



# A Curriculum Guide to DANCING HANDS

HOW TERESA CARREÑO PLAYED THE PIANO FOR PRESIDENT LINCOLN

By Margarita Engle, Illustrated by Rafael López

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Ages 4–8; Grades P–3  
Atheneum Books for Young Readers

## BACKGROUND/SUMMARY

From the time she was born, music was at the center of Teresa Carreño's life. Growing up in Venezuela, her mother sang to her, and her father taught her to play the piano. By age six, she was writing original songs, and by age seven, she was performing in a magnificent cathedral. Teresa's life changed dramatically when a revolution in Venezuela caused her family to flee to New York. Yet in the United States, too, the Civil War was raging. Despite this hardship, Teresa continued to devote herself to music, discovering its power to bring people together. Because of her musical ability, she became known as the Piano Girl. She performed with great orchestras in large theaters and traveled to elegant cities.

A unique opportunity presented itself when Teresa was ten years old. She was invited to play for President Abraham Lincoln and his family. At that time, the country was at war, and one of Lincoln's sons had recently died. The family was grieving. When Teresa began to play, she felt discouraged because the piano was out of tune. But when she played the president's favorite song, Teresa saw the joy she was able to bring him and his family, and it made her more confident and self-assured about sharing her music with others. Margarita Engle's poetic language, rich with descriptive details, similes, and rhyme, shows Teresa Carreño's growth and development as a musician. Colorful mixed media illustrations by Rafael López evoke the beauty, power, and joy of her music as well as the despair of war. Together, words and illustrations create a moving portrait of the young Teresa Carreño.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

### Key Ideas and Details

The discussion questions and activities below draw on Common Core State Standards for Reading and Informational Text (RI) that ask children to ask and answer questions about key details in a text (RI.K.1–RI.3.1), identify the main topic and key details that support it (RI.K.2–RI.3.2), and describe the relationship between a series of events, concepts, or ideas (RI.K.3–RI.3.3).

1. **Prereading: See, Think, Wonder.** Before reading the book, carefully examine the front cover. Use the See, Think, and Wonder chart below to help you predict what the book is about and what questions you think the book might answer. After reading, see if your predictions were correct and your questions answered.

SEE: What do you see?	THINK: What do you think the book will be about?	WONDER: What questions do you think the book will answer?

2. Why did people call Teresa Carreño the Piano Girl?
3. How did Teresa become an outstanding pianist? Describe some of the steps she took and the lessons she learned.
4. How did the revolution in Venezuela affect Teresa's life?
5. Imagine that you could interview Teresa about playing the piano for President Lincoln. With a partner, make up questions you could ask her. Then take turns being either the interviewer who asks the questions or Teresa answering the questions. Here are some topics you could ask about:
  - What Teresa saw and heard when she arrived in Washington, DC
  - What Teresa hoped she could do to entertain the president
  - How she overcame feelings of sadness and discouragement
  - How Teresa felt at the end of the evening
6. The author describes Teresa's hands as "dancing hands, happy hands, and strong hands." What do these descriptions tell you about Teresa's piano playing?
7. How did Teresa change from being a girl who "had to struggle to make the stubborn music behave" to a girl who felt "bold enough to share her musical courage anywhere in the world"? Can you name some of the people or experiences that most influenced her?
8. Have you ever felt bold like Teresa? Describe how you developed the courage to overcome a fear or struggle. What advice would you have for someone to help them feel brave?

## CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

To learn about craft and structure, the CCSS asks us to help students learn and understand vocabulary words and phrases (RI.K.4–RI.3.4), think about the features of nonfiction text (RI.K.5–RI.3.5), and assess the author's point of view (RI.K.6–RI.3.6). The questions and activities below emphasize these understandings.

1. **Looking at Well-Crafted Language.** The author uses several techniques to make the language she uses memorable and appealing. Samples of three such techniques—simile, internal rhyme, and vivid verbs—are given below. Read each example aloud and then discuss how the language makes you think and feel about Teresa Carreño's life and times. Then find additional examples of each technique.

- **Simile**, the use of language to compare two different things, often uses the words like or as to make the comparison. Similes make the language dynamic and add emphasis.

Here is how the author compares the powerful songs Teresa played to jaguars:

"... powerful songs that roared  
like prowling jaguars, beside towering waterfalls"

Later in the book, the author compares a room in the White House to the weather:

"Clutching Papá's hand fiercely as they stepped  
into a room so red that it looked like a storm  
or a sunrise."

- **Internal rhyme** happens when a word in the middle of a line rhymes with a word at the end of the line. The rhyme can emphasize an idea.

Here is how the author emphasizes the sounds Teresa heard in Washington, DC, during the Civil War:

"the injured moaned, and nurses groaned  
from the sheer weariness of caring  
for so many fevers  
and wounds."

The author also uses internal rhyme to show the impact of arguments:

“Men argued about battles lost, battles won,  
speeches **made**, victory **delayed** . . .”

- **Vivid verbs**, the use of specific verbs or action words, makes the language more understandable, interesting, and exciting.

