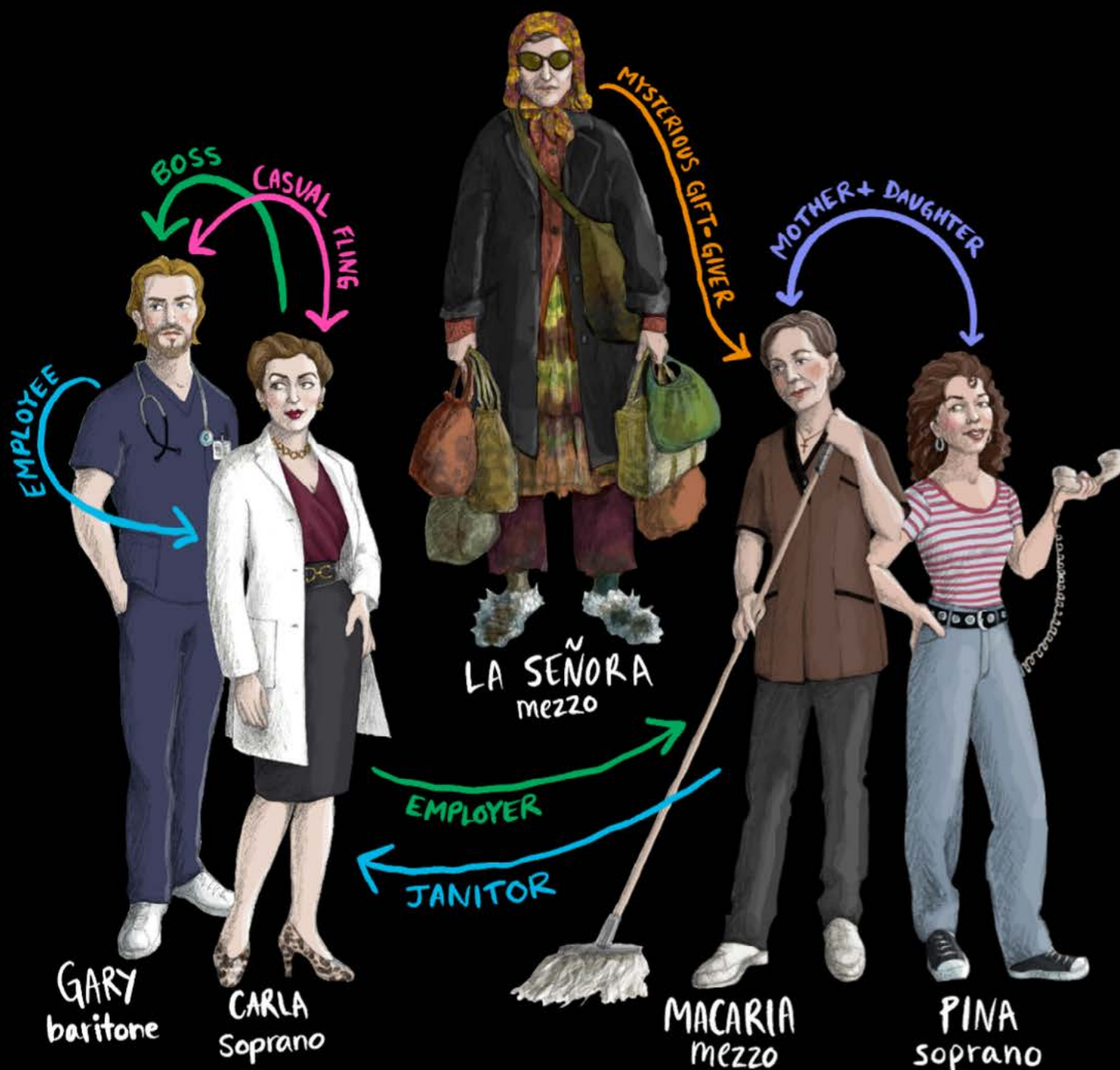
Carla and Gary interrogate Macaria. She tells them she is the Angel of St. Margaret's. Gary is dubious, but Carla asks how the magic works. She reveals that she and Gary have had a premature baby together, who is sick in the NICU. She pleads with Macaria to save him. Macaria informs her that all the water has been spilled, but proposes that if Carla helps Pina get into medical school she will do her best to heal their child. Carla agrees, so Macaria orders Gary to mop up the spilled water with her bandana.

Macaria is led by Carla to the NICU. Once she is alone, she wrings out water from the bandana. Señora appears and transports Macaria and the child to her dark domain. Macaria begs Señora to allow her to heal the child. Señora presents her with an ultimatum: Macaria's life in exchange for the child's. Macaria pleads with Señora, as she and the infant are engulfed by an infinite swarm of monarch butterflies.

Scene 14

It is November, twelve years later. Leaves fall peacefully in a small cemetery.

CHARACTER RELATIONSHIP CHART



Character sketches by Costume Designer, Susan Branch Towne

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE OPERA

Whether it's your first time at the opera, or you've been more times than you can count, these tips and tricks for your visit will help you feel comfortable and help the evening run smoothly.

Final Dress Rehearsal

Because this is a final dress rehearsal, there will still be elements of the production that are in process. There may be stopping to fix mistakes, or singers "marking," which means singing lightly to save their voices. There will also be a tech table in the middle of the audience where the production team, including the director, costume, lighting, and set designers, are working hard to make sure all of the finishing details are in place.

Be quiet and courteous

Be quiet and courteous to the actors on stage. A night at the opera is a live theater experience, things work a little differently than they would at a movie theater or school assembly. Since there are singers on stage actively working, our audience needs to be as respectful as possible.

