

AUSTIN OPERA

INTERACTIVE RESOURCE GUIDE

JULES MASSENET

THAÏS



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AUSTIN OPERA STAFF

Annie Burrridge, General Director & CEO
Timothy Myers, Sarah & Ernest Butler Music Director
Jennifer Basten, Chief Advancement Officer
Cory Lippiello, Chief Producing Officer
Andréa Ochoa, Director of 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
Laura Carrisosa, Graphic Design
Mighty Music Publishing, Listening Map

Welcome to the Interactive Resource Guide for *Thaïs*, Jules Massenet and Louis Gallet's operatic blend of faith and desire.

In ancient Alexandria, the glamorous courtesan *Thaïs* is the toast of the city. Out in the Egyptian desert, a devout monk named Athanaël cannot stop thinking about her. Convinced he's being sent visions of her by God, he sets out to persuade *Thaïs* to give up her sinful life of luxury and become a nun. But as her world turns upside down, so does his, and he discovers all too late that his motives were never as pure as he wanted to believe. With its rich music and complex characters, *Thaïs* offers students an opportunity to explore themes of belief, identity, morality, and obsession.

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

- A look behind the scenes at how this production came to life
- The history behind the story and its monastic setting
- An introduction to composer, Jules Massenet
- Hands-on activities, including a guided listening map, an exploration of character foils, and discussion questions that connect the themes of the opera to real life

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

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



Janine Llewellyn
Education Manager



AUSTIN OPERA

Under the visionary leadership of General Director & CEO Annie Burrige and Music Director Timothy Myers, Austin Opera has become one of the most innovative and community-centered performing arts organizations in Central Texas. Since its founding in 1986, the company has evolved into a vibrant cultural force, inspiring more than 30,000 people each year through world-class performances, transformative educational programs, and meaningful community engagement. Each season, Austin Opera brings extraordinary stories to life through a dynamic lineup of productions presented at the iconic Long Center for the Performing Arts and the new Butler Performance Center. Featuring internationally acclaimed

artists alongside exceptional local talent from the Austin Opera Orchestra and Chorus, our productions offer fresh perspectives on beloved classics while championing bold contemporary works that demonstrate opera's power to reflect and shape the world around us. 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 §117.310 Music, Level I (One Credit), Adopted 2013

(c) Knowledge and skills.

- 1) (A) experience and explore exemplary musical examples using technology and available live performances;
- 1) (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) (B) identify music-related vocations and avocations;
- 6) (A) practice informed concert etiquette as a performer and as an audience member during live and recorded performances in a variety of settings;

Rule §110.22 English Language Arts and Reading, Grade 6, Adopted 2017

(b) Knowledge and skills.

- 7) (B) analyze how the characters' internal and external responses develop the plot;
- 7) (D) analyze how the setting, including historical and cultural settings, influences character and plot development.

Rule §110.36 English Language Arts and Reading, English I (One Credit), Adopted 2017

(c) Knowledge and skills.

- 6) (A) analyze how themes are developed through characterization and plot in a variety of literary texts;
- 6) (B) analyze how authors develop complex yet believable characters in works of fiction through a range of literary devices, including character foils;
- 6) (D) analyze how the setting influences the theme.

Rule §113.18 Social Studies, Grade 6, Adopted 2022

(c) Knowledge and skills.

- 16) (C) Identify examples of art, music, and literature that convey universal themes such as religion, justice, and the passage of time.
- 17) (A) explain the relationship among religious ideas, philosophical ideas, and cultures;

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

(d) Knowledge and skills.

- 1) (B) identify major causes and describe the following events from 200 BC to AD 600: the development of... major world religions;
- 3) (A) describe the major political, religious/philosophical, and cultural influences of... Rome;
- 22) (B) describe the historical origins, central ideas, and spread of major religious and philosophical traditions, including... Christianity...;

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 deeply emotional story about the struggle between passion and duty. This is the case with our upcoming opera, *Thaïs* (pronounced “Tah-ees”). While *Thaïs* is a masterpiece of French opera, it is not performed that often. Why? Because it is so difficult to sing! The title role was written for a specific soprano who could sing amazingly high and fast with a BIG voice, so now opera companies have to wait until they can find a singer who can sing it. And we have!



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!**

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.