Here is how the author uses vivid verbs to describe the dangerous conditions at sea when Teresa’s family escaped from the revolution in Venezuela:

“Guns **blazed**, swords **flashed**, and poor Papá  
had to rush the whole family down to the seashore  
and onto a ship, into a storm where wind **howled**,  
waves **rolled**, barrels **tumbled**, ropes **snapped**,  
and clouds **bucked** and **kicked** across the wild sky  
like angry mules.”

When Teresa played for President Lincoln, the author used vivid verbs to describe the sound of her music:

“The president listened quietly  
to notes that rose, swayed, rippled,  
and dipped like a bird in a blue sky  
above a green forest.”

Did you notice that each of the examples above also ended with a simile? Try using simile, internal rhyme, and vivid verbs in your writing. How does it change your writing style?

**2. Using Words and Illustrations to Build Understanding.** The words and illustrations in *Dancing Hands* work together to help you understand Teresa Carreño’s life. Look carefully at each of the pages below. Then use the prompts to help you answer the question below each picture.



**Question:** What was it like to leave Venezuela?

1. What do the words tell you about leaving Venezuela?

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2. What do the illustrations show you?

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3. How do the words and illustrations work together?

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**Question:** What did Teresa discover about the power of music to bring people together?

1. What do the words tell you about Teresa's thoughts regarding the power of music?

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2. What do the illustrations show you?

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3. How do the words and illustrations work together?

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**Question:** When Teresa felt discouraged, how did President Lincoln help her find the courage to continue?

1. What do the words tell you about how Teresa felt discouraged at first, and how the president helped her?

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2. What do the illustrations show you?

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3. How do the words and illustrations work together?

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**Question:** What happened when Teresa played the song the president requested?

1. What do the words tell you about what changed after Teresa played the requested song?

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2. What do the illustrations show you?

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3. How do the words and illustrations work together?

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3. **Word Splash.** See the reproducible sheet at the end of the guide.

## WRITING

CCSS emphasizes writing informative and explanatory text in the early grades. The writing activities below provide experience writing to give an opinion (W.K.1–W.3.1), to inform (W.K.2–W.3.2), and to explain a sequence of events (W.K.3–W.3.3).

1. Imagine that you are Teresa Carreño and you are writing to your mother. Describe your experience playing the piano for President Lincoln and his family. Here are some things you can include:

- The red room
- The piano you played on
- Why you felt discouraged
- The song the president requested
- How you felt after playing that song

2. Select an illustration in the book and bring it to life by writing the conversation the people there are having. Here are some examples of what you could write:



- Write the conversation Teresa and her father are having when he is showing her how to play the piano.



- Write the conversation Teresa and her father are having when she notices strangers in New York staring and whispering about her family.



- Write the conversation Teresa is having with President Lincoln after she finishes playing "Listen to the Mockingbird."

3. After she played for President Lincoln, Teresa felt she would always have the courage to share her music anywhere. She no longer felt discouraged. Have you ever felt discouraged or courageous like Teresa? Think of moments when you experienced either of these feelings, and what you learned about yourself. Then write about a different experience where you used that same courage.
4. Someone who is “bold” and “courageous” is confident, brave, and willing to take risks. These are the words the author uses to describe Teresa Carreño. Do you agree? Write down your thoughts on Teresa and how she portrayed herself.

## EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE OF READING THE BOOK

### Read books about other musicians:

*Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music* by Margarita Engle

*The Little Piano Girl: The Story of Mary Lou Williams, Jazz Legend* by Ann Ingalls and Maryann Macdonald

*Little Melba and Her Big Trombone* by Katheryn Russell-Brown

*Trombone Shorty* by Troy Andrews

*Marvin Makes Music* by Marvin Hamlisch

*Ada's Violin: The Story of the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay* by Susan Hood

*Muddy: The Story of Blues Legend Muddy Waters* by Michael Mahin

### Read other picture books written by Margarita Engle:

*All the Way to Havana*

*Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music*

*The Flying Girl: How Aída de Acosta Learned to Soar*

*Bravo! Poems About Amazing Hispanics*

*Orangutanka: A Story in Poems*

*A Dog Named Haku: A Holiday Story from Nepal*

*Miguel's Brave Knight: Young Cervantes and His Dream of Don Quixote*

*The Sky Painter: Louis Fuertes, Bird Artist*

### Read other books illustrated by Rafael López:

*The Day You Begin*

*Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood*

*We've Got the Whole World in Our Hands*

*Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music*

*Book Fiesta!: Celebrate Children's Day/Book Day*

*Tito Puente, Mambo King*

*My Name Is Celia: The Life of Celia Cruz*



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## Word Splash Activity

Draw a line connecting two words you think “go together” and use these words in a sentence about Teresa Carreño. All the words come from the book *Dancing Hands*. Can you use them all?

Papá

piano

**courage**

# Piano Girl

performed

## Teresa

## “Listen to the Mockingbird”

## concerts

dancing hands

## dark and light keys

## New York

## Venezuela

## President Abraham Lincoln

## homesick

## White House

graceful waltzes and sonatas

## **grieving**

struggle

clapped

**bold**

## Civil War

## DANCING HANDS

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