OPERA 101 – AN INTRODUCTION TO OPERA

A Syllabus for February 2020

Loving Opera
ART1223-RR
Thursdays, February 6, 13, 20, and 27; 1:00pm - 2:30pm

Opera has always been intended as a glorious entertainment - one that beguiles all the senses. If you've ever been tempted to find out what opera’s attractions are, but have been put off by seemingly incomprehensible conventions, then this is the course for you. Focusing on the operas of the late 18th, the 19th, and the early 20th centuries, members will discover together those elements that continue to attract opera audiences who love a great tale well told, thrilling sound, the dance, passions on display, and the arts working together to move the heart and lift the spirit.

Steve Dubrow has been a devotee of opera since his 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 that celebrates the classical vocal arts. He graduated summa cum laude from Columbia; did his graduate work in Romance Languages and Literatures at Princeton; and taught French at Brown University. He 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; specializing in press and cultural affairs; and retiring in 1998 as a member of the Senior Foreign Service). For the last 19 years, he taught world languages (French, Latin, Spanish, Italian) in high school in Montgomery County, MD, where he become a National Board Certified Teacher. He and his wife retired and moved to Denton in June of 2019.

FEBRUARY 6. The class will focus on the components of an opera, in order to assure that we have a commonly understood vocabulary for further discussion; to create an appreciation of the wealth of performance resources composers of opera have at their disposal; and to prepare us to anticipate the variety of performance pleasures opera
presents to its audiences. Once each component is introduced, it will be exemplified by opera selections available on YouTube.

(2) Overture – the finale from the overture, GUILLAUME TELL by Rossini (in a performance by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Edo de Waart)


(1) Aria – “Quand’ero paggio...,” Falstaff’s aria from FALSTAFF (act 2, scene 2) by Giuseppe Verdi (taken from the Metropolitan Opera production with Ambrogio Maestri as Falstaff)

(8.5) Duet – second half of the love duet from TRISTAN UND ISOLDE (act 2) by Richard Wagner (taken from the Bayreuth Festival production with René Kollo and Johanna Meier; Daniel Barenboim, conductor)

(5.5) Ensembles (trios, quartets, etc.) – Quintet (“Nous avons en tête une affaire...”) from CARMEN (act 2) by Georges Bizet (taken from the Metropolitan Opera production)

(4) Choral scene – “Gloria all’Egitto...” (act 2) from AIDA by Verdi (taken from the Metropolitan Opera production)

(9) Ballet – “The Dance of the Hours (act 3) from LA GIOCONDA by Ponchielli (taken from the production at La Monnaie, Brussels)

(5) Orchestral interlude – “Meditation” (act 2, between scenes 1 and 2) from THAÏS by Massenet (Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, David Chan, concertmaster)

(19) Our first meeting will close by our viewing Act 2 of Puccini’s LA BOHÈME, which will, in some 20 minutes, feature many of the components we will have examined. (2012 Salzburg Festival 2008 with Netrebko, Beczala, Machaidze and Gatti conducting the Vienna Philharmonic – 37:15-56:15)
**FEBRUARY 13.** Candidate Bill Clinton, in 1992, famously focused the voting public’s attention on the key issue to consider that election year with the catch phrase “It’s the economy, stupid.” Well, in opera, any year, “it’s the voice!” The kind of voice singers have is often referred to as their **Fach** - a German word that, as used in opera, has come to mean the singer’s vocal specialization, according to the range, weight, and color of singers’ voices. Although there is no strict agreement on all the names of the categories (or even on which singer fits into what category), we will consider the 16 “Fächer” (the German plural of “Fach”) below. At the same time, we will consider some of the famous singers of modern times who incarnated these Fächer and try to put into words why they have had such success. Once each Fach and its representative singer are introduced, we will listen to an appropriate selection available on YouTube.

**Soprano**

(3) **Coloratura** – Diana Damrau (the Queen of the Night’s act 1 aria from Mozart’s THE MAGIC FLUTE – “Die Hölle Rache...”; the Royal Opera, Covent Garden)

(2) **Lyric** - Kristina Mkhitaryan (Lauretta’s aria from Puccini’s GIANNI SCHICCHI – “O, mio babbino caro...”; the Metropolitan Opera)

(6.5) **Spinto** – Leontyne Price (Aida’s act 1 aria from Verdi’s AIDA – “Ritorna vincitor”)

(3.5) **Dramatic** - Birgit Nilsson (Elisabeth’s act 2 aria from Wagner’s TANNHAUSER - "Dich, Teure Halle...”)

**Mezzo-soprano**

(6) **Coloratura** – Joyce DiDonato (Rosina’s act 2 aria from Rossini’s BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA – “Una voce poco fa...”)

(4.5) **Lyric/Dramatic** – Elina Garanca (Carmen’s act 1 aria from Bizet’s CARMEN – “L’Amour est un oiseau rebelle...”; the Metropolitan Opera)

(3) **Contralto** – Ewa Podles (the Marquise de Birkenfeld’s act 1 aria from Donizetti’s LA FILLE DU REGIMENT – “Pour une femme de mon nom...”)

