



AN OPERA IN TWO ACTS

Conceived by Jake Heggie, Gene Scheer, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar Music by Jake Heggie Libretto by Gene Scheer Directed/Choreographed by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar Commissioned by Houston Grand Opera Premiered by the Houston Grand Opera in October 2023 World premiere production in collaboration with Urban Bush Women

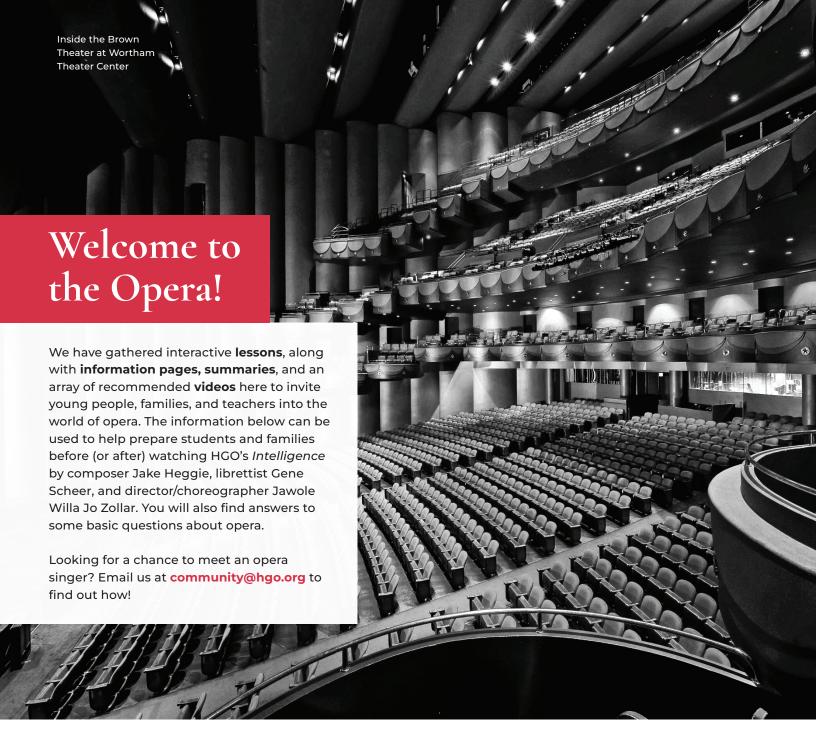


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The Opera in One Sentence

When the enslaved Mary Jane Bowser goes undercover at the Confederate White House to spy for the Union, she discovers even more secrets about her own life and family.

Synopsis (Spoiler Alert!)

Richmond, 1865. The U.S. Civil War.

ACT I

Mary Jane Bowser, a woman born into slavery to the wealthy Van Lew family in Richmond, is hanging laundry on the Van Lew plantation when she is approached by a woman named Lucinda, whom she has never met but who seems to know a lot about Mary Jane. Lucinda questions Mary Jane's close relationship with Elizabeth Van Lew, the daughter of the deceased family patriarch. Mary Jane defends Elizabeth, saying she took care of her after her mother died in childbirth. We learn that Mary Jane had been baptized and married in Richmond's church for white families, and that she was sent to the North for school to learn to read and write.

As Lucinda slips away, a man runs to Mary Jane begging for help to escape to the North. Elizabeth enters and berates him for implying that she is sympathetic to the Union. She also recognizes the man: she knows he is Travis Briggs, a Confederate Home Guard, who was trying to entrap Elizabeth and Mary Jane. Elizabeth's sister-in-law Callie arrives and vouches for Elizabeth's loyalty to the Confederacy. She, too, is suspicious of Elizabeth's Northern sympathies, but she is more concerned with protecting her family name.





When Travis and Callie depart, Elizabeth and Mary Jane drop the charade and focus on the task at hand: they have two Union soldiers hiding in the house, and they need Mary Jane's husband Wilson to help them escape to the North. Elizabeth then tells Mary Jane that their secret plan can finally be put into motion: Mary Jane will be loaned out to the Confederate White House. She will spy for the Union, sending intelligence from Jefferson Davis's study to the North through Elizabeth's spy ring.

At the seamstress shop, Mary Jane delivers a dress with Confederate secrets sewn into the hem. Travis approaches her, increasingly suspicious of her and Elizabeth; he nearly assaults her before he is interrupted by the Davis's butler, Henry, who is looking for Mary Jane to bring her back to the Davis house.

