

INTERACTIVE  
RESOURCE  
GUIDE

AUSTIN  
OPERA

BIZET'S

# THE PEARL FISHERS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome.....	3
TEKS: Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills.....	4
What is Opera?.....	6
Main Characters .....	7
Synopsis.....	7
Meet Some Key Players .....	8
Orientalism and Opera: An Interview with Asitha Tennekoon.....	12
Discover “Comme autrefois dans la nuit sombre” .....	14
Jamboard Classroom Activity: Literary Connections .....	15

## **AUSTIN OPERA**

Annie Burrridge, *General Director & CEO*

Timothy Myers, *Sarah and Ernest Butler Principal Conductor & Artistic Advisor*

Nathan DePoint, *Chief Producing Officer*

Andréa Ochoa, *Director of Education & Community Impact*

Jennifer Basten, *Chief Advancement Officer*

## **CURRICULUM DESIGN**

Makenzie Morgan, *Curriculum Consultant*

Gianna Wichelow, *Graphic Design*

*The staged performance will be sung in English with Closed Captions.*

*All production photos are courtesy of Houston Grand Opera, 2019*

# WELCOME TO AUSTIN OPERA'S PRODUCTION OF *THE PEARL FISHERS*

I am thrilled for you to experience *The Pearl Fishers* by Georges Bizet. Before you arrive at the theater, we want you to dive into this opera and get a taste of all the work that goes into making the magic happen on stage. In this TEKS aligned Interactive Resource Guide, you will find a wealth of topics to further explore this piece and discuss with your students.

We invite you to dig deep into the making of this production and learn about the creation of *The Pearl Fishers*, our principal cast members, artistic career paths that exist in the performing arts, and of course, the beautiful music and lyrics that composer Georges Bizet and librettists Eugène Cormon and Michel Carré masterfully wrote to tell this story.

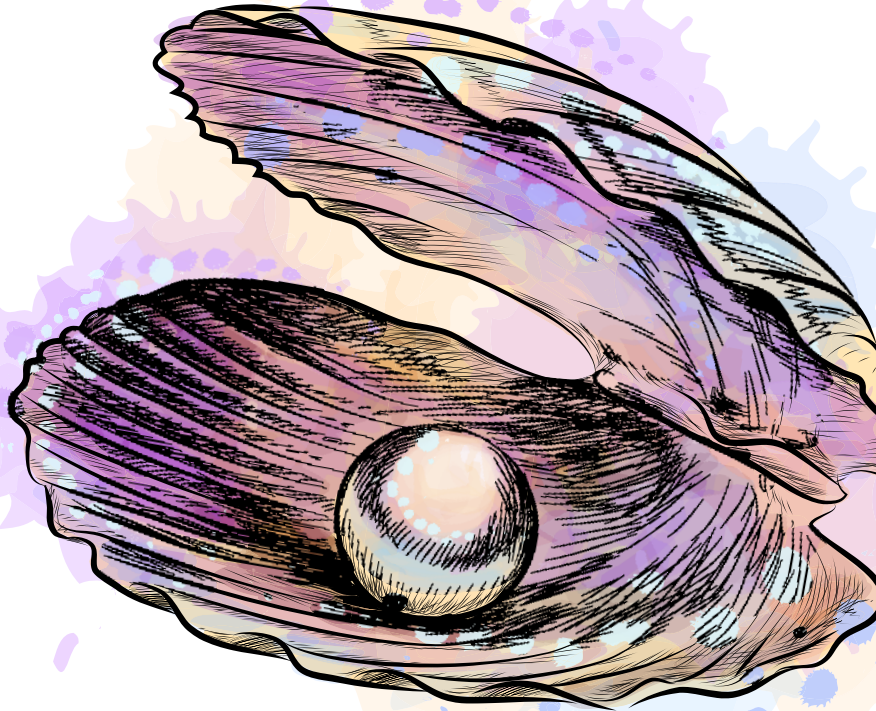
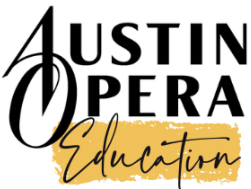
Whether this is your first time experiencing an opera or you're an avid music fan, this guide is designed to teach you something new, and I know it will enhance your full Access Opera experience.