Applaud after arias

Let the singers know that you love the work they're

doing. You can say "bravo" for men, "brava" for women, and "bravi" for a group!

How will I know what is going on?

No need to worry if you don't know the language of the opera. There will be a highly visible screen with "supertitles" that provide a complete translation of the words being sung. The experience of watching an opera has been truly transformed by making it possible for everyone to follow the story.

Dress like yourself

Whether you wear that dress or suit you've been saving for a special occasion, or you're more comfortable going out in jeans or basketball shorts, dress like yourself at the opera!

And finally... **Have fun!**

WHAT IS OPERA?

by Dr. Charles Carson, 2026-2027 Scholar-in-Residence

For many of us, the word opera conjures up pictures of women singing in Viking helmets or—let’s be real—the over-the-top drama of Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd cartoons. Well, to be honest, those cartoons aren’t that far off. Operas are supposed to be dramatic! But what is opera, actually?

The word “opera” comes from the Latin word for “work,” and that’s what it is—all of the arts (music, singing, acting, movement, and design) combined to give you larger-than-life characters and dramatic situations in fantastic locations. (It’s like TikTok, but live!)

Opera as we know it today began in 1500s Italy, when musicians and thinkers got together to try to imagine what the “pure” drama of Ancient Greece must have sounded like. After all, there were no recordings! For them, this meant blurring the lines between singing and speaking, and using instruments to help to singers communicate deeper meanings than acting alone could. They thought this combination would work really well on audiences. What do you think?

Opera can take many forms, because composers, musicians, and stage directors can mix these elements together in many different ways.

Opera often uses instrumental music (the orchestra), arias (solo singers), and sometimes even choruses (a choir) to tell many different kinds of stories—from hilarious comedies, to heartbreaking tragedies. The music can be soft and wholesome, or roaring and thunderous. Opera can tell grand stories with mythic characters or beasts, or it can just as easily tell a small, very personal story set in an everyday time and place. This is the case with our first opera of the season, *Ofrenda*, a brand new work which includes people, places, and situations that may be familiar to many audience members. That’s what’s great about opera—if you look closely enough, there is always something relatable in there for you!



THE OPERATIC VOICE

Being an opera singer is hard work! Singers need to be physically strong and have superb technique in order to sustain long phrases (musical thoughts): this means they have excellent control of both the inhalation and the exhalation of their breath. Likewise, their voices must maintain a resonance using cavities in the face to increase the audibility of the voice in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and the chest cavities. All of this resonance is necessary to achieve the volume required to be heard above the orchestra that accompanies the singers. Opera singers do not usually use microphones, so they must project their voices throughout a whole

theatre using only their muscles and technique! All voices are defined by both the actual voice "type" and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited. The range, pitch, and tone of a singer's voice will determine what kind of role they will play in the opera.

[Watch this video from the Royal Ballet and Opera to hear the different voice types in action.](#)

Below is a list of voice types (and ranges) commonly found in operas:

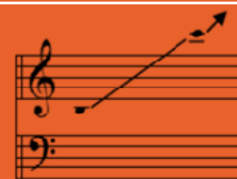
Treble Voice Types



Soprano (sopra = over)

The highest pitched female voice. Composers often (but not always) write the female lead role in an opera for a soprano. Soprano voices vary by sound type: coloratura sopranos, who can sing very high notes and rapid passages with ease; dramatic sopranos, whose voices have great power; and lyric sopranos, whose voices have exceptional beauty and can sustain long passages.

Photo: Hailey Clark in Austin Opera's production of *Pagliacci*.



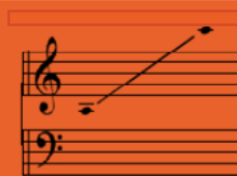
Characters: Pina, Carla



Mezzo-soprano ("mezzo" = "médium")

Lower than the soprano and higher than the contralto. Mezzos often play either the character of a young boy (this is called a trouser role), a complex character with energy and awareness of life, or an evil character. Bizet's *Carmen* is one of the most famous mezzo roles in opera, and is a rare lead role for a mezzo.

Photo: Cecilia Hall in Austin Opera's production of *Carmen*.



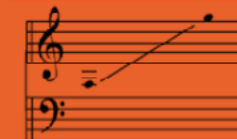
Characters: Macaria, La Señora



Contralto ("contra" = "against" & "alto" = "high")

The lowest pitched female voice, these singers have a deep, well-rounded sound. Contraltos are rarer than sopranos or mezzos, and they are usually given the role of a maid, mother, or grandmother.

Photo: Marian Anderson, one of the finest contraltos of her time and a force in the Civil Rights movement.



Countertenor ("contra" = against, tenor)

The highest pitched male voice, Countertenors typically sing in the mezzo-soprano range, using a well-developed falsetto technique combined with their full voice. They have a distinct, ethereal tone that is often described as bright, pure, and otherworldly. Countertenors are primarily associated with early music, particularly Baroque opera and sacred music, but they have also found a place in contemporary opera and even crossover genres.

Photo: Anthony Roth Costanzo in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Akhnaten*.



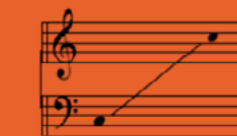
Non-Treble Voice Types



Tenor ("tenere" = "to hold")

The highest sounding male voice: often the leading role. Tenors, like sopranos, can have a lyric or dramatic quality. Luciano Pavarotti was one of the world's most famous lyric tenors. Tenors typically play characters that fall in love with sopranos.

Photo: Efraín Corralejo in Austin Opera's production of *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*.



Baritone (from the Greek term for "deep sounding")

These voices are more mellow-sounding and slightly lower than tenors. The roles sung by baritones are usually father figures or counts and other nobles, and these are often important roles in the story.