Wilson tells Elizabeth that, as he was delivering the message from the dress to the Union line, he learned that only one of the two Union soldiers made it back safely; the Confederate Home Guard must have captured one of the escaped Yankee prisoners. As Elizabeth worries about the captured soldier and about Callie and Travis's increasing suspicions, she asks Wilson to bury her journal: they cannot risk anyone finding the cipher to their messages to the Union.

Travis interrogates the captured Yankee but kills him when nothing is revealed. Lucinda mysteriously reappears, observing both the burying of the soldier and the burying of the journal. At the Davis house, Mary Jane has uncovered intelligence that needs to get to the North as quickly as possible: she does not have time to sew it into a dress to deliver later. She sets fire to the building as a distraction, encouraging Henry to run to the Van Lew house where Elizabeth can help him get to the North. As the fire grows, Mary Jane sees Lucinda consumed in the flames.

INTERMISSION

ACT II

Mary Jane returns to the room where she started the fire, looking for signs of Lucinda: nobody else saw Lucinda in the fire. Back at the Van Lew house, Callie tries yet again to entrap Elizabeth. She pretends to be more concerned about her family's welfare in the war, asking Elizabeth to help them escape to the North. Elizabeth refuses to take the bait.

Elizabeth meets Mary Jane at the seamstress shop, thinking Mary Jane has found some new intelligence. Instead, Mary Jane asks about Lucinda. Insisting that no one was in the fire, Elizabeth reluctantly asks the troubled Mary Jane for more help: since Callie has been suspiciously watching her, Elizabeth needs Mary Jane to retrieve the buried journal. Mary Jane agrees, but then asks about her mother: what was her name? How old was she when she died?

When Elizabeth leaves, Mary Jane falls into a mysterious existence as spirits and ancestors dance around her. She sees Lucinda. Mary Jane asks her how old she was when she died, and Lucinda echoes Elizabeth's answer about Mary Jane's mother.

Travis finds Wilson digging up the buried journal and knocks him unconscious. When Mary Jane arrives, Travis confronts her about the secrets, stories, and cipher: he reads a story from Elizabeth's journal that departs from Mary Jane's knowledge of her mother's death in childbirth, instead saying that Mary Jane was two years old when the Van Lews took her mother to the auction block. As Travis moves to assault Mary Jane, Henry appears, and the men fight; Travis is killed.

Callie comes across Travis's body. She plans to turn in Elizabeth and destroy her family name. Elizabeth watches from a distance, a gun in hand, prepared to do the worst to protect herself and the spy ring. But as Callie realizes that destroying Elizabeth's reputation would include her and her children, she focuses on her own self-preservation: Callie buries Travis's body herself to keep the truth from being discovered.

Elizabeth tells Mary Jane what she saw Callie do. But Mary Jane is no longer concerned with the secrets of the war and the spy ring. She is concerned with the secrets Elizabeth has been keeping from her. As she confronts Elizabeth and learns the truth about what happened to her mother, Mary Jane decides to leave Richmond behind her and tell her story. The whole story.



Cast



ELIZABETH VAN LEW mezzo-soprano



JANAI BRUGGER MARY JANE BOWSER soprano



J'NAI BRIDGES LUCINDA mezzo-soprano



CAITLIN LYNCH CALLIE VAN LEW soprano



NICHOLAS NEWTON HENRY bass-baritone



MICHAEL MAYES TRAVIS BRIGGS baritone



WILSON tenor

Solo Dancers of Urban Bush Women



COURTNEY J. COOK



LOREN DAVIDSON



KENTORIA EARLE



ROOBI GASKINS



SYMARA JOHNSON



CHANON JUDSON



BIANCA LETICIA MEDINA LOVE MUWWAKKIL





SAMANTHA SPEIS



MIKAILA WARE

For more cast details, please visit our website HGO.ORG

Creative Team



JAKE HEGGIE, COMPOSER

GENE SCHEER, LIBRETTIST

KWAMÉ RYAN, CONDUCTOR

JAWOLE WILLA JO ZOLLAR, DIRECTOR & CHOREOGRAPHER

MIMI LIEN, SET DESIGNER

CARLOS J. SOTO AND CLAIR HUMMEL, COSTUME DESIGNERS

JOHN TORRES, LIGHTING DESIGNER

WENDALL K. HARRINGTON AND RASEAN DAVONTÉ JOHNSON,

PROJECTION DESIGNERS

VINCENT THOMAS, ASSOCIATE CHOREOGRAPHER

LUKE FEDELL, FIGHT DIRECTOR

SKYE BRONFENBRENNER, INTIMACY DIRECTOR

JEREMY JOHNSON, DRAMATURG

Setting

In the South during the Civil War.