CONTENT WARNING

Thaïs is recommended for ages 13 and up. Because the opera addresses mature themes, we encourage you to prepare your students before attending. The production includes:

- **Death:** A principal character's death is depicted on stage.
- **Religious Themes:** Characters question and defend their faith as the story explores devotion, conversion, and doubt.
- **Sexual Themes:** The story centers on a former courtesan and a monk who struggles with romantic and physical desire.

Support Resources

If the opera's themes raise something 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 or Spanish), or chat online at 988lifeline.org.**

SYNOPSIS

Scene 1 — The Thebaid, along the banks of the Nile

A group of monks share a simple dinner outside their huts in the desert of the Thebaid (thee-BAY-id). Their leader, Palémon (PA-lay-mon), says a short prayer. Everyone notices that Athanaël (ah-ta-na-EL), one of the monks, has just returned from a trip. Athanaël is known for being especially devoted to his faith. But tonight, he seems distracted. He can't stop thinking about Alexandria, the city he grew up in, and about Thaïs (tah-EES), a famous performer he once admired there before he became a monk. Palémon warns him not to get too caught up in thinking about the outside world. Everyone goes to sleep, but Athanaël is woken up by a vision of Thaïs performing on stage. Convinced he needs to save her from her life of sin, he decides to leave the desert and go back to Alexandria.

Scene 2 — The terrace of Nicias's house in Alexandria

Athanaël arrives at the home of his old friend Nicias (NEE-see-ahs) and is upset by how much the city has changed since he was young. When Nicias comes out to greet him, Athanaël explains his plan: he wants to convince Thaïs to give up her life of performing and become a nun. Nicias warns him this won't be easy but tells him that Thaïs is coming to dinner at his house tonight after her show. He lends Athanaël some of his clothes and jewelry so he'll make a better impression.

A crowd gathers, and Thaïs finally arrives to much excitement. She notices Athanaël and teases him. Nicias jokes that Athanaël is only there to convert her. Thaïs tells Athanaël that she only believes in following her passions, nothing else. She even wonders if he might give up his beliefs for her. Shocked, Athanaël vows to follow her and convince her to change her way of life.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Scene 1 — The house of Thaïs

Thaïs looks in a mirror, admiring her own beauty, but she's secretly afraid of what will happen to her fame and wealth when she's no longer young and beautiful. Athanaël arrives and makes his case again: he wants her to give up her luxurious life and devote herself to God. He tells her he cares about her in a deeper way than anyone has before. He leaves, promising to wait outside until morning. Thaïs spends the whole night meditating about which path to choose.

Scene 2 — In front of Thaïs's house

The next morning, Thaïs admits that her current life feels empty, and she decides to follow Athanaël. His first instruction is to give up her old belongings, so she sets fire to her house. There's only one item she wants to keep: a small statue of Eros, the Greek God of Love, which reminds her of happy times in her past. Athanaël insists she get rid of it, so she reluctantly destroys the statue.

Meanwhile, Nicias and his friends are still celebrating from the night before. When Athanaël announces that Thaïs has left her old life behind for good, the crowd is shocked and upset, especially once they see her house burning. Some of them get angry enough to endanger Athanaël, but Nicias distracts everyone by throwing gold coins on the ground, giving Athanaël and Thaïs a chance to safely escape.

ACT III

Scene 1 — The oasis

Thaïs and Athanaël are almost to the convent, but the journey through the desert has worn Thaïs out completely. Athanaël finds them food and a place to rest. Albine, an abbess who leads a nearby convent, gives them food and a place to rest. Athanaël decides to leave Thaïs in her care, confident he's done what he set out to do. He feels surprisingly sad when he realizes that he will never see Thaïs again.

Scene 2 — The Thebaid

Back in the monastery, the other monks notice that Athanaël has been alone and fasting for almost three weeks. His experience with Thaïs has shaken him, and he can't stop thinking about her. He starts to realize his feelings about her might be more complicated than he thought. After seeing a vision of Thaïs dying, he decides he has to see her one more time, even if he has to give up his sacred vows and abandon his cenobite community to do so.

Scene 3 — The garden of the convent

The nuns of the convent are praying for Thaïs, whose health has gotten much worse. Athanaël arrives, exhausted. Thaïs is happy to see him one more time, and Athanaël admits that he loves her, not just as someone he wanted to save, but as a person he wants to spend his life with. They share one last moment together before Thaïs, who is at peace with dying and excited to meet God, passes away. Athanaël is left to sit with everything he's just realized about his own feelings and the consequences of his actions.