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



**Andréa Ochoa**

Director of Education & Community Impact  
Austin Opera



# TEKS: TEXAS ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

## Overall Expectations: Knowledge and Skills

---

110.36. *English Language Arts and Reading, Highschool, Adopted 2017.*

**AUTHOR'S PURPOSE AND CRAFT:** Listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student uses critical inquiry to analyze the authors' choices and how they influence and communicate meaning within a variety of texts. The student analyzes and applies the author's craft purposefully in order to develop his or her own products and performances.

*Specific:*

- (A) analyze the author's purpose, audience, and message within a text
- (D) analyze how the author's use of language achieves specific purposes

**RESPONSE SKILLS:** Listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student responds to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed.

*Specific:*

- (D) paraphrase and summarize texts in ways that maintain meaning and logical order
- (H) respond orally or in writing with appropriate register, vocabulary, tone, and voice

## Overall Expectations: Knowledge and Skills

---

117.208. *Music, Middle School 1, Adopted 2013.*

**FOUNDATIONS:** The student describes and analyzes music and musical sound. The student explores fundamental skills appropriate for a developing young musician.

*Specific:*

- (A) experience and explore exemplary musical examples using technology and available live performances
- (E) explore health and wellness concepts related to musical practice such as body mechanics, hearing protection, vocal health, hydration, and appropriate hygienic practice

**HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL RELEVANCE:** The student relates music to history, culture and the world.

*Specific:*

- (C) identify relationships of music concepts to other academic disciplines such as the relationship between music and mathematics, literature, history, and the sciences
- (D) describe music-related vocations and avocations.

**CRITICAL EVALUATION & RESPONSE:** The student listens to, responds to, and evaluates music and musical performance in both formal and informal settings.

*Specific:*

- (B) identify criteria for listening to and evaluating musical performances
- (E) demonstrate appropriate cognitive and kinesthetic responses to music and musical performances









# WHAT IS OPERA?

The term “opera” comes from the Italian word for “work” or “piece.” Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama, and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Many individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural, and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

Operas have been written on a wide variety of topics, serious and light-hearted, such as mythology, cultural clashes, comedic farce, the celebration of heroes, and children’s stories, just to name a few. Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* will take you on a musical journey of gorgeous, sweeping melodies and lyric expression; but also explores a colonial past that uncovers the bitter truth of exploitation and exoticization of a culture and people that were not his own.



# MAIN CHARACTERS

Leïla, a priestess of Brahma.....	Soprano
Nadir, a fisherman .....	Tenor
Zurga, head fisherman .....	Baritone
Nourabad, high priest of Brahma .....	Bass

## SYNOPSIS

### *Act I*

Amid great festivity, the pearl fishers of Sri Lanka prepare to choose a chief. Just as Zurga is chosen to lead them, his old friend Nadir arrives after a long absence. Together, the two reminisce about the night they encountered a mysterious woman of extraordinary beauty at the gates of Kandy. Both immediately fell in love with her but renounced their intense rivalry for her in order to save their friendship.

A veiled woman approaches. Leïla has been chosen as the consecrated virgin whose duty it is to sing and protect the fishermen while they are at sea. She is presented by the High Priest Nourabad and acclaimed by the pearl fishers as she swears an oath of obedience. But before she is led away to the temple, near where she will keep her sacred vigil, she and Nadir recognize each other. Nadir, despite his assurance to Zurga to the contrary, has never ceased loving her. When Leïla comes out of the temple, he lets her know he is nearby and will protect her.

### *Act II*

Nourabad reminds Leïla of her sacred vows, warning her to remain faithful to her oath on the pain of death. She assures him that she never breaks a promise. She tells the old man that she once refused to reveal the hiding place of a fugitive, even though his pursuers threatened to kill her. The fugitive gave her the necklace she always wears as proof of her faithfulness. However, later that evening, she and Nadir meet, declaring their love. Nourabad has witnessed their encounter and calls a curse down on them both, as a storm approaches. Nadir is captured by the temple guards and charged with sacrilege. Zurga, as tribal chief, claims his right to settle the case and decides to pardon them in deference to his friendship with Nadir. But Nourabad tears the veil from Leïla's face, and Zurga recognizes Leïla as the woman he and Nadir both loved. Revoking his pardon, Zurga swears to have his revenge.