Background

In 2012, author and educator Lois Leveen wrote an op-ed for the New York Times titled "A Black Spy in the Confederate White House," introducing much of the public, for the first time, to the extraordinary true story of Mary Jane Bowser. Born into slavery to the Van Lew family circa 1840, Mary Jane had an unusual series of events in her life: she was baptized and married in Richmond's white church, sent to the north to be fully educated in reading and writing, and sent to Liberia as a missionary. When she returned to Richmond, she was loaned out to the Confederate White House where her unexpected literacy allowed her to spy on documentation of troop movements and strategy, which she was able to deliver to the North through Elizabeth Van Lew's undercover spy ring. Leveen's article was given to composer Jake Heggie by a docent at the Smithsonian Institution, and the idea for his next opera, Intelligence, was born. With longtime collaborator Gene Scheer on board as librettist, Heggie reached out to director and choreographer Jawole Zollar to complete the creative team. Created in collaboration with Urban Bush Women, the dance company founded by Zollar in 1984, Intelligence tells the story of Mary Jane and Elizabeth through a unique fusion of words, dance, and music, an unprecedented combination on the operatic stage in which all three art forms coalesce into a narrative whole.





What to Listen For

Intelligence opens with Mary Jane at a clothesline, singing a minor-mode melody that bends through flat- and natural- scale degrees, evoking a bluesy, plaintive atmosphere as she sings, "Oh, Lord, have mercy on my soul." This folklike theme returns in a short duet with Lucinda shortly after they meet, as Mary Jane is unaware that Lucinda is the spirit of her mother, and unaware of the deeper meaning behind the diegetic lyrics, "Whose arms were holding me then? Whose arms would not let me go?" The haunting refrain comes back in Lucinda's voice throughout the opera, notably in the ultimate scene when Mary Jane finally learns the truth about her past from Elizabeth.

Fun Fact:

SEVEN NAMES

Mary Jane Bowser is so named, in *Intelligence*, for the historical record indicating that she married Wilson Bowser, a man also enslaved to the Van Lew family. Primary sources do not indicate that Mary Jane ever took the last name Bowser. She is most commonly called Mary Jane Richards, taken from her baptismal records, but her transient life through the unwelcoming Southern U.S. after the Civil War forced her to go by many different names. She had become a teacher for the Freedmen's Bureau, taking her through schools and communities in Virginia, Georgia, and Florida, and giving lectures in Texas and New York. For a number of reasons, including protecting her identity from unfriendly listeners as she recounted her wartime efforts, Mary Jane went by at least seven different known aliases: Mary Jane Richards, Mary Elizabeth Bowser, Mary J. Garvin, Mrs. John T. Denman, M.J. Denman, Richmonia Richards, and Richmonia R. St. Pierre.

THE COMPOSER

JAKE HEGGIE

Jake Heggie is the American composer of the acclaimed operas Dead Man Walking, Moby-Dick, It's A Wonderful Life, and Three Decembers, among others. Heggie's operas —most created with Gene Scheer or the late Terrence McNally—and his nearly 300 art songs, as well as chamber, choral, and orchestral works, have been performed extensively on five continents, championed by some of the world's most beloved artists. Several of his works made their world premieres at HGO: End of the Affair (2004), Three Decembers (2008), Pieces of 9/11 (2011), It's a Wonderful Life (2016), and Songs for Murdered Sisters (2022). HGO performed Dead Man Walking in 2011, with a commercial recording being released on the Virgin Classics label. The work has now received nearly 80 international productions, making it the most-performed American opera of our time. New York's Metropolitan Opera opens its 2023-24 season with Dead Man Walking in a bold new production by director Ivo van Hove, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin. Starting this September, Heggie's "Fire" (Elements) will tour around the world in a co-commissioned project with Joshua Bell and five major orchestras including the NDR Elbphilharmonie, New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and Seattle Symphony. Future premieres include new works for the Miró String Quartet and a one-act opera, Before it All Goes Dark (Scheer), starring baritone Ryan McKinny and mezzo Megan Marino. Heggie has received Grammy nominations for Great Scott (2019) as well as Unexpected Shadows, his album with Jamie Barton (2022). A Guggenheim Fellow, Heggie has served as a mentor for the Washington National Opera's American Opera Initiative and is a frequent guest artist at universities, conservatories, and festivals throughout the U.S. and Canada.