Adapted from a synopsis courtesy of Minnesota Opera.



CHARACTER RELATIONSHIP CHART



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: Thaïs, Crobyle, La Charmeuse



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*.



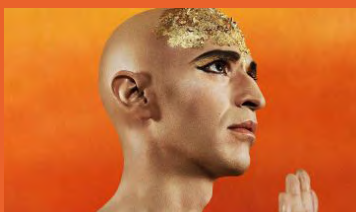
Characters: Albine, Myrtale



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.

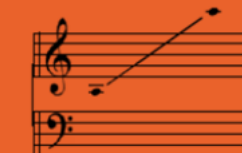
Photo: Marian Anderson, one of the finest contraltos of her time and a force in the Civil Rights movement.



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*.



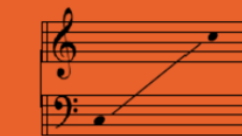
Non-Treble Voice Types



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*.



Characters: Nicías



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: Athanaël, A servant



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*.



Characters: Palémon

CAST



Nicole Heaston
Soprano
Thaïs



Troy Cook
Baritone
Anathaël



Dominick Valdéz Chenes
Tenor
Nicias



Sergio Martinez
Bass
Palémon



Yuxin Liu**
Soprano
La Charmeuse



Kimberly Clemmons**
Mezzo-soprano
Albine



Sandra Villwock**
Soprano
Crobyle



Hannah Park**
Mezzo-soprano
Myrtale



Abraham Isai Cruz+
Bass baritone
A servant

*Austin Opera Debut

+Role Debut **14**

CREATIVE TEAM



Timothy Myers
Conductor



Crystal Manich
Director



Brandon McDonald
Costume Designer



Michael Pappalardo
Choreography



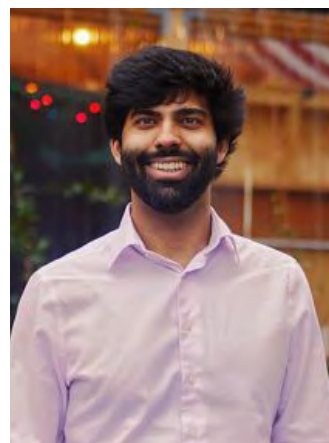
Tlálloc López-Watermann
Lighting Design



Greg Emetaz
Production Design



Tracy McCaskill
Wig/Makeup Designer



Gyan Singh Maria*
Assistant Conductor/
Chorus Conductor/
Production Pianist



Bill Mester
Audio Designer

MEET THE CONCERTMASTER: **PATRICE CALIXTE**

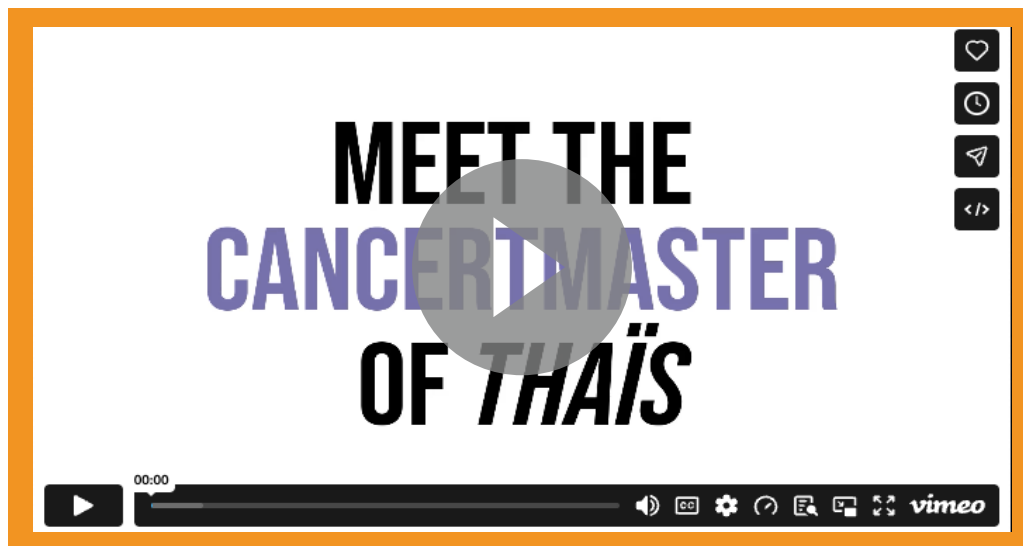


Canadian violinist Patrice Calixte began playing the violin at the age of eight and went on to participate in a highly competitive high school music program in Montreal, Quebec, where he studied with Francine Pépin. He then earned his undergraduate degree and his master's degree in music performance from the Université de Montréal, studying under Claude Richard. An experienced orchestral musician, Calixte has worked with many orchestras in Québec and Ontario, including the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Orchestre Symphonique de Québec, and Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra. More recently, he was hired to the first violin section of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, where he stayed for two years. Leaving Calgary in search for more personal development, Calixte moved to Austin

where he just obtained an artist diploma from The University of Texas at Austin in the studio of Daniel Ching. He has played in numerous masterclasses from luminaries such as Maxim Vengerov and Regis Pasquier. Calixte has also performed as a concertist with various orchestras in Montreal and recently won The University of Texas Symphony Orchestra Concerto Competition. He is the newest addition to the Austin based Artisan Quartet. Patrice Calixte performs on a violin made in 1910 in Florence by Valentino de Zorzi, kindly on loan from Lorraine and John Wang.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CONCERTMASTER