Photo: Will Liverman in Austin Opera's production of *The Pearl Fishers*.



Characters: Gary



Bass ("low") Bases are the lowest-sounding human voices, and they often play roles of wise and older characters in opera, like kings, emperors, or gods. They can also play profoundly evil characters. The basso profundo is the lowers voice in singing, and is commonly heard in Russian opera.

Photo: Musa Ngqungwana in Austin Opera's production of *The Barber of Seville*.



WHO WORKS AT THE OPERA?

It takes more than singers to put on an opera. Although you may see only the performers in the spotlight, many people behind the scenes make what you see possible.

BACKSTAGE

The **Stage Director** tells singers how to move on stage so that the audience can understand what is being sung, even if it is in a different language.

The **Technical Director** coordinates lighting, set, and costumes, supervises the building and mounting of scenery onstage, and oversees the work of all crews during rehearsals and performances.

The **Scenic Designer** is responsible for the visual appearance and function of all scenic elements in an opera to help bring the story to life on stage. They plan or design the set and supervise its construction.

The **Lighting Designer** plans or designs the color, intensity, and frequency of the light onstage.

The **Wig and Make-Up Designer** creates and

oversees hairstyles, wigs & make-up.

The **Costume Designer** will help the singers accurately portray their characters in the opera's setting.

The **Properties (Props) Manager** is in charge of finding objects for the singers to use while on stage that will correctly reflect the time period of the opera and

give the actions on stage a more realistic feel.

The **Choreographer** invents dances and movements and teaches them to dancers and/or cast members.

The **Crew or Stagehands** assist in the construction, installation, and changes of the set, costumes, lights, and props. Stagehands know when to change the scenery.

ON STAGE

Cast: All singers and actors who appear onstage.

Actors: Performers who have dialogue but do not sing.

Principal: A singer who performs a large role in the opera.

Comprimario: A singer who specializes in the small character roles of opera, from the Italian meaning "next to the first".

Supernumeraries (or Supers): Actors who participate in the action but do not speak or sing.

Dancers: These performers train for years and perform choreographed routines onstage. From flamenco to ballet, dance plays a supporting role in countless operas.

Chorus: A group of singers with more than one person singing each part, like a choir. The choruses in opera represent certain groups required by the story such as soldiers, priests, peasants, or townspeople. Certain operas include the use of a children's chorus.

IN THE PIT

The **Conductor or Maestro** shows the orchestra when to play and the singers when to sing. The conductor controls how fast or slow the music goes.

The **Orchestra** is made up of a group of musicians who play instruments. They typically stay with the conductor in the **orchestra pit** during operas, as opposed to onstage for concerts.

What is the orchestra pit? It is a partially covered area right in front of the stage. You'll generally only be able to see the back of the conductor's head in the pit if you are an audience member. A composer typically uses woodwinds, brass, percussion, and string instruments in various combinations in the orchestra to help express a variety of emotions and environments.

Woodwinds include piccolos, flutes, and reed instruments such as the oboe, clarinet, and bassoon, all requiring a very focused stream of air. **Brass** instruments produce sound through the buzzing or vibration of the player's lips resonating within a tubular chamber. They include horns, trumpets, and trombones. **Percussion** is a broad term describing any instrument that is struck,

scraped, or rubbed by hand. Timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, xylophone, glockenspiel, and chimes are just an example of a few utilized by composers. **Strings** include any instrument that produces sound from vibrating strings such as violins, violas, cellos, double bass, and harp.

IN THE HOUSE

The Audience (that's you!) also has an important role to play. It would not be a real performance without you! Sometimes as an audience member, you have to be creative too. A setting might be suggested by a few panels or a background requiring you to engage your imagination. You can become a part of the communal experience, living and breathing with the cast and musicians as they create art onstage.

MEET KEY PLAYERS

MEET CLAUDIA CHAPA

Claudia Chapa is Austin Opera's Artistic Administration & Curator of Hispanic and Latinx Programming and has been deeply involved with the development of *Ofrenda* since the project's beginning. In this interview, Claudia takes us behind the scenes to discuss the process of bringing *Ofrenda* to the stage.



1. What is your name and what role do you play in *Ofrenda*?

My name is Claudia Chapa. I serve as the Artistic Administrator and Curator of Hispanic and Latinx Programming, as well as the lead for the Residency for Latinx Creatives. In these roles, I am proud to be part of the core team cultivating and supporting the *Ofrenda* project.

2. What do you do as the Curator of Hispanic and Latinx Programming?

As the Curator of Hispanic and Latinx Programming for the Austin Opera, my main goal is to bring Spanish-language music and stories to life while welcoming more Latinx individuals into the world of opera. I help select and shape major opera productions that celebrate Hispanic and Latinx culture. Additionally, I serve as the artistic director for the unique Concerts at the Consulate series. This partnership with the Consulate General of Mexico in Austin provides intimate performances, community events, and family activities directly in local neighborhoods.

3. Could you describe how *Ofrenda* came to be?

The bilingual chamber opera *Ofrenda* was inspired by a combination of pandemic-era creativity, significant local funding, and a dedicated residency program for Latinx artists. It represents a major milestone as it is the first-ever world-premiere commission created from scratch by the Austin Opera.

4. What is The Butler Fund for Spanish Programming and the Residency for Latinx Creatives and how do these programs relate to *Ofrenda*?

The Butler Fund for Spanish Programming is a \$3 million permanent endowment established in 2022, made possible by a groundbreaking \$3.3 million donation from Austin philanthropists Sarah and Ernest Butler. Shortly thereafter, the Residency for Latinx Creatives was launched. This multi-year artist residency initiative, which began in 2023, offers selected Hispanic and Latine composers, librettists, and creators the time, compensation, and resources needed to develop original operatic works.