THE LIBRETTIST

GENE SCHEER

Gene Scheer is a frequent collaborator with composer Jake Heggie, with three of their works making their world premieres at HGO: It's a Wonderful Life (2016), Three Decembers, which starred Frederica von Stade (2008); and the song cycle Pieces of 9/11 (2011). The two also collaborated on the critically acclaimed 2010 Dallas Opera world premiere Moby-Dick, starring Ben Heppner as Captain Ahab; the lyric drama To Hell and Back (Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra), which featured Patti LuPone; and Camille Claudel: Into the Fire, a song cycle premiered by Joyce DiDonato and the Alexander String Quartet. Scheer worked as librettist with Tobias Picker on An American Tragedy, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 2005. Their first opera, Therese Raquin, written for the Dallas Opera in 2001, was cited by Opera News as one of the ten best recordings of 2002. Other collaborations include the lyrics for Wynton Marsalis's "It Never Goes Away," featured in Congo Square; the Grammy-nominated oratorio August 4, 1964, with composer Steven Stucky; the opera Everest with composer Joby Talbot, premiered by the Dallas Opera in 2015; and the opera Cold Mountain with composer Jennifer Higdon, premiered by the Santa Fe Opera in 2015 (International Opera Award for Best World Premiere in 2015). Also a composer, Scheer has written a number of songs for singers such as Renée Fleming, Sylvia McNair, Stephanie Blythe, Jennifer Larmore, Denyce Graves, and Nathan Gunn. Scheer's song "American Anthem," sung by Norah Jones, was featured in Ken Burns's Emmy Award-winning documentary The War.

THE DIRECTOR & CHOREOGRAPHER

JAWOLE WILLA JO ZOLLAR

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar is making her HGO debut. In 1984, Zollar founded Urban Bush Women as a performance ensemble dedicated to exploring the use of cultural expression as a catalyst for social change. Her most recent honors include the 2022 APAP Honors Award of Merit for Achievement in the Performing Arts, the 2022 Dorothy and Lilian Gish Prize, and a 2021 fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In addition to 34 works for UBW, she has created works for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Philadanco, University of Maryland, Virginia Commonwealth University, and others. UBW has toured five continents and has performed at venues including Brooklyn Academy of Music, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and The Kennedy Center, and in 2010 was selected as one of three U.S. dance companies to inaugurate a cultural diplomacy program for the U.S. Department of State. Zollar serves as director of the Urban Bush Women Summer Leadership Institute, which enables artists to strengthen effective involvement in cultural organizing and civic engagement. A former board member of Dance/USA, Zollar received a 2008 United States Artists Wynn fellowship and a 2009 fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial. She received the 2013 Arthur L. Johnson Memorial Award, the 2013 Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, the 2015 Dance Magazine Award, the 2016 Dance/USA Honor Award, the 2017 Bessies Lifetime Achievement Award, the 2021 Dance Teacher Award of Distinction, and the 2021 Martha Hill Dance Fund Lifetime Achievement Award. She holds honorary degrees from Columbia College, Chicago, Tufts University, Rutgers University, and Muhlenberg College. She is the Nancy Smith Fichter Professor of Dance and Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor at Florida State University.

Classroom Connections

SOCIAL STUDIES

Despite working together under the same anti-Confederate spy ring, Elizabeth and Mary Jane lived as members of two distinct social classes. Analyze and discuss each woman's motivation to join the spy effort. What advantages and disadvantages did each woman have within the spy ring, due to their status during the Civil War?

TEKS: 113.42 (23A); 113.43 (22B, C); 113.46 (11C, D, E), (12A); 113.51 (3D, E, F), (4A)

SCIENCE

Elizabeth van Lew is the daughter of a prominent Confederate family, faced with the tension of preserving the importance of her "family name." Meanwhile, Mary Jane struggles with the many unknown elements of her family history. Research the impact of slavery on the science of genealogy and summarize recent scientific advancements that further the research of African American family history and genetic ancestry today.

TEKS: 112.34 (2G, H), (3A, B, D, E); 112.42 (1A) (4A, B)

MATH

Mary Jane employs several methods of communication to relay secret messages to Elizabeth, including sewing ciphers into dress hemlines. Research the history of cryptography, ciphering methods, and whether ciphers are still utilized today. Utilizing the methods you find, develop your own basic cipher.