Watch this interview to learn more about Patrice and the famous “Méditation” solo he plays in Act 2.



1. When did you start playing the violin?
2. What's your favorite thing about playing the violin?
3. What does a concertmaster do?
4. When did you first become a concertmaster?
5. Why do you think “Meditation” is so popular?
6. What's your advice for a kid who wants to be a professional violinist?

MEET THE DIRECTOR: CRYSTAL MANICH



Crystal Manich has been hailed by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other major publications for “lively” and “imaginative staging.” As a Latiné creative leader and manager in the performing and filmic arts, Manich is dedicated to making vibrant entertainment and cultural experiences. Over the last two decades, Manich has directed over 100 stage productions of opera, musical theatre, plays, and circus with various companies worldwide. Additionally, Manich served as Artistic Director of Mill City Summer Opera in Minneapolis having previously served as Founding Co-Artistic Director for Opera Omnia in New York. She was Assistant Artistic Director for QUIDAM in Brazil with Cirque du Soleil and served as Artistic Director of Cirque du Soleil’s CRYSTAL North American and Middle East tours.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Watch this interview to learn more about Crystal and how she’s worked to bring *Thaïs* to the stage.



1. What does an opera director do?
2. How is directing an opera different from directing a play or musical?
3. This opera looks a little different. Why is that?
4. What’s something in *Thaïs* that you’re really proud of?
5. What’s your advice for a kid who wants to be an opera director?

HOW WORLD HISTORY SHAPED THE SETTING OF **THAÏS**

In order to understand this opera, it's helpful to know about the development of **Christianity**, the religion at the heart of the story. Christianity began during the 1st century CE in the Roman province of **Judea**. The religion is based on the teachings of **Jesus of Nazareth** and its central ideals include love for others, the power of forgiveness, and the belief that anybody, at any time, can start living their life in a new way.

Most of *Thaïs* takes place in the neighboring deserts of **Egypt**, in a region called **The Thebaid** (thee-BAY-id). By the late 200s CE, Christianity had spread across the **Roman Empire**. Many early Christians began moving to the deserts to live quiet, simple lives devoted to their religion. At first, they left to escape punishment. Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire until 313 CE and openly practicing the religion could get one into serious trouble. About 70 years later, once