Resident artists collaborate closely with Austin Opera's artistic and administrative teams, participating in regular feedback sessions, table reads, and music workshops. Rather than focusing solely on performing traditional European repertoire, this residency aims to serve as a pathway for staging new contemporary works directly in Austin, known as the music capital of the world.

5. What has been your favorite part of working on *Ofrenda*?

My favorite part of the process so far is the workshop phase. I read the sample of the libretto and listen to a MIDI version. From that, I try to envision whether audiences will be able to relate to the material. It's essential to determine if the music sample is enough for people to connect with and fall in love with the piece.

The first time you hear the work accompanied by piano and human voices is both exciting and nerve-racking. Did we make the right choice? During the workshop, it feels like the first listening experience. You can observe how people react: What do they relate to? Was there a part of the story where they got lost? Does it make sense? Does the human ear appreciate what it hears?

It's all very thrilling; the workshop phase truly allows us to explore the limits of a new piece.

6. What advice do you have for a high schooler who wants to do what you do?

In a world that pushes you to conform to the expectations of others, strive to remain true to yourself. Your unique experiences are irreplaceable, and you might be surprised by how many people can benefit from your perspective. If you have the chance to advocate for those who are often overlooked or unheard, seize that opportunity.

CAST



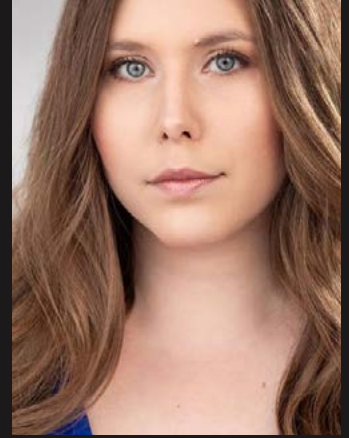
Kelly Guerra*+
Mezzo-soprano
Macaria



Maia Aramburu*+
Soprano
Pina



Victoria Vargas*+
Mezzo-soprano
La Señora



Kristin Bilodeau+
Soprano
Carla



Kyle White*+
Baritone
Gary

Watch this interview to learn more about the cast and how they prepared to be in *Ofrenda*:



1. What's your favorite thing about your role?
2. How do you prepare for an opera?
3. What's your favorite thing about *Ofrenda*?
4. What's your advice for a high schooler who wants to be an opera singer?

*Austin Opera Debut
+Role Debut

CREATIVE TEAM



Timothy Myers
Conductor



Jorge Sosa
Composer



John de los Santos
Librettist



Daniel Chapman*
Scenic Designer



Anthony Robles*
Projection Designer



Dwight Bellissimo*
Associate Projection
Designer



Susan Branche Towne
Costume Designer



Tracy McCaskill
Wig/Makeup Designer



Gloria Kim
Production Pianist

VIOLIN 1
Patrice Calixte,
Concertmaster

VIOLIN 2
Nick Montopili,
Principal

VIOLA
Ames Asbell,
Principal

CELLO
Anna Park,
*Acting Principal**

ORCHESTRA

BASS
Christopher Flores,
Acting Principal

PERCUSSION
Tony Edwards,
Acting Principal

KEYBOARD
Gloria Kim,
*Acting Principal**

**ORCHESTRA
MANAGER**
**Beverly Frittelli

**ORCHESTRA
ASSISTANT**
Natalie Stanco

LIBRARIAN
Gloria Kim*

* Denotes substitute
** Charter member
since January, 1987

*Austin Opera Debut

THE COMPOSER & LIBRETTIST/DIRECTOR

JORGE SOSA

Composer

Award-winning composer Jorge Sosa Ortega's music has been performed hundreds of times around the world, from New Zealand to Iran, to great acclaim. He has received five NEA grants and an Opera America IDEA Grant, and his works have received rave reviews from the Wall Street Journal, Opera News, and Boston Globe. His opera *Ofrenda*, inspired by the work of B. Traven, received an Opera America Repertoire Development Grant and was commissioned by Austin Opera. Jorge holds a doctorate in composition and electronic music from the University of Missouri Kansas City and teaches at Molloy University and Wintergreen Music Festival.



JOHN DE LOS SANTOS

Librettist/Director

John de los Santos's productions include *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun* (world premiere, Santa Fe Opera), *Ghosts* (world Premiere, San Diego Opera), *Daughter of the Régiment* (Boston Opera), *Frida* (Opera Orlando), *Master Class* (Charleston Opera Theater), and *María de Buenos Aires* (Arizona Opera). As a librettist, John's first collaboration with Clint Borzoni, *When Adonis Calls*, premiered at Asheville Lyric Opera. His second collaboration with Borzoni, *The Copper Queen*, premiered as a feature film in 2021. Their third work, *The Christmas Spider*, premiered in 2023 at Opera Louisiane. *Service Provider*, his commission with Christopher Weiss, premiered in 2015 at the Kennedy Center. White Snake Projects premiered his new comedy with Tony Solitro, *Requiem Tomatina*, in 2026. John and Kamala Sankaram will premiere an operatic version of Stephen King's *Misery* in 2028.