TEKS: 111.39 (1B, C, D, E, G); 111.40 (1B, C, D, E, F, G)

LITERATURE

In 2012, author and educator Lois Leveen wrote an op-ed for the New York Times titled "A Black Spy in the Confederate White House," introducing much of the public, for the first time, to the extraordinary true story of Mary Jane Bowser. This article was a key inspiration for the composer Jake Heggie in creating *Intelligence*. Discuss the online article and compare the opera to what we know about Mary Jane's real-life history.

TEKS: 110.36 (4E, F, G, I), (7D, E, F); 110.37 (E, F, G, I), (7D, E, F); 110.38 (4 E, F, G, I), (7D, E, F); 110.39 (4E, F, G, I), (7D, E, F); 110.47 (3D), (4A, B), (5C, D, E), (6B, C), (8A, C, D); 110.48 (1A), (3A, B, C)

WORLD HISTORY

Throughout the course of history, Black women have made important contributions to the history of spying and espionage. Along with Mary Jane Bowser, research the history of Josephine Baker, a Black American singer recruited as a spy for the French Army during World War II. Compare and contrast the two women's experiences, and how their work aided the cause of their respective war efforts.

TEKS: 113.42 (23 A); 113.43 (22 B, C); 113.46 (11C, D, E), (12A); 113.51 (3D, E, F), (4A)

TECHONOLOGY AND MEDIA

At the start of *Intelligence*, Mary Jane collects scraps of cloth to fashion into a quilt that will help tell her "story of what came before." Quiltmaking is an important historic cultural tradition for Black communities that serves both practical and artistic purposes. Search online archives to find examples of historic quilts by Black artists, such as those by Gee's Bend, a celebrated quilting group whose members are direct descendants of enslaved people. Choose one quilter and create a virtual presentation to summarize their personal history and artistic output.

TEKS: 130.82 (2E, F), (3B, C, D), (5A), (6B), (17A, B, C, D), (18A, B, C)

WORLD EVENTS IN 1864

- Archduke Maximilian I of Mexico, known as Maximilian of Habsburg, is named emperor of Mexico during the French intervention in Mexico.
- The United States Congress passes the Coinage Act of 1864, which mandates that the inscription 'In God We Trust' be placed on all coins minted as United States currency.
- Montana is declared as an organized incorporated territory of the United States.
- On June 15, Arlington National Cemetery is established when 200 acres around Arlington Mansion (formerly owned by Confederate General Robert E. Lee) are officially set aside as a United States military cemetery.
- Union forces under General Sherman enter Atlanta, Georgia on September 4, a day after Confederate defenders flee the city.

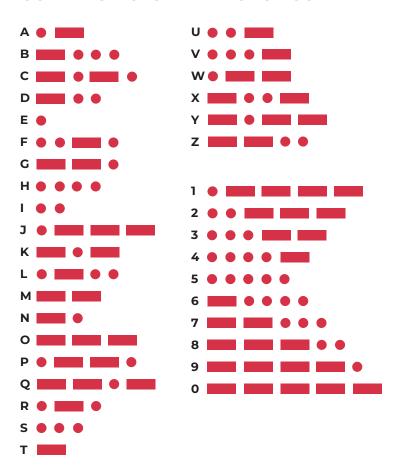
Activities

INTELLIGENCE SCAVENGER HUNT

Let's continue the journey of *Intelligence* after seeing the performance! This activity can be completed in small groups or as a full class. Show your spy skills like Elizabeth and Mary Jane by using each riddle - based on material from the production – to solve the clues. Below is your personal "toolkit", which includes a few hints and guides to help you along your way:

- Mary Jane would sew codes into clothing to sneak messages out of Richmond to the North.
 Later during WWII, codes were knitted with a knit (v shape) as the dot and the purl as a dash in Morse code.
- · Elizabeth Van Lew kept the cipher to her grid code in her pocket watch.
- The Morse code alphabet is rather simple, each of the letters A to Z and 0 to 9 have their own unique dot-dash code. The Morse sequences for characters from the alphabet seem to be quite random and do not seem to follow any logical order, but there is method behind the madness! Alfred Vail realized that if you gave more commonly used letters shorter sequences ones with fewer symbols and using more dots than dashes then most messages would be shorter.