### *Act III*

Zurga regrets his condemnation of Nadir, recalling their friendship. Leïla appears to beg for Nadir's life, confessing she is willing to die for him if necessary. Her devotion to Nadir stirs Zurga's jealousy and renews his intention to have Nadir killed, for which Leïla curses Zurga. Before leaving to meet her fate, she asks a fisherman one final favor: that her necklace be sent to her mother in the event of her death. Zurga recognizes the necklace and hastens after her to the place of execution.

A funeral pyre has been erected, around which the people dance in a murderous frenzy. Leïla is brought forward to meet her fate with Nadir. But Zurga rushes in with the news that the camp is on fire. As the fishermen run to fight the flames, Zurga confesses to Leïla and Nadir that he set the fire as a diversion, to allow him to free the lovers. He reveals that he was the fugitive who gave the necklace to Leïla when she saved his life long ago. He frees them and remains behind as Leïla and Nadir escape.

# MEET SOME KEY PLAYERS



TIMOTHY MYERS  
*Conductor*

**CONDUCTOR:** You will find a conductor at the front of any orchestra, chorus, or any musical group in the performance and interpretation of ensemble works. The conductor is the heartbeat of any musical performance and the role of a conductor is to be a guide to the music. A conductor is responsible for knowing everything about the musical score including the tempo, interpretation, understanding of all the instrumental/vocal lines, as well as stylistic articulations.

CLICK  
TO  
WATCH!

## CONDUCTOR'S SPOTLIGHT FEATURING TIMOTHY MYERS

- ~ What do you think are the three top characteristics needed to become a successful conductor?
- ~ What elements are involved in your creative process when you are preparing for an opera you are not familiar with? Does this differ with operas that you are familiar with?
- ~ What is your greatest fear when conducting a piece of music?
- ~ Musical education is very important in preserving this artform. How do you go about encouraging young people to listen and study to this kind of music?





## CINA CRISARA *Chorus Master*

**CHORUS MASTER:** The person who conducts an ensemble of vocal musicians. They also prepare chorus members, hold auditions and select chorus members. As a chorus master, it is your responsibility to teach your group of singers to sing as a single body, even when there is more than one singer on each part.

CLICK  
TO  
WATCH!

### CHORUS CONNECTIONS FEATURING CINA CRISARA

- ~ When most people think about opera, they envision international soloists on the main stage or a grand orchestra in the pit. Choristers are not always the first thing that comes to mind. What is the role of a chorus in an operatic production such as this and how does the choral director help to facilitate and bring the artistic vision to life?
- ~ What should a chorister expect from the rehearsal process?
- ~ Within the field of professional choral directors, there isn't always a large number of female representation. How would you go about encouraging young girls to pursue a career in choral conducting and how might someone who is interested begin their journey, when often it is difficult to see themselves in the field?