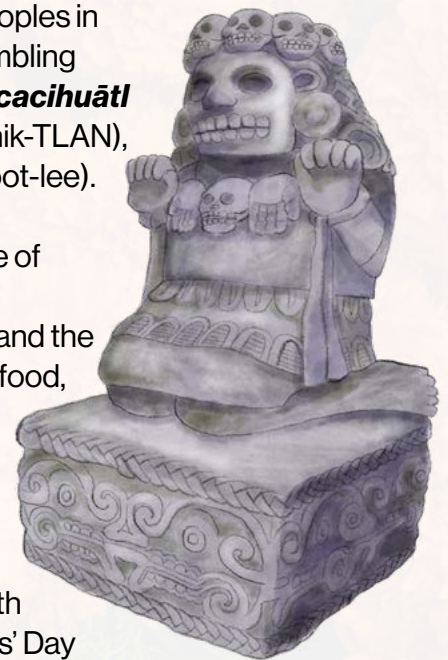
1. What are your responsibilities in *Ofrenda*?
2. How did you come up with your ideas for *Ofrenda*?
3. What is your favorite part of working on *Ofrenda*?
4. What's your advice for a high schooler who wants to do what you do?

THE ORIGINS OF DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

The plot of *Ofrenda* revolves around the Aguilar family's observance of *Día de los Muertos* and the family's personal relationship with loss. Towards the beginning of the opera, Pina and Macaria assemble their **ofrenda** – home altar – to honor Ronaldo, Macaria's husband and Pina's father, who has died before the beginning of the opera. By celebrating this important ritual together, the family takes part in a multicultural tradition with elements that originally date back to over 3,000 years ago. By understanding the origins of *Día de los Muertos*, you will have a richer understanding of the historical references made in the opera.

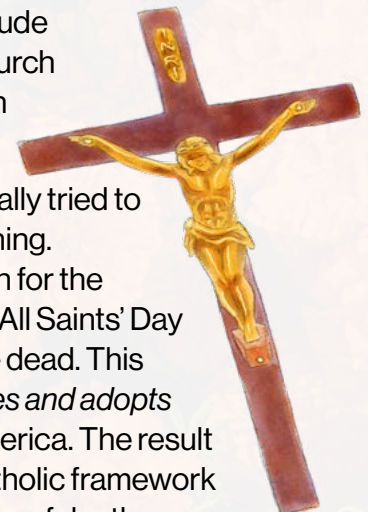
THE HISTORY

Long before the Spanish arrived, Mexica/Aztec and other Indigenous peoples in central Mexico held many rituals to honor the dead. The ritual most resembling *Día de los Muertos* was a month-long harvest festival dedicated to **Mictēcacihuātl** (mik-TE-kah-see-WAH-tl), the “**Lady of the Dead**,” who ruled **Mictlān** (mik-TLAN), the underworld, alongside her husband, **Mictlantecuhltli** (mik-tlan-TE-koot-lee). Mexica **cosmology** – a culture's understanding of how the universe works – understood death as the soul's metamorphosis into its next stage of existence, and not something to fear. The dead traveled through several levels of the underworld before reaching their final resting place, and the living held an ongoing responsibility to help finish that journey by offering food, flowers (*cempasúchil*/marigolds), and other useful items. Though this ritual closely resembles the *ofrenda* practices of *Día de los Muertos*, it occurred around what is now August and was seen as important for ensuring the continued success of maize farming.



When Spanish colonizers brought Catholicism to Mesoamerica in the 16th century, they brought with them All Saints' Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2). The first honors Christian martyrs, and the second emphasizes praying for souls in purgatory. Catholic contributions to *Día de los Muertos* include the modern dates, the framing of the celebration as a time to pray for souls, church attendance, and the use of Catholic iconography like crosses and saints which often appear alongside Indigenous elements on modern *ofrendas*.

Rather than one tradition smoothly joining the other, Spanish missionaries initially tried to completely eradicate the Indigenous celebration as contrary to Catholic teaching. However, the Indigenous practices were too deeply ingrained in the population for the Spanish to eliminate. Instead, they decided to align the Indigenous rituals with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, since both already shared a thematic focus on honoring the dead. This pattern of **religious syncretism** – a process in which one belief system reframes and adopts aspects of another tradition's practices – played out across colonized Latin America. The result is the multilayered and multicultural *Día de los Muertos* celebrated today: a Catholic framework of feast days, masses, and saints enmeshed with the Indigenous understanding of death as a new stage of the soul's journey, not something to fear, and a celebration of ongoing relationships between the living and the dead.



“WHAT’S ON AN OFRENDA?”

Candles:

Votives or long candle sticks that guide spirits to the ofrenda, sometimes arranged in a cross or to reference the four cardinal directions. Represents Fire.

Drink:

The deceased's favorite drink. For an adult, typically a shot of tequila or mezcal.

Mirror & Towel:

For the spirit to freshen up. Represents Water.

Water: For drinking and washing. Represents Water.

Personal Items:

Belongings of the deceased, showing the spirit that they are not forgotten. For Children, typically a favorite toy.

Religious Items:

A crucifix, cross, or statue or image of a beloved saint.

Food: A favorite meal, snack, or candy, meant to sustain the spirit with familiar smells.

Calaveras: Colorful sugar skulls.

Copal: Incense made from copal tree resin, offering protection from evil. Represents Air.

Salt: Offers protection and preserves the spirit's body. Represents Earth.