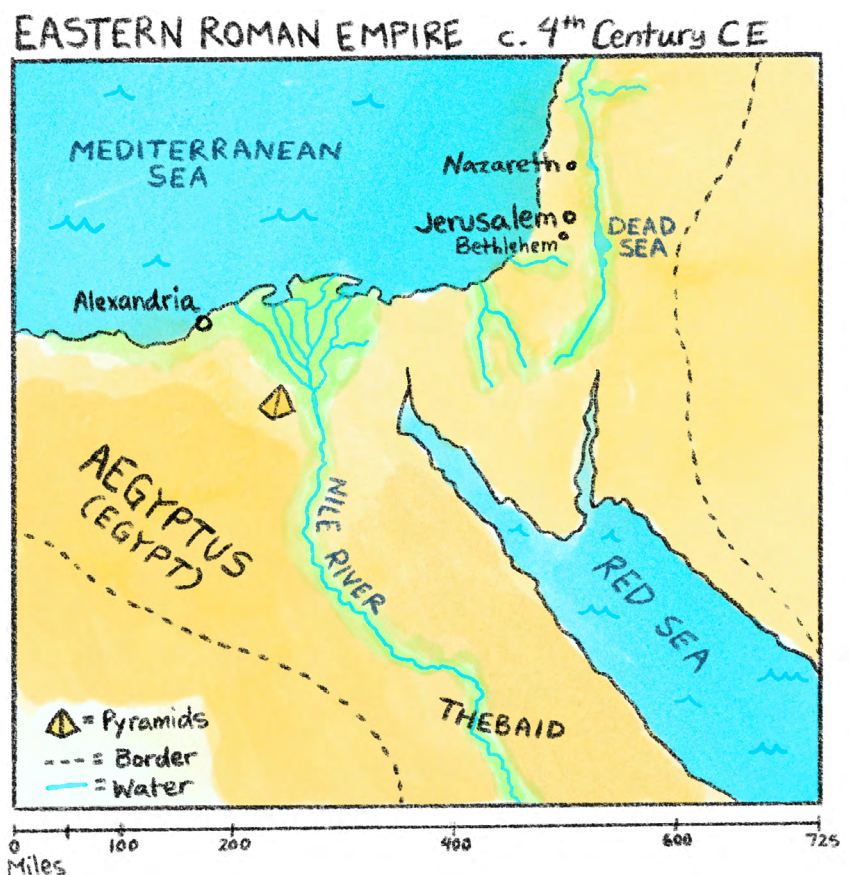
Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in 380 CE, many Christians remained in the Thebaid, finding the harsh climate helpful for focusing lives on their religion. Some practiced and lived alone as hermits. Others, called **cenobites** (SEN-uh-bites) – monks or nuns living together in a shared religious community – developed monasteries and convents. At the beginning of the opera, we meet Athanaël, Palémon, and the other cenobites living in the Thebaid.

The rest of the opera takes place in **Alexandria**, the city where we meet Nicias and Thaïs. Alexander the Great founded the city in 331 BCE, and it grew into one of the largest and most important cultural centers of the ancient world. During the time when the opera is set, much of Egypt belonged to the Roman Empire, making Alexandria a meeting place for Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian cultures. The city was famous for two landmarks. Its library held thousands of ancient scrolls on science, math, literature, and history. Its lighthouse, **Pharos** (FAIR-os), was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. While neither landmark survives today, the city still exists and is the second largest in Egypt, after its capital, Cairo.

WHO WAS **THAÏS**?

Saint Thaïs of Egypt is honored in both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. She is a **saint** – a holy person in the Christian tradition – remembered for her dramatic, complete change in how she lived her life. Her **feast day** – a special day set aside in the Church calendar to honor a saint – is October 8th.

Historians aren't sure if Thaïs was a real person, her story may have been created to teach a lesson rather than to record history. In nearly every version, including this opera, she begins as a famous **courtesan** – a woman paid for her companionship – before converting to Christianity and spending the rest of her life as a nun. Stories like hers taught Christians a central idea of their faith: no matter how someone has lived, it's never too late to repent and start over.



NICIAS VS. ATHANAËL: CHARACTER FOILS

At the heart of *Thaïs* is a disagreement that's much older than the opera itself: how should a person live their life? Nicias believes in **hedonism** (HEE-dun-ism) – the idea that pleasure is the most important thing in life, and that we should enjoy the world while we can. Athanaël believes in **asceticism** (uh-SET-uh-sih-zum) – the practice of giving up pleasure or comfort, often for spiritual or moral reasons, in pursuit of something greater. These two philosophies pull against each other throughout the opera, shaping how each character sees Thaïs, each other, and the right way to live.

Nicias and Athanaël are **character foils** – two characters whose opposite values and choices make each other's personality stand out more clearly. Once you know two characters are foils, you can usually predict how one will act just by knowing what the other would do.

In this activity, we'll test that idea using three scenarios. For each one, predict what Nicias would do, then predict what Athanaël would do, based on what you already know about them.

Scenario 1: It's time for dinner and you are really hungry. You go to the kitchen and find a slice of your favorite cake next to a can of vegetable soup.