*Costumes from Austin Opera's production.*





## MADISON LEONARD

### ***Soprano: Leïla***

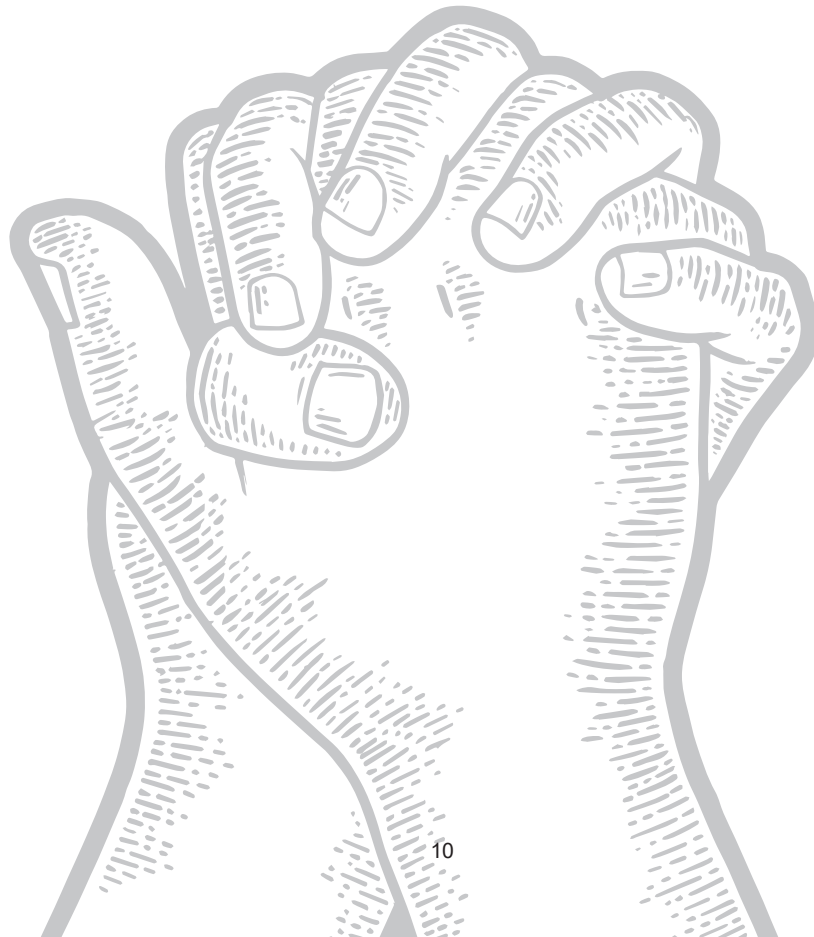
**SOPRANO:** This is a word that we use to describe different “types” of voices in music. It comes from the Italian word “sopra” or “above” and is usually distinguished by impressive high notes. In choral music, sopranos often sing the melody. In opera, sopranos are divided into three basic sub-types: **coloratura** (kohl-or-ah-TOO-rah), **lyric**, and **dramatic** sopranos. Coloraturas are the highest and most agile, Lyric sopranos are the most common of the sopranos, and dramatic sopranos are the fullest and most powerful.

The role of Leila is sung by a coloratura soprano. When you come to the performance, pay attention to her quick moving and wide range of notes.

CLICK  
TO  
WATCH!

### LEÏLA — FEATURING MADISON LEONARD

- ~ What drew you to the role of Leïla? How do you find the “magic” within yourself to illustrate the complexity of this character?
- ~ How do you use the music in *The Pearl Fishers* to describe or evoke the emotions & themes laid out from the composer, and how do you find your own autonomy within that process?
- ~ What is your favorite musical part/moment of the story, and who is involved in the creative process when bringing this moment to life?









# ORIENTALISM AND OPERA

An interview with Asitha Tennekoon

*Les pêcheurs de perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*) is a story of love and sacrifice, but beyond the beautiful music of Bizet lies another story. Until most recently, the use of orientalism in opera has been widely accepted for hundreds of years. Of the handful of completed operas that Georges Bizet composed, only six were fully performable in his lifetime. Written in 1863, *Les pêcheurs de perles* was one of Bizet's earlier opéras and was seen as a major success; not only due to his gift of melodic line, but also very much due to the fact that the libretto was completely engrossed in Orientalism, which was considered 'fashionable' and followed the current 'trends' of the time.

In order to unpack this topic, we should first clearly define exactly what Orientalism means. The Oxford Dictionary describes this term as "the representation of Asia, especially the Middle East, in a stereotyped way that is regarded as embodying a colonialist attitude". Cambridge Dictionary describes Orientalism as "Western ideas about the Middle East and about East and Southeast Asia, especially ideas that are too simple or not accurate about these societies being mysterious, never changing, or not able to develop in a modern way without Western help". Both definitions encompass accurate perspectives of the term and both help to open up the conversation around ethical reasonings in providing historically and culturally relevant contextualization of a community of people.

What significance does all of this have to *Les pêcheurs de perles*? As with many countries across the globe, the country of Sri Lanka (formally known as Ceylon) shares a deep colonial past. Former Ceylon was held under British rule until 1900 and gained independence from Britain in 1948. However, it wasn't until 1972 when a new constitution was formed, that Ceylon officially became the Republic of Sri Lanka. Removing all references to its colonial name from state institutions while still maintaining political ties to the British Commonwealth.