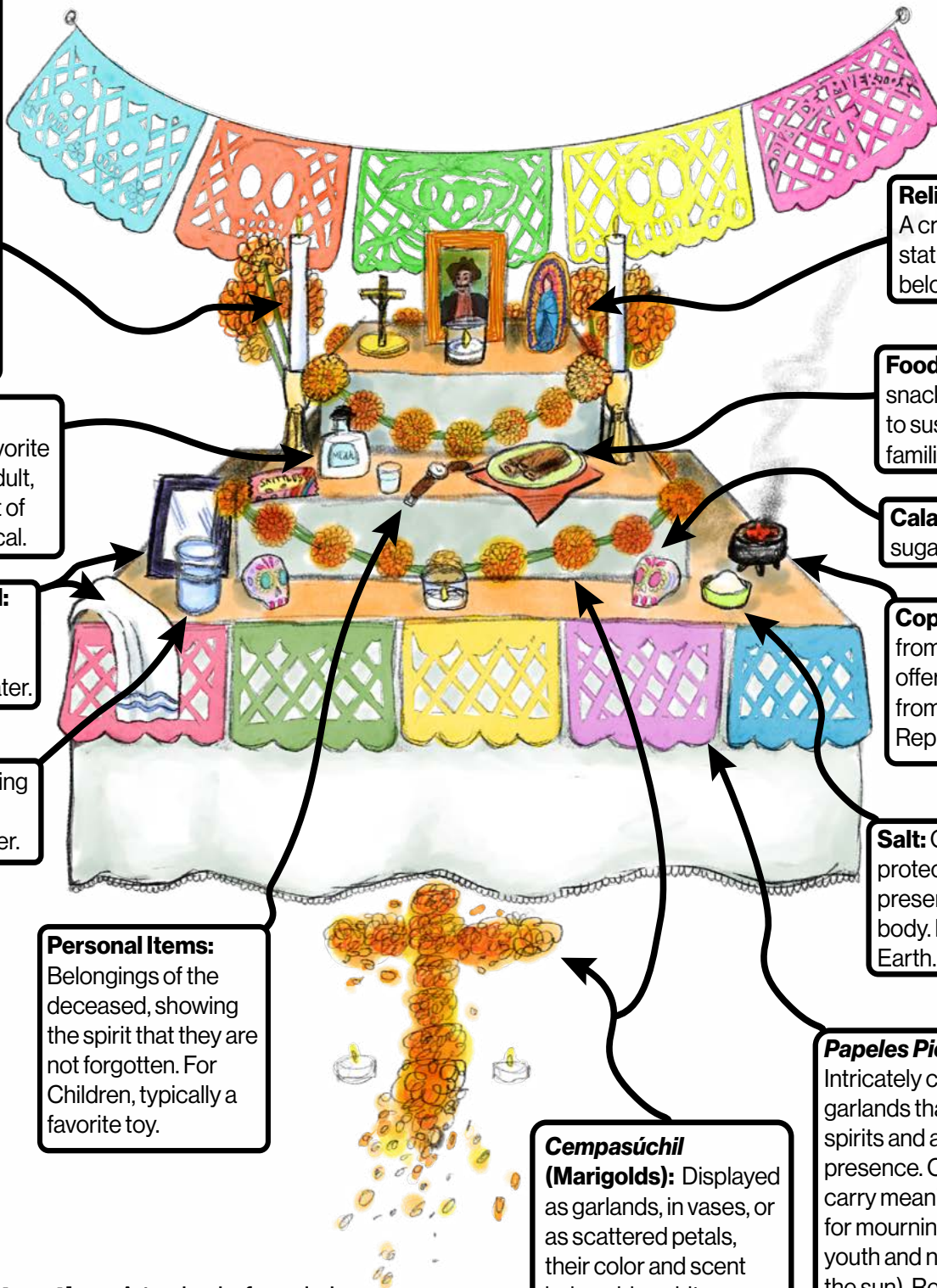
Papeles Picados:

Intricately cut tissue paper garlands that flutter to direct spirits and announce their presence. Colors often carry meaning (e.g., purple for mourning, green for youth and nature, yellow for the sun). Represents Air.

Cempasúchil

(Marigolds): Displayed as garlands, in vases, or as scattered petals, their color and scent help guide spirits across the threshold between the living and the dead. Represents Earth.

The Construction: A typical ofrenda has three tiers, representing the Aztec's mythological realms: *Ilhuicatl* (Heaven), *Tlalticpac* (Earth), and *Mictlan* (Underworld).



THE MUSIC OF OFRENDA

Composer Jorge Sosa uses elements of traditional Mexican folk music to underscore moments centered on Macaria and Pina's Mexican heritage and mother-daughter bond. These moments are defined instrumentally by the huapango style, appearing in Scene 2, as Macaria and Pina assemble their ofrenda; at the start of Scene 6, when Macaria gives Pina Señora's gift; and in the final scene, when Pina visits the grave.

WHAT IS HUAPANGO?

Huapango (wa-PAN-go) is a family of traditional Mexican musical styles from the country's Huasteca region. The name comes from the Nahuatl word **cuauhpanco**, "on top of the wood," referring to the **tarima** – the wooden platform where dancers perform zapateado, a percussive footwork style from Spain which developed further in Latin America. Dancers' footwork on the tarima brings out the style's signature 2 vs. 3 polyrhythm, driven by quick rhythms that shift between 6/8 and 3/4 meter. Huapango takes three main forms:

1. **Huapango Huasteco** – Played by a trío huasteco of violin, huapanguera, and jarana huasteca. Traditionally accompanied by zapateado dancers.
2. **Huapango Norteño** – Played by a conjunto norteño of accordion, bajo sexto, bass, drums, and saxophone. Often used for partner dancing.
3. **Huapango Mariachi** – Played by a mariachi ensemble of violin, trumpet, guitarrón, vihuela, and acoustic guitar.



