

OPERA 201 – AN INTRODUCTION TO OPERA, part 2

A Syllabus for September 2021

What Makes an Opera Great

Wednesdays, September 1, 8, 15, and 22; 1:00 - 2:30pm; OLLI at UNT classroom (1716 Scripture Street; Denton, TX 76201)

There are extrinsic factors that keep the public going back to the opera house: for example, world-renowned singers are performing; it's "the thing to do"; the critics' reviews of a performance have been positive; or the public just can't get enough of a particular opera. On the other hand, there are elements intrinsic to those operas that never fail to draw large and appreciative audiences, in some cases consistently over more than two centuries. It is these intrinsic elements on which we will focus our attention as we continue our look into what attracts opera audiences. Again, thanks to YouTube selections from operas of the late 18th, the 19th, and the early 20th centuries, members will discover the contributions to an opera's "greatness" made by both the playwright's/lyricist's (the librettist's) dramatic words, characters, and stories and the composer's lush melodies and virtuoso display pieces. Then, we will examine how the librettist-composer collaboration creates the stage magic that happens in performance. The result is a "great opera" – namely, one that resonates over generations with the opera-going public.

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 arts. 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, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Congo, Poland, Belgium, France, Austria, and – of course – in Washington, DC. I retired in 1998 as a

member of the Senior Foreign Service. From 2000 until 2019, I taught world languages (French, Latin, Spanish, 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, but, alas, leaving our son Eric behind in Maryland.

SEPTEMBER 1. Today, the class will focus on the contributions that the librettists - the “wordsmiths,” the dramatists – make to the creation of memorable operas. Clearly, since operas are a musical art-form, the composers’ inputs remain ever-present, yet, 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, enlightens us. Relevant selections come from those available on YouTube.

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, Janowitz, Bacquier – 1:04:00-1:22:48)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e3xxNY6KXA>

(22) Puccini’s TOSCA (librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa), end of act 2 (taken from a 2000 LaScala production conducted by Riccardo Muti with Guleghina, Licitra, Nucci – 1:06:00-1:28:00)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnrpDRrHkrQ&t=5300s>

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, and Schaechter – 1:11:29-1:22:11)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFbbc8itl98>

PROTAGONIST

(20) Verdi's LA TRAVIATA (librettist Francesco Maria Piave), selection from act 2, scene 1 (taken from a 2005 Salzburg Festival production conducted by Carlo Rizzi with Netrebko and Hampson – 39:13-59:13)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYGiRbDhr7k>

SEPTEMBER 8. After last week's look at what a librettist can contribute to the making of a "great" opera, we turn our attention now to the particular domain of the composer – providing the occasion for singers to "strut their stuff" and make time seem to stop. After all, the opera-going public wants to luxuriate in glorious sound; so composers comply by offering gorgeous melodies that ring in the listeners' ears and remain in their heads long after the performance has ended. But there are also occasions when composers satisfy audiences' desire almost to hold their collective breath as they witness singers' dancing on a tight-rope, accomplishing virtuoso feats of daring-do. Once each selection is introduced, we will enjoy it on YouTube.

MELODIES

(3) "Soave sia il vento," trio from act 1, scene 2 of Mozart's COSI FAN TUTTE; Majewski, Malfi, and Maltman; the Metropolitan Opera

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2ESkanjf5s>

(4) "Chi me frena in tal momento," sextet with chorus from the act 2 finale of Donizetti's LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR; Sutherland, Kraus, Elvira, Stamm, Plishka, Bybee; the Metropolitan Opera

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXiUB7zgiqw>

(3.5) "Oh du mein holder Abendstern," Wolfram's aria from act 3 of Wagner's TANNHAUSER; Mattei; the Staatsoper Berlin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8yYSMOt-0Y>

(3.5) “La Vergine degli angeli,” soprano with chorus from the act 2 finale of Verdi’s LA FORZA DEL DESTINO; Tebaldi (no other performers identified)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqT3ptcY8eI>

(5) The Ride of the Valkyries, female soloists with orchestra from the beginning of act 3 of Wagner’s DIE WALKURE; the Metropolitan Opera

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSuRJueqsOg>

(3.5) The Barcarolle, duet for soprano and mezzo-soprano, the opening of the Venice act of Offenbach’s LES CONTES D’HOFFMANN; Netrebko and Garanca; Deutsche Grammophon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0u0M4CMq7uI>

(9.5) “Che gelida manina” and “Mi chiamano Mimi,” Rodolfo’s aria followed my Mimi’s aria from act 1 of Puccini’s LA BOHEME; Raimondi and Freni; La Scala (00:20:10 – 00:29:28)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U2N2c96Kuk>

(5) “Hab’s mir gelobt ihn lieb zo haben,” trio from the end of Richard Strauss’s DER ROSENKAVALIER; Fleming, Garanca, and Morley; the Metropolitan Opera

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0ATZ0hLaQ0>

A VIRTUOSO FEAT

(20) Lucia’s Mad Scene, scene and aria for soprano with chorus from act 3, scene 2, of Donizetti’s LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR; Sutherland; the Australian Opera (01:39:05 – 01:59:05)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9Y1ME4DPZQ>

SEPTEMBER 15. It bears repeating that opera is theater, and, thus far, we have seen that words and music each have their own roles in the composition of an opera. Yet it is together that they make their greatest

impact. And it is this togetherness that we will be considering in this second half of the course. An opera is, par excellence, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – an all-embracing art form – a term made popular by the greatest of German opera composers, Richard Wagner. This all-embracing quality reveals itself regularly throughout the greatest of operas in scenes of remarkable spectacle and/or special effects: here is the culminating collaboration of composers, librettists, and the theater professionals who choose to present their work. Today, the class will consider such scenes, using (as is our custom) performances available on YouTube.

