

THE LIBRETTO – OPERA’S “BLACK SHEEP”

A Syllabus for Summer 2024: UNT SSB 105, Wed., June 12th,
10:00-11:30 AM; RR, Tues., July 9th, 1:00-2:30 PM

The word “libretto” – the text of an opera – entered the English language from the Italian, where the word was originally the diminutive of “libro” (book). Maybe that’s where the trouble started: a LITTLE book just can’t get any respect. The literary establishment – creators, critics, and the reading public – has for centuries reviled, derided, mocked, and scorned opera libretti for their alleged simple-mindedness, melodramatic traits, lack of subtlety and sophistication, and sing-song and often language-distorting verses. YET successful operas – those that have stayed in the repertory to the delight of many generations of opera-goers – have in common their wealth of gripping dramatic scenes, riveting plots, and memorable, beloved protagonists. Thanks to YouTube selections from operas of the late 18th, the 19th, and the early 20th centuries, class members will discover the contributions to an opera’s “greatness” made by the playwright’s/lyricist’s (the librettist’s) dramatic words, characters, and stories.

[I (Steve Dubrow – smdubrow@gmail.com) have been a devotee of opera since my childhood, attending, over the years, many hundreds of opera and vocal recital performances in the U.S. and Europe and maintaining an extensive CD collection focused on the classical vocal repertory. Having graduated summa cum laude from Columbia, I did graduate work in Romance Languages and Literatures at Princeton and taught French at Brown University. A specialist in press and cultural affairs, I served for 25 years as a U.S. Foreign Service Officer, working in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Slovenia, the DR of Congo (when it was called “Zaire”), Poland, Belgium, France, Austria, and (of course) in Washington, DC. I retired in 1998 as a member of the Senior Foreign Service of the U.S. and, under contract for another two years, continued working for the U.S. Department of State as spokesman for the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs . From 2000 to 2019, I taught world languages (French, Latin, Spanish, and Italian) in high school in Montgomery County, MD, where I

became a National Board Certified Teacher. My wife, Jeannette, and I retired and moved to Denton in June of 2019, joining our poet and essayist daughter, Jehanne, UNT Professor of English and Creative Writing, but, alas, leaving our son, Eric, behind in Maryland.]

The class will focus on the contributions that the librettists have made to the creation of noteworthy operas. Clearly, since operas are a musical art form, the composers' inputs dominate. However, just as clearly, the opera-loving public often becomes so caught up in the events brought to life in an opera that one is hard-put to assign one's fascination only to musical elements. At times, there are scenes of rare dramatic intensity; or a protagonist takes on a life that speaks to us all; or the plot draws us in, moves us, shocks us, and enlightens us.

DRAMATIC SCENES

(19) Mozart's THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO (librettist Lorenzo da Ponte), from act 2 (taken from a 1980 Paris Opera production conducted by Georg Solti with Popp, von Stade, Janowitz, Bacquier – TIMING 1:04:00 – 1:22:40)

(21) Puccini's TOSCA (librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa), end of act 2 (taken from a 2004 Teatro Real de Madrid production with Dessi, Armiliato, Raimondi – TIMING 1:10:30-1:31:30)

PLOT

(11) Richard Strauss's SALOME (translated/adapted from Oscar Wilde's play by the same name) scene with Herod, Salome, and Herodias (taken from a 2010 Bologna production conducted by Nicola Luisotti with Brubaker, Sonneggardh, Schaechter – TIMING 1:11:29-1:22:11)

PROTAGONIST

(20) Verdi's LA TRAVIATA (librettist Francesco Maria Piave), selection from act 2, scene 1 (taken from a 2006 Metropolitan Opera production conducted by James Conlon with Fleming and Bruson – TIMING 0:42:20-1:02:00)

YouTube Playlist:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFXm33g1Zx9zclsDnt49dxIkEu5l9YMwY>