Huapanguera



Jarana Huasteca

POLYRHYTHM ACTIVITY



A polyrhythm is the use of two or more differing rhythmic patterns that are played at the same time. While both patterns start simultaneously, their uneven combination can create an invigorating rhythm to dance to. The following activity will show you how to feel and perform the 2 vs. 3 polyrhythm:

1. Establish a slow, steady beat
2. In the space of one beat, clap twice (1 – 2)
3. In the space of one beat, clap three times (1 – 2 – 3)
4. **If with others:** have one person clap twice in a beat and one person clap three times in a beat at the same time.
If by yourself: switch every two beats between clapping the groups of two and three.
5. Watch [this video](#) to learn how to tap out the 2 vs. 3 patterns **BY YOURSELF**
 - Practice finding this pattern by saying "Nice cup of tea" like in the video or "Cempasúchil" to be more on theme with Ofrenda!
6. Listen to ["Huapango" by Mariachi Vargas De Tecalitlán](#) and see if you can find the 2 pulse, the 3 pulse, and the two combined as you listen and tap along.

MEMORY JOURNALING ACTIVITY

Bring to mind a loved one you want to remember. It could be a family member, a friend, a pet, a teacher, someone you only know from family stories, or even a fictional character. Fill out the following list, then answer the questions below.

Their Name: _____

Their favorite food: _____

Their favorite drink: _____

Their favorite song or a song that makes you think of them: _____

Their favorite place to visit: _____

Their favorite color: _____

An activity they love: _____

A scent that reminds you of them: _____

Something that made them laugh: _____

A nickname they had for you, or that you had for them: _____

A favorite animal, or an animal that reminds you of them: _____

Something they taught you how to do: _____

Write about a happy memory that making this list brought up for you.

Do you think it matters to hold onto small, ordinary memories, and not just big, important ones? Why?

MAKE YOUR OWN PAPER *NICHO*

A ***nicho*** is a Mexican folk-art form closely associated with Día de los Muertos. Emerging as a popular adaptation of the Roman Catholic ***retablo*** – small painted images of saints, brought to Mexico by Spanish colonizers – *nichos* evolved into small, three-dimensional shadow-box shrines. While traditionally used to honor religious figures like patron saints, *nichos* are also created to memorialize and honor loved ones. The following are instructions to assemble and design your own paper *nicho*:

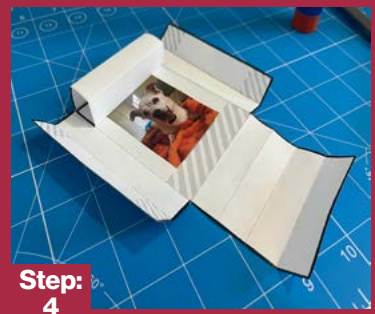
Materials Needed:

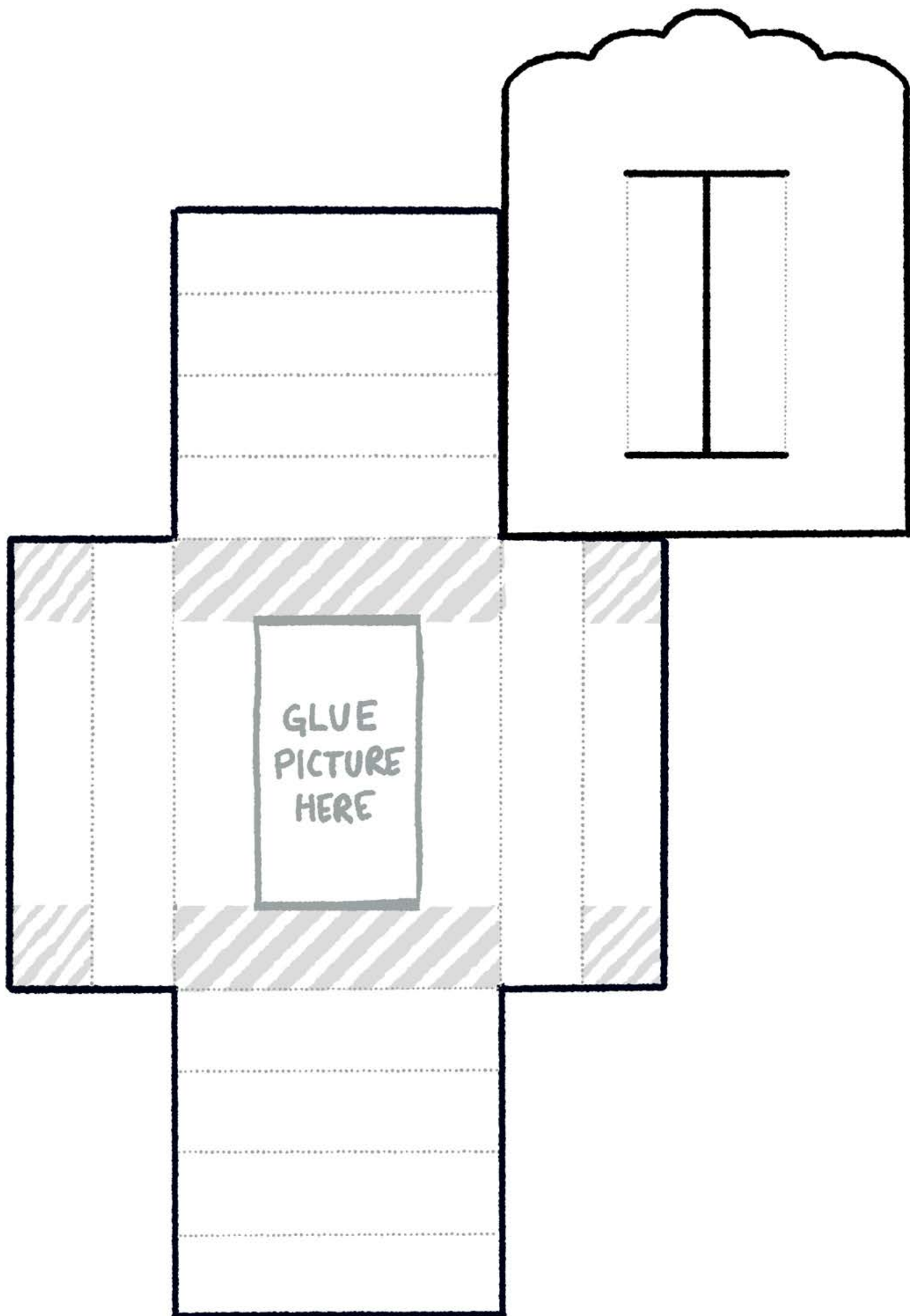
- Print out of the paper *nicho* template (page 22)
- Scissors
- Glue
- Materials to decorate the frame (markers, colored pencils, crayons, etc.)
- A small picture or drawing of a loved one
- A pencil to help press down on the hard-to-reach glued parts