Well over 150 years after Bizet composed this opera, we certainly realize that during the time of its creation, adhering to or even acknowledging culturally relevant perspectives of the people of Sri Lanka, was disregarded completely. The setting of this opera was intentionally chosen to be set in Sri Lanka, as it was "meant to conjure a locale slightly more exotic than the standard backdrops, with a nod to the growing popularity of Indian themes". There has been much speculation over the origin of character names in this story, as they do not reflect traditional Sri Lankan names. Another considerable aspect of Sri Lankan identity is religion, with more than 90% of the population practicing Buddhism. Yet, these considerations were not honored as the characters of Leila and Nourabad, high priestess and priest of Brahma respectively are known to be Hindu gods.

Even further, considering the population that does practice Hinduism, Hindus in Sri Lanka do not practice Brahmanism and the basic ideas of Brahmanism in this Opera have been completely usurped to make way for a eurocentric, theocratic and religious fantasy (the idea of a virgin high priestess whose virginity had to be protected at all costs is nowhere to be found in any religion of South Asian origin). *Les pêcheurs de perles* does not take heed to the complicated racial and religious context of Sri Lanka, and instead imposes a culture and religion that really had nothing to do with any documented history of Sri Lanka.

Discussing Orientalism in Opera examines the idea of representation. From whose lens are we gaining perspective and understanding? More importantly, it exposes **how** a story being told is just as significant as **who** is the one who is able to tell it.

May, T. (2018), 'The Metropolitan Opera', pg. 47, Program Notes, <https://www.metopera.org/globalassets/season/2018-19/operas/pecheurs-de-perles-les/programs/111418-pecheurs.pdf>

It is an absolute honor to speak with Asitha Tennekoon, a Sri Lankan tenor and Co-founder of **Amplified Opera**, an indie opera company committed to placing artists at the center of public discourse. You are invited to listen to this short interview, as he shares his perspective on the topic of Orientalism and how as audience members, we can support positive change to help to reinforce more genuine and authentic narratives within the stories being told on stage.

**CLICK  
TO  
LISTEN!**

- ~ Why is it important to discuss issues such as Orientalism, right now in the 21st century?
- ~ Before young audiences come to watch *The Pearl Fishers*, what is it that you hope they will understand? What are the questions that you want them to be thinking about?
- ~ How can opera goers play an active role in helping to change the narratives in opera to be more inclusive and equitable?



# DISCOVER “COMME AUTREFOIS DANS LA NUIT SOMBRE”

## SET THE SCENE

As evening falls, Nourabad tells Leïla she needs rest, and reminds her of her vow of chastity. She tells a story from her childhood, when she risked her life to save a fugitive, who gave her a necklace in gratitude. She has worn the necklace ever since. Upon the priest's departure, Leïla quietly reminisces on former times when she and Nadir would meet together secretly. Leïla senses that Nadir is nearby...