**Tenor**

(5) **Coloratura** – Javier Camarena (Tonio’s act 1 aria from Donizetti’s LA FILLE DU REGIMENT – “Ah, mes amis...”); the Metropolitan Opera
(6) Lyric – Fritz Wunderlich (Lensky’s act 2 aria from Tchaikovsky’s EUGEN ONEGIN – “Kuda, kuda...”)
(3.5) Lyric-dramatic (spinto) – Placido Domingo (Canio’s aria from Leoncavallo’s PAGLIACCI – “Vesti la giubba...”; Franco Zeferelli’s film)
(7.5) Dramatic (Heldentenor) – Bryan Hymel (Enée’s act 5 recitative and aria from Berlioz’s LES TROYENS – “Inutiles regrets!”)

(5.5) Baritone – Dmitri Hvorostovsky (Giorgio Germont’s act 2 aria from Verdi’s LA TRAVIATA – “Di Provenza...”; the Vienna State Opera)

(4.5) Bass-baritone – George London (as Scarpia in the “Te Deum,” finale of act 1 of Puccini’s TOSCA)

(9) Bass – Kurt Moll (as the Baron von Ochs in the act 2 finale of Richard Strauss’s DER ROSENKAVALIER; the Salzburg Festival, Herbert von Karajan, conductor)

FEBRUARY 20. The class will consider – alas, all too briefly – some major composers of opera, using (as is our custom) brief scenes in performance available on YouTube. It is undeniable that the time period we have chosen – the late 18th century to the early 20th century – saw dozens upon dozens of extraordinary composers of opera at the height of their creativity. Limiting them, as we do here, to ten representatives provides just a glimpse into what opera can offer. Nevertheless, the works of just the following composers (listed in chronological order) could fill many lifetimes of opera enjoyment: Mozart, Rossini, Donizetti, Berlioz, Verdi, Wagner, Bizet, Tchaikovsky, Puccini, and (Richard) Strauss.

(7) Mozart (1756-1791) – DON GIOVANNI, first part of finale, trio (“A cenar teco...”; Opera alla Scala, Riccardo Muti, conductor)

(8.5) Rossini (1792-1868) – SEMIRAMIDE, duet (“Serbami ognor...”; the Metropolitan Opera, Marilyn Horne and June Anderson)

(4) Donizetti (1797-1848) – L’ELISIR D’AMORE, Nemorino’s act 2 aria (“Una furtiva lagrima...”; Roberto Alagna, Orchestre de l’Opera National de Lyon, Evelino Pidò, conductor)
(5.5) Berlioz (1803-1869) – LES TROYENS, Cassandra’s act 1 aria (“Malheureux roi...”; Eva-Maria Westbroek and Chorus of the Netherlands Opera)

(4.5) Wagner (1813-1883) – DIE WALKÜRE, Brünnhilde’s “Battle Cry” from the opening of act 2 (“Ho jo to ho...”; Gwyneth Jones; the Bayreuth Festival, 1978)

(4.5) Verdi (1813-1901) – OTELLO, Otello’s act 3 aria (“Dio, me potevi scagliar...”; Jonas Kaufman; the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Antonio Pappano, conductor)


(6.5) Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) – QUEEN OF SPADES, act 2, scene 2, “the death of the Countess” (Vladimir Atlantov and Elena Obratzova, Bolshoi, 1983)

(6:37-9:51 - 3.5) Puccini (1858-1924) – MADAMA BUTTERFLY, Butterfly’s (Cio-Cio-San’s) act 1 entrance (Ying Huang; Frédéric Mittérand film of 1995)


FEBRUARY 27. At this last meeting, we will reflect upon opera’s place in the national identity of those four nations the operatic output of which represents an overwhelming majority of the operas in the repertory of today’s world-class opera houses – namely, Italy, Germany, France, and Russia. It is not a coincidence that these same countries all played huge roles (alongside the United Kingdom and the United States) in the formation of the modern world. Italy will be represented by Verdi (NABUCCO); France, by Berlioz (LES TROYENS); Germany, by Wagner (DIE MEISTERSINGER); and Russia, by Mussorgsky (BORIS GODUNOV).
The time period focused on in this course – the late 18th century to the early 20th century – saw the birth of a unified Italy and Germany, the consolidation of leadership in Russia in its capital, Moscow, and the full affirmation of an ever richer, ever more centralized, and ever more influential France. This rosy picture had its opposite in the wars spawned from the Napoleonic to World War I – an unmistakable sign of an international order in search of means to settle conflict. Opera may have been peripheral to resolving such a central problem; the art form revealed, nonetheless, characteristics of some of the chief national players. Without, we hope, stooping into stereotypes, we will look at some of these characteristics through scenes selected from the above-mentioned operas.


(14) Berlioz – LES TROYENS, finale of act 3 (recitative, “Mais bannissons...”; septet and chorus, “Tout n’est que paix...”; duet, “Nuit d’ivresse...”; Westbroek and Hymel, Pappano, conductor; The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden)

(1:39 – 2:02:44 – 24) Wagner – DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG, finale of act 3 (Beckmesser’s song, Stolzing’s response, Sachs’s wisdom; Prey, Jerusalem, Weild; Bayreuthe Festspiele 1984)

(9) Mussorgsky (1839-1881) – BORIS GODUNOV, finale of act 3, scene 2 (Boris’s death – 1954 movie with Alexander Pirogov and the Choir and Orchestra of the Bolshoi, V. Nebolsin, conductor)