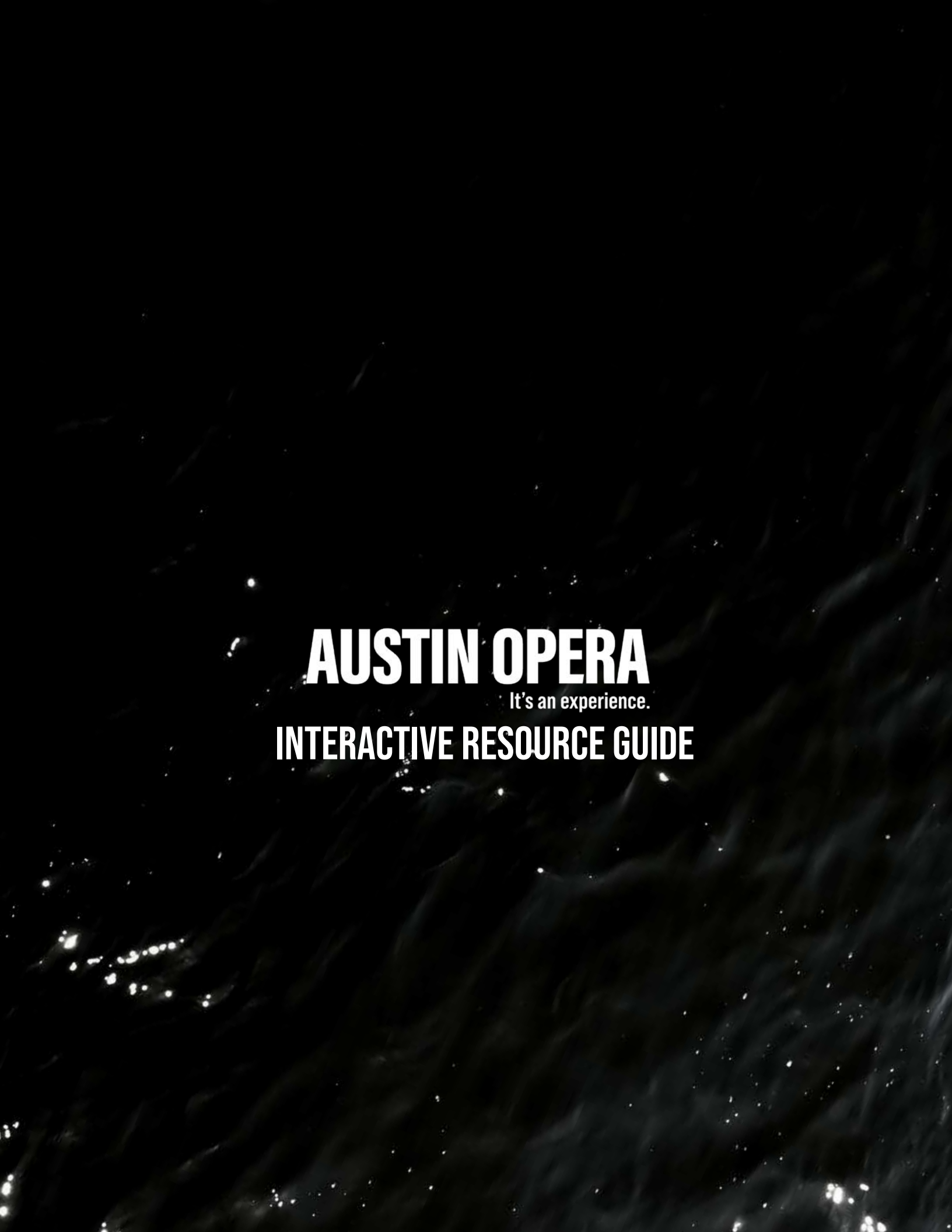
INSTURCTIONS/STEPS

1. Cut along the solid back lines.
 - To cut the little doors out, it can be helpful to lightly fold the door piece in half.
2. Glue a picture of your loved one over the “GLUE PICTURE” rectangle.
3. Tightly fold along the dotted gray lines
4. Take the t-shaped body of the frame and curl the top four folded sections into a rectangular shaped tube.
5. Apply glue to the long, gray striped section above the photo and attach the bottom of the folded rectangular tube so it completely covers the stripes.
 - You may need to press the inside of the tube down with your finger or a pencil so it adheres firmly.
6. Repeat the same process for the section underneath your picture.
7. Apply glue to the striped corners of the sides of the t-shape and attach each to the corners of the rectangle tube.
8. Decorate the little doors to your *nicho*.
9. Apply glue to the whole front of your frame and attach the decorated doors to the frame so that their opening lines up perfectly with the photo inside.

If you would like to, you're invited to bring your *nicho* to the show on **SEPTEMBER 29th** to add to Austin Opera's community ofrenda at the Butler Performance Center. We would be honored to provide a space for you to celebrate your loved ones.







AUSTIN OPERA

It's an experience.

INTERACTIVE RESOURCE GUIDE