

THE ACTOR'S ACCOUNT OF FAMOUS
(and Not-So-Famous)

Musical Moments

15 Readers' Theater Scripts for the General Music Classroom

BY ANNA WENTLENT

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Access reproducible PDFs of each script online.



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OVERVIEW

Readers' theater is a strategy for developing reading fluency and public speaking skills. Often used in elementary and middle school English and history classes, students build oral fluency, develop confidence as independent readers, and learn to read aloud with expression by using the full range of their speaking voice, facial expressions, and physical gestures. All of this takes place within a collaborative full-class setting that encourages interacting and cooperating with others.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

The Actor's Account of Famous (and Not-So-Famous) Musical Moments applies this device to the general music classroom. Rather than simply describing significant events in music history to your students, bring them to life using readers' theater. The only requirement is the script. Assign parts, give students a few minutes to practice, and then read the lines off the page. Readers should be encouraged to be funny, try out accents, and act out, so long as it is respectful and serves the purpose of making the reading memorable to the rest of the class. You might help your students loosen up and draw reluctant readers out of their shells by "setting the stage" in your classroom: play the suggested background music, add a few optional props, etc. After the laughter subsides, lead the class into a follow-up discussion. Prompts are included with each event, encouraging students to make social, historical, and cultural connections.

PROGRAMMING

The scripts may be used individually where appropriate in your curriculum or combined together for a more formal performance, such as an "informance," a school assembly, or an evening performance for parents. Consider putting together a presentation of several scripts from across history that share a common theme. For instance, a program on composers might include Hildegard von Bingen writing the first musical drama, Camille Saint-Saëns composing the first film score, and Rodgers and Hammerstein writing the musical *Oklahoma!* An evening exploring American popular music could feature Louis Armstrong recording the Hot Five and Hot Seven sessions, Chuck Berry releasing "Maybellene," and DJ Kool Herc giving rise to hip-hop in the Bronx.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

I have selected a wide variety of historical events for inclusion in this book, including Western classical music, instrument development, sound technology, and American popular music. This was done in an effort to broaden the lens through which musical concepts are presented in the general music classroom and make connections with other content areas and historical events. In addition to being an important part of my own philosophy of music education, this view is supported by the connection standards of the National Core Arts Standards. Students are asked to place artistic ideas and work within their proper external context to deepen understanding. How can music help us make sense of our own history? It is my hope that the scripts in this book will play a small part in helping young students connect music with the people who made it and the time and place from which it came.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Camille Saint-Saëns Composes the First Film Score

SUMMARY: One of the most important French composers of all time, Camille Saint-Saëns is remembered today for classics such as *The Carnival of the Animals*, *Danse macabre*, his Organ Symphony, and the opera *Samson and Delilah*. Less known is the fact that he composed the first original film score. Saint-Saëns wrote orchestral music to accompany a 15-minute black-and-white French film titled *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise* (or *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* in the original French).

NUMBER OF STUDENT READERS: 10+

CHARACTERS:

Narrator 1	Aunt	Director
Narrator 2	Announcer	Bernstein
Narrator 3	Saint-Saëns	
Narrator 4	Critic	

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

Background Music Suggestions:

- Score from *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise*
- Other well-known pieces by Camille Saint-Saëns, such as:
 - *Danse macabre*
 - *The Carnival of the Animals*
 - Organ Symphony

Optional Show and Tell Props:

- Picture of Camille Saint-Saëns
- Video clips from early films, including *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise*, which is now in the public domain and widely available online
- “How Music Affects Film” series on YouTube (*The Lion King* example is both effective and school-appropriate)

Class Discussion Prompts:

- Despite his best efforts, Saint-Saëns is most remembered today for pieces that he thought beneath him during his lifetime, such as *The Carnival of the Animals* and his film score. What conclusions can we draw from this?
- What makes a *good* film score?
- How is writing a film score different than writing a standalone piece of music? What factors need to be considered?



LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Camille Saint-Saëns Composes the First Film Score

- NARRATOR 1:** Repeat after me: seh.
- ALL:** Seh.
- NARRATOR 1:** Very good. And now: sahnz.
- ALL:** Sahnz.
- NARRATOR 1:** And then put it together: seh-SAHNZ.
- ALL:** Seh-SAHNZ.
- NARRATOR 1:** Excellent. But that's just step one. Now ... we make it French. Flip the word forward and speak it into the front of your face. Nasalize it, if you will. Seh(n)-SAH(N)Z.
- ALL:** Seh(n)-SAH(N)Z.
- NARRATOR 1:** Très bien (*tray bee-EH(N)*)! We are ready to begin!
- NARRATOR 2:** This is the story of the French composer Camille (*kah-MEEL*) Saint-Saëns (*seh(n)-SAH(N)Z*).
- NARRATOR 3:** He was born in Paris in the year 1835, and raised by his mother and aunt.
- NARRATOR 4:** It was his aunt who first introduced him to music, by way of the piano.
- AUNT:** (*as if speaking to a very young child*) Camille, have a seat right here on the piano bench. Alright dear, let's start at the very beginning. This is middle C.
- NARRATOR 1:** Saint-Saëns was a true prodigy.
- NARRATOR 2:** That means he was naturally skilled and progressed quickly. He was soon playing at the level of an adult.
- ANNOUNCER:** Allow me to introduce our next performer this evening: the young Camille Saint-Saëns, who is but five years old!
- NARRATOR 3:** That's right, he performed in public for the first time at age five, playing a piece by Beethoven.
- NARRATOR 4:** Saint-Saëns was soon admitted to the Paris Conservatory, the most prestigious music school in France.
- NARRATOR 1:** While there, he studied music composition, piano, and organ.

GENIUS DRAWS NO COLOR LINES

Marian Anderson Performs at the Lincoln Memorial

SUMMARY: Marian Anderson was the first well-known Black classical singer in the United States. Born to a working class family in Philadelphia, she persevered through poverty and racism to become an accomplished performer in both the United States and Europe. In the process, she broke down several racial barriers, becoming the first Black musician to perform at the White House and with the Metropolitan Opera, as well as performing live for millions on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

NUMBER OF STUDENT READERS: 12

CHARACTERS:

Narrator 1	Anderson
Narrator 2	Queen
Brünnhilde	Roosevelt (Eleanor)
Narrator 3	Bing
Narrator 4	Kennedy
Mother	Ickes

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

Background Music Suggestions:

- Major recordings by Marian Anderson, such as:
 - “My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord”
 - “My Lord, What a Morning”

Optional Show and Tell Props:

- Picture of the Lincoln Memorial (and other Washington, D.C. memorials and monuments)
- Pictures and/or videos of Marian Anderson (clips of the Lincoln Memorial performance are available on YouTube)

Class Discussion Prompts:

- What lessons can we learn from Marian Anderson’s life?
- How have race relations in our country changed for the better since Marian Anderson’s time? What work do we still have to do?



GENIUS DRAWS NO COLOR LINES

Marian Anderson Performs at the Lincoln Memorial

- NARRATOR 1:** Classical singers are often stereotyped.
- NARRATOR 2:** Have you ever seen a cartoon version of an opera singer? She was probably a large woman with long braids and horns on her head.
- BRÜNNHILDE:** *(with a big, round “operatic” voice)* Ahhh!
- NARRATOR 3:** Well, that’s just one character from a German opera.
- NARRATOR 4:** Classical music is so much more than that! There are singers from nearly every country in the world, and they sing a wide variety of art songs, oratorios, and operas.
- NARRATOR 1:** They sing in English, German, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, Russian, and even more languages.
- NARRATOR 2:** And they sing songs that are slow and melancholy, songs that are agitated and angry, and songs that are full of humor and inside jokes for the audience—just like in any other style of music.
- NARRATOR 3:** The training that classical singers receive allows them to sing complex lines of music in a safe and reliable way.
- NARRATOR 4:** Classical singers are also capable of filling a large concert hall without the use of a microphone, even singing over the sound of a full orchestra.
- NARRATOR 1:** In fact, using microphones is somewhat frowned upon.
- BRÜNNHILDE:** *(shocked)* The horror! You’ll never see *me* using a microphone.
- NARRATOR 2:** One unfortunate fact of the classical music world is that until recently, most professional singers were white.
- NARRATOR 3:** The first well-known Black classical singer was Marian Anderson.
- NARRATOR 4:** Anderson grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the early 1900s.
- NARRATOR 1:** Her family didn’t have a lot of money. In fact, she often had to take time off from school to go to work to help pay the family’s bills.
- MOTHER:** I don’t know how we’re going to pay the rent on time. Marian dear, I’m so sorry, but you’re going to need to go back to cleaning houses.