(10) A ball at Don Giovanni's, scene for soloists and chorus, act 1, scene 5, of Mozart's (and da Ponte's) DON GIOVANNI; Gilfrey, Polgar, Rey, Sacca, Bartoli, Nikiteanu, and Widmer plus chorus and orchestra of the Zurich Opera (1:24:22 – 1:33:38)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL2VdxseTvE>

(10) Siegfried meets and kills Fafner, the giant turned dragon, scene for tenor and bass from act 2, scene 2, of Wagner's SIEGFRIED; Ryan and Milling; Valencia Opera (2:09:00 – 2:18:40)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaF8zdfS0q8&t=13813s>

(7) The Spanish people honor their king, Philip II, and his Inquisition, scene for chorus and orchestra from act 2, scene 2, of Verdi's DON CARLO (based on Schiller's DON CARLOS); chorus and orchestra of the Théâtre antique d'Orange (1:23:00 -1:29:40)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXa45Xx_H9Q

(5) Escamillo, the famous toreador, makes his grand entrance, scene for baritone and chorus from act 2, scene 1, of Bizet's (and Meilhac's and Halévy's) CARMEN; Smorigina and chorus; the Royal Opera at Covent Garden

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vr8sc4EjsTQ&list=PLFXm33g1Zx9yrnKlsMncMBoA5X8leD75w&index=26>

(4) The merry wives have Falstaff thrown into the Thames, scene for soloists and chorus, the finale of act 2 of FALSTAFF by Verdi (and Boito – with a little help from Shakespeare); Bacquier, Stillwell, Armstrong et al.; Vienna State Opera (1:14:00 – 1:19:34)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=We0heyFkqXU>

(8) The presentation of the silver rose, scene for soprano and mezzo-soprano and chorus, from the beginning of Richard Strauss's and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's DER ROSENKAVALIER; Howell and Bonney; Covent Garden (01:20:40 – 01:28:48)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3D7abQTy71I>

(4) The entire Chinese court gathers at the command of the Emperor, scene for chorus and orchestra from act 2, scene 2 of Puccini's (and Adami's and Simoni's) TURANDOT; chorus and orchestra of the Barcelona Opera (00:56:35 – 01:00:47)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVjsQBdqps0>

SEPTEMBER 22. As we saw in last week's meeting, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* like an opera brings together a lot of different creative elements and, as in all theatrical endeavors, the climax – in opera, the “finale” – is key: a great opera has a great finale that brings the work to a moving close. Six such finales will be featured in this our last class: some will be subtle; some, spectacular; all are meant to have a long-term impact on the audience. It is important to note that great finales – to a greater or lesser extent - characterize almost all operas in the international repertory today, so that the six selected here exemplify a common feature and were chosen, in large measure, because of both personal preference and availability on YouTube.

(12) The entry of the gods into Valhalla, finale of Wagner's DAS RHEINGOLD; Morris, Jerusalem, Held, Baker et al.; the Metropolitan Opera

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_rzjp6sBr8

(7.5) Final trio (Margu rite, Faust, M phistoph l s) and [Margu rite's] apotheosis, finale of Gounod's FAUST (adapted from Goethe's work of the same name); Poplavskaya, Kaufmann, Pape; the Metropolitan Opera

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24bSzxuchM>

(20:00-32:00 – 12) Final trio (Aida, Radames, Amneris), finale of Verdi's (and Ghislanzoni's) AIDA; Sumegi, Andreev, Helfricht; Opernfestspiele Sankt Margarethen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69MJC2El724>

(02:15:09 – 02:28:40 – 14) Final duet (Tatyana, Onegin), finale of Tchaikovsky's EUGENE ONEGIN (based on Pushkin's novel-in-verse of the same name); Prokina, Drabowicz; Glyndebourne Festival Opera

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50ZQ6brrYng>

(02:19:04 – 02:30:50 - 12) Final duet (Arabella, Mandryka), finale of Richard Strauss's (and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's) ARABELLA; Putnam, Br cheler; Glyndebourne Festival Opera

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBBrpfef1Y0>

(01:07:35 – 01:16:35 - 9) Place de la R volution (act 3, scene 4), finale of Poulenc's (and Bernanos's) DIALOGUES DES CARMELITES; soloists, orchestra, and chorus; Angers Nantes Op ra

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7Kng4-Gq1E>