- What would Nicias do?
- What would Athanaël do?



Scenario 2: It's the weekend and you have some free time to decide what you want to do. You could either work on a project for class that isn't due for another week, just to get ahead **OR** you could hang out, play video games, and watch movies with your friends.

- What would Nicias do?
- What would Athanaël do?

Scenario 3: You just got some money as a gift! You could spend it right away on something fun you've been wanting, **OR** you could save it toward something bigger later on.

- What would Nicias do?
- What would Athanaël do?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think authors use foils to tell stories?
- Do you think one of these ways of living is always better than the other? Why is that?
- Which way of living do you think the creators of the opera are promoting? Why is that?
- What would **YOU** have done in these scenarios?

MEET MASSENET

Jules Massenet (1842 to 1912) was one of the most popular French opera composers of the **Romantic Era** (1830-1900). His mother was a skilled amateur pianist who taught him to play. He got so good that he gained admittance to a top music school, the Paris Conservatoire, when he was just a kid! At the school, he continued his piano studies and began studying **composition** – writing music – with composer Ambroise Thomas. To support himself during his studies, Massenet played timpani in the orchestra of the Théâtre Lyrique, a famous opera house in Paris. This job gave him a close-up view of operatic productions and experience working for French composers like Charles Gounod. After winning the 1863 **Prix de Rome**, a top prize for composers at the Conservatoire, Massenet solidified himself as a leader in French music and many of his operas are still performed across the world today.

If you enjoy the music of *Thaïs*, be sure to check out his other operas, *Manon*, *Werther*, *Cendrillon* (Cinderella),



HOW DID THAÏS BECOME AN OPERA?

The legend of St. Thaïs was a familiar story to many Catholics living in France in the 1800s. In 1890, French author **Anatole France** turned her story into a **novel** – a long, fictional story published as a book. Instead of telling the story from Thaïs' point of view, the novel follows a monk who sets out to convince her to convert to Christianity. By the end, he has fallen in love with Thaïs and lost his faith. That was a bold plot for the time, and the book became a hit. These days, many popular books and series become movies (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, *The Hunger Games*). In the 1800s, popular books were often adapted into operas.

At the time of the novel's popularity, Massenet was already internationally known for composing operas based on popular novels like 1884's *Manon*, and 1892's *Werther*. For *Thaïs*, Massenet teamed up with writer, **Louis Gallet**, who wrote the **libretto** – the words of an opera – and worked with him to adapt the novel to the stage. On March 16, 1894, *Thaïs* was premiered at the Opéra Garnier in Paris, France.

FUN FACT: the soprano who first played Thaïs was an American singer from California named Sibyl Sanderson. You can see her standing at the piano with Massenet in this painting.



Jules Massenet at the piano with Sybil Sanderson (standing) Painting by Albert Aublet

This listening map covers the end of Act III, Scene 1, when Athanaël leaves Thaïs with Albine and her nuns. He believes his mission to convert Thaïs is complete and he is happy that she is in good hands. But as she leaves, he begins to realize how he truly feels about her. Listen to the music and follow along with the animated map before answering the questions below.



LISTENING MAP QUESTIONS

Which instruments do you hear in this scene?