GUIDE FOR CLUE #1 - MORSE CODE ALPHABET



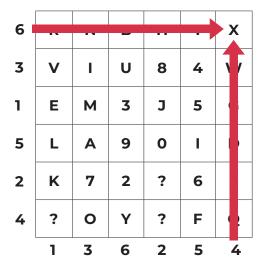
GUIDE FOR CLUE #2 - CIPHER KEY

Directions: In order to decode the letters using this cipher key, find the number in the y-axis (vertical) and align it with the second number in the x-axis (horizontal). Where those numbers intersect on the cipher key reveal the coded letter.

6	R	N	В	н	?	X
3	٧	_	C	8	4	W
1	E	М	3	J	5	G
5	L	Α	9	0	I	D
2	K	7	2	?	6	S
4	?	0	Υ	?	F	Q
	1	3	6	2	5	4

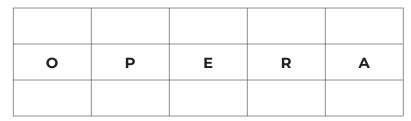
Miss Lizzie always carried this cipher key in the case of her watch. She wrote dispatches with a colorless liduid. Recipients applied milk to make the messages visible.

For example, if the first number to decode is 64, using the cipher key, find the 6 in the y-axis (at the top of the cipher key) and then the 4 in the x-axis (second to last number). Drawing lines to where the two numbers intersect reveal the letter, which in this example is \mathbf{x} .



GUIDE FOR CLUE #3 - SHIFT CIPHER

It is well-known that the Confederates used a polyalphabetic (Vigenere) cipher during the Civil War. This is also referred to as a "shift cipher", and a common shift cipher used during this war was "MANCHESTER BLUFF". The way that you use this shift cipher to decode hidden messages is to use each letter in the word ("MANCHESTER BLUFF") as your starting point to find the number of spaces from each letter to the cipher text. Let's try an example using a different shift cipher – instead of "MANCHESTER BLUFF", let's use "OPERA". You'll start by putting your shift cipher in the middle row.



Next, plug in the text cipher (hidden message) in the boxes above the shift cipher. For this example, our hidden message is **ajwzc**, so you will place these letters in the boxes above the shift cipher.

а	j	W	Z	С
0	Р	E	R	Α

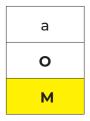
For the final step in decoding the hidden message, you will need to do the following for each letter: count the distance between the letter in the shift cipher and the letter in the text cipher (hidden message). For instance, to find the first letter in our example, you must count how many letters O is away from A by starting with O as 1, P as 2, Q as 3, etc. Once you reach Z (which for this example, Z is 12, A will be 13.)

а	
0	

From there, look to the Alphabet Numbering chart below to find the letter assigned to the number that you found in the last step.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Α	В	С	D	E	F	G	Н	I	J
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
K	L	М	N	0	Р	Q	R	S	Т
21	22	23	24	25	26				
U	V	w	X	Y	Z				

For this example, our number is 13, which means that at last, we have found the decoded letter, which is M! This is when you can write the letter into the empty box under the letter O (in this example).



You can continue to follow these steps to find the missing letter in each cipher, but always remember that the letter in the shift cipher will always be the letter at which you start counting to find the distance. For musicians, think of it like using movable *do* in solfege!

Want to practice using this example? Go ahead...the answer might be "music" to your ears!

GUIDE FOR CLUE #4 - MUSIC STAFF



LET'S SOLVE THE RIDDLE

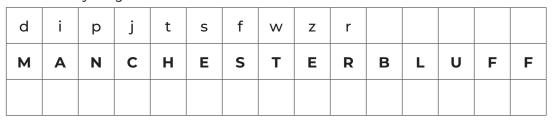
Clue #1: The heroine of our tale you seek, now in a code you need to speak. If knit is dot and purl is dash, what Morse could you ask for in a flash?

Code:	- V V V	 V	\vee \vee \vee	V	V – V
Letters:					

Clue #2: The ringleader of spies did code, as did our heroine as she sewed. Lizzie kept pristine time, on the grid with her clock chime.

31 53 63 51 11 34

Clue #3: A keyword is now what you'll need, if the next clue you want to read. Mary Jane called their Manchester Bluff, as she was made of tougher stuff. Now you must try to shift your thoughts, along with the letters keenly sought.



Clue #4: To guide you on this noble quest, put music knowledge to the test. Note the FACE in the space to find what you seek and use prior answers to make it complete. (Hint: Only the musical alphabet letter associated with each circled pitch should be written on the BOLD lines. Use the answers from the three previous clues to guess the remaining letters that spell out this two-word answer that provides the setting for the opera Intelligence).

Answer: ___ __ __ __ __ __ ___