## LISTEN TO “COMME AUTREFOIS DANS LA NUIT SOMBRE”

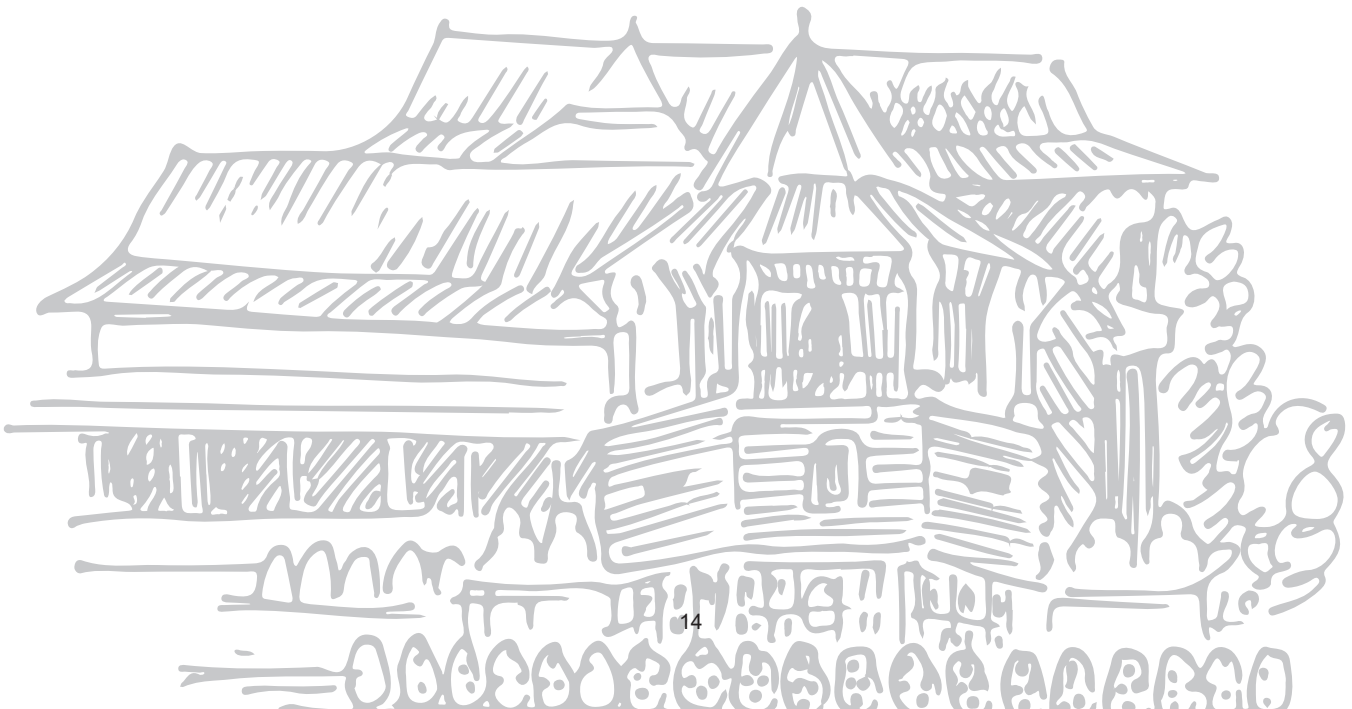
Please [click on this link](#) to listen and watch this aria, performed at 1:25.

[Click here](#) to follow along with the musical score of “Comme autrefois dans la nuit sombre”.

## ARTISTIC PRACTICE: HOW DO YOU BEGIN TO LEARN A PIECE OF MUSIC?

When looking at a new piece of music, here are three easy ways to tackle a piece of repertoire:

- 1 Take a small portion of the melody and learn the rhythmic pattern.
- 2 Once you feel like you have an internal rhythm, clap back the rhythm to yourself. [Listen to this audio clip for reference.](#)
- 3 Use a piano to hear what the melody sounds like and begin to match the pitches that you hear. Sing on a vowel that you feel comfortable with.
- 4 If you don't have access to a piano, listen to a recording of the melody on youtube. [Click here to follow along with the vocal guide.](#)
- 5 Repeat, until you feel it beginning to become internalized in your body. Once it has, take a new portion of the music and go through these steps again.





# JAMBOARD: CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

## LITERARY CONNECTIONS

In life and in literature do you ever wonder sometimes, how the situation/plot would've turned out, if only a different choice was made? Having alternative Endings in storytelling can be a great way to improve or differentiate how your story concludes.

All of the great writers were never without completing a draft (or two). The libretto of *The Pearl Fishers* is no different. In the opera's 1886 revival, a revised version was staged where Nourabad sees Zurga freeing Sri Lankan prisoners and denounces him to the fishermen, one of whom stabs Zurga to death.

Use **this Jamboard** to brainstorm the possible characters, events and an alternative ending that could have resulted from one moment being thought differently from how Bizet actually wrote the story. Rewrite a portion of **the libretto** that reflects your own personality/thoughts/moral values more accurately. Then, as a class outline possible events and choices that the characters could have made using the graphic organizer outline found in the Jamboard.

This can be done in many creative ways, so don't be afraid to use your imagination. Highlight a theme in this story that you feel most strongly about and share with Austin Opera on social media, at **@austinopera** using the hashtag **#PearlFishersATX** and **#AccessOperaPearl**.