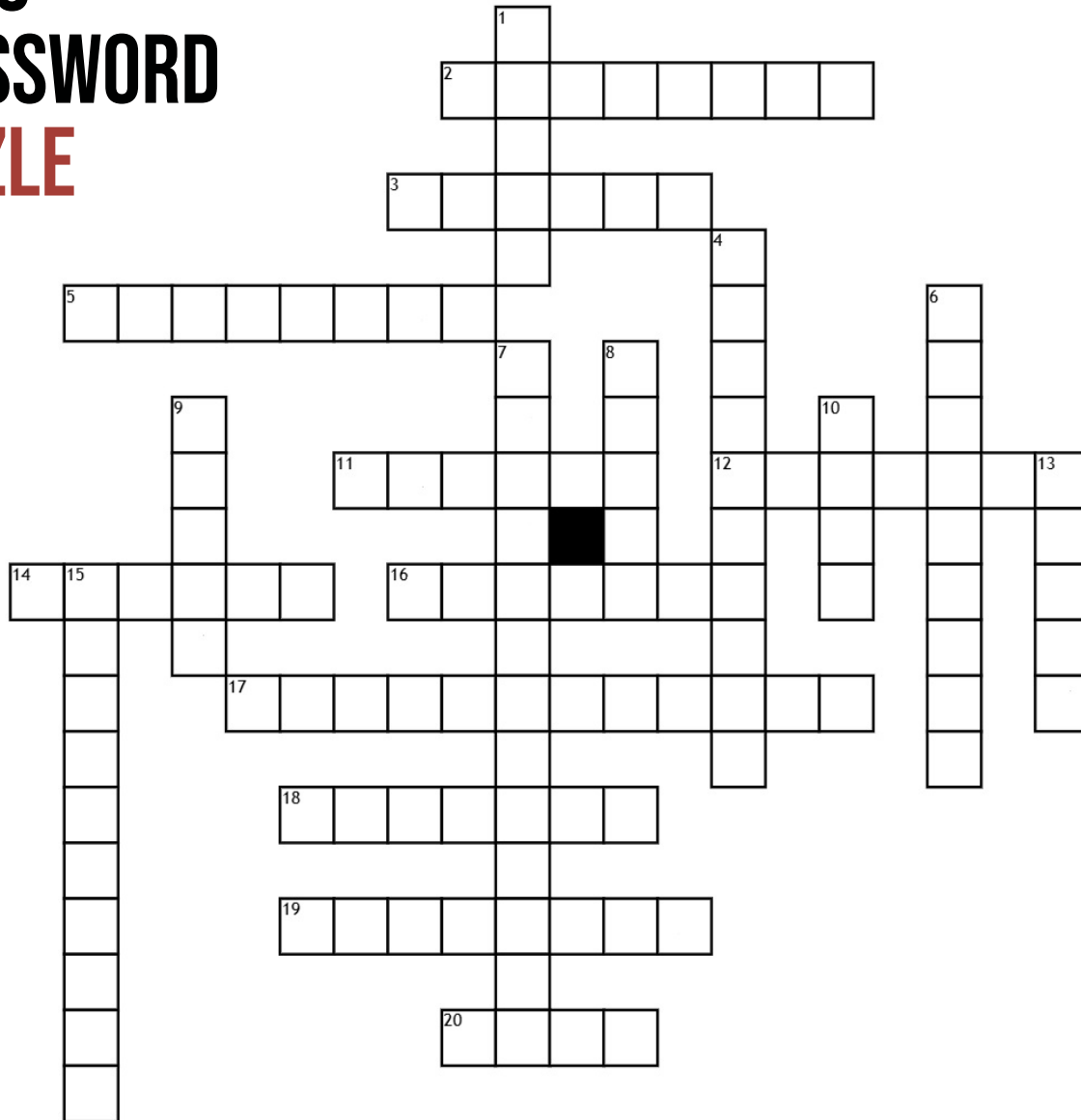
The solo violin plays the most famous melody from the opera, “Méditation”. How does listening to this melody make you feel?

At the beginning of the scene, Athanaël feels

At the end of the scene, Athanaël feels _____ . How can you tell?

What are three words you would use to describe this music?

THAÏS CROSSWORD PUZZLE



Across

2. The idea that pleasure is the most important thing in life
3. The solo instrument that plays the "Meditation" in Act 2
5. The last name of the composer of Thaïs
11. The country where Thaïs premiered in 1894
12. The first name of the author who wrote the 1890 novel, Thaïs, on which the opera is based
14. The last name of the librettist of Thaïs

16. The region where we meet Athanaël and Palémon
17. The religion practiced by Athanaël, Palémon, Albine, and Thaïs
18. The voice type of Nicole Heaston, who sings Thaïs
19. The voice type of Troy Cook, who sings Athanaël
20. Name of the Greek god of love, the statue that Thaïs destroys

Down

1. The voice type of Dominick Valdés Chenes, who sings Nicias
4. The city where we meet Nicias and Thaïs

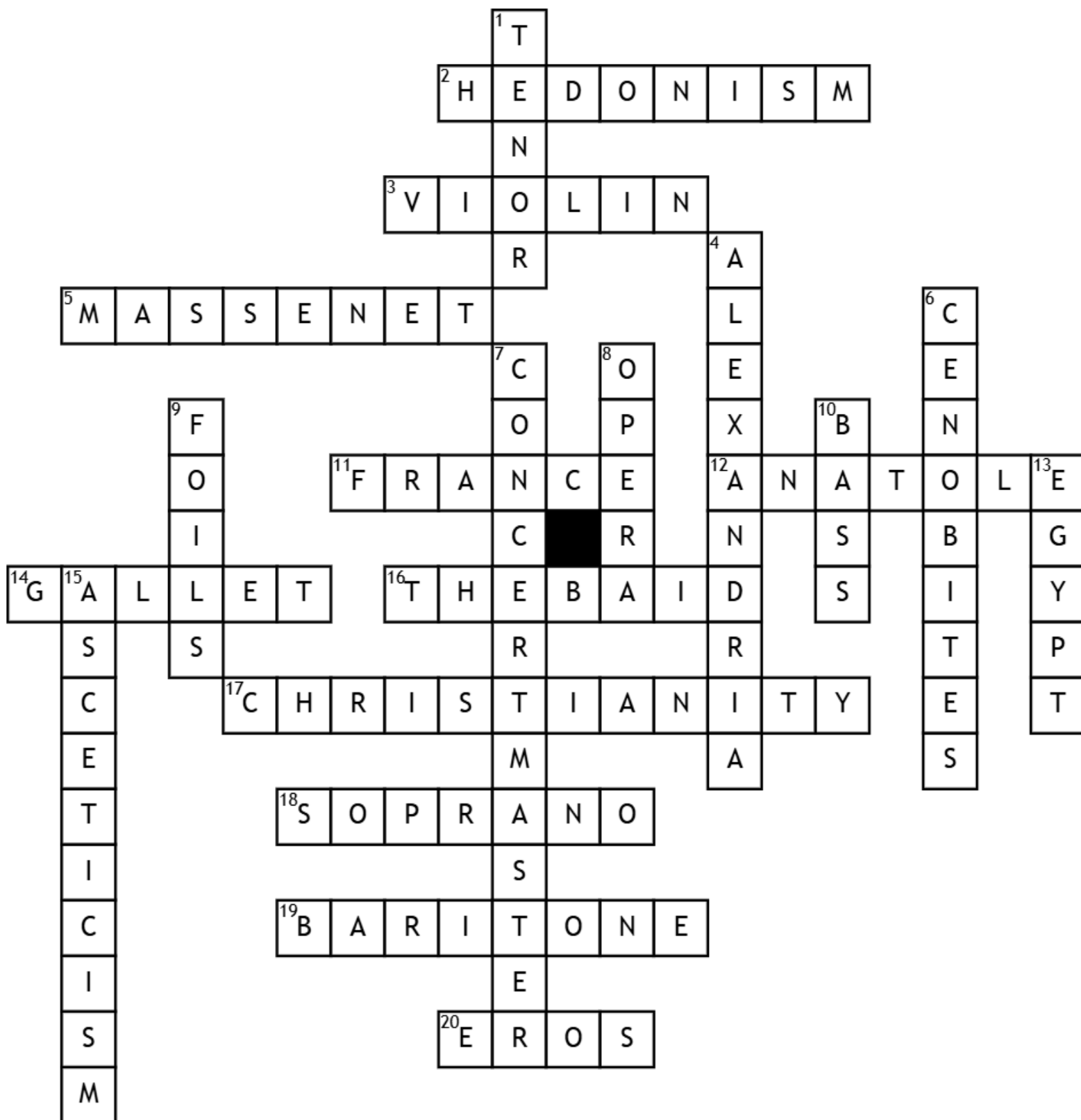
6. Monks or nuns who live together in a shared religious community
7. The role of Patrice Calixte in the Austin Opera Orchestra
8. A theatrical art form where a dramatic story is told entirely through singing and music
9. Nicias and Athanaël are examples of this literary device
10. The voice type of Sergio Martinez, who sings Palémon
13. The modern country where Alexandria located
15. The practice of giving up pleasure or comfort for spiritual or moral reasons

Word Bank

Soprano	Hedonism	Alexandria	Bass	Foils
Violin	Concertmaster	Baritone	Thebaid	Gallet
Eros	Tenor	Asceticism	Anatole	Christianity
Egypt	Cenobites	France	Massenet	Opera

THAI'S CROSSWORD PUZZLE:

ANSWER KEY



INTERACTIVE RESOURCE GUIDE



AUSTIN OPERA

Photos by Cole Carrico/Spoletto Festival USA