OPERA 101 – AN INTRODUCTION TO OPERA

A Syllabus for March 2021

Loving Opera
Thursdays, March 4, 11, 18, and 25; 10:00 - 11:30am

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.

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.

MARCH 4. 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
for the variety of performance pleasures opera presents to its audiences. Once each component is introduced, it will be exemplified by an appropriate opera selection (selected from those available on YouTube).

(2) Overture – the finale from the overture to GUILLAUME TELL by Rossini (in a performance by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Edo de Waart)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIbYCOiETxO

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPYjqz7nToY&t=805s

(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 – 0:37-1:11)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukS7qDd4pDA

(7.5) Duet – second half of the love duet from TRISTAN UND ISOLDE (act 2) by Richard Wagner (taken from the Bayreuth Festival production with Sigmund Jerusalem and Johanna Meier; Daniel Barenboim, conductor – 31:12-38:40)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQNcTYVlcEg

(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)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpWfxb3V36I

(4) Choral scene – “Gloria all’Egitto...” (act 2) from AIDA by Verdi (taken from the Metropolitan Opera production)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czEfHr8YGPA
Ballet – Finale of “The Dance of the Hours (act 3) from LA GIOCONDA by Ponchielli (taken from the production at La Monnaie, Brussels – 7:00-8:30)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb1An2BTN7M&list=PLYAQ82KFI_cTb7m54m-1tsKc26CMey3Q

Orchestral interlude – “Meditation” (act 2, between scenes 1 and 2) from THAÏS by Massenet (Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, David Chan, concertmaster)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE-vk76f5k

Our first meeting will close by our viewing Act 2 of Puccini’s LA BOHÈME, which will, in under 20 minutes, feature many of the components we have examined (1965 film by Franco Zeffirelli with Freni, Raimondi, Martino, and Panerai, La Scala orchestra and chorus conducted by Herbert von Karajan– 33:49-52:25)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U2Nc96Kuk&t=2035s

MARCH 11. 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 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)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuBeBjqKSGQ
(2) Lyric – Kristina Mkhitaryan (Lauretta’s aria from Puccini’s GIANNI SCHICCHI – “O, mio babbino caro...”; the Metropolitan Opera)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9J9XMe7zvVg

(6.5) Spinto – Leontyne Price (Aida’s act 1 aria from Verdi’s AIDA – “Ritorna vincitor”)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-W--M_VMIY

(3.5) Dramatic (often termed “Wagnerian”) - Birgit Nilsson (Elisabeth’s act 2 aria from Wagner’s TANNHÄUSER - "Dich, Teure Halle...”)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjX0yFVZ3BE

Mezzo-soprano
(6) Coloratura – Joyce DiDonato (Rosina’s act 2 aria from Rossini’s BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA – “Una voce poco fa…”)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysGFMx6NOEY

(4.5) Lyric/Dramatic – Elina Garanča (Carmen’s act 1 aria from Bizet’s CARMEN – “L’Amour est un oiseau rebelle...”; the Metropolitan Opera)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2snTkaD64U

(3) Contralto – Ewa Podleś (the Marquise de Birkenfeld’s act 1 aria from Donizetti’s LA FILLE DU REGIMENT – “Pour une femme de mon nom...”)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kGUN70CyIs

Tenor
(5) Coloratura – Javier Camarena (Tonio’s act 1 aria from Donizetti’s LA FILLE DU REGIMENT – “Ah, mes amis...”; the Metropolitan Opera)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYgRFZdinTQ

(6) Lyric – Fritz Wunderlich (Lensky’s act 2 aria from Tchaikovsky’s EUGEN ONEGIN – “Kuda, kuda...”)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbvD11_qeP0

(3.5) Lyric-dramatic (spinto) – Plácido Domingo (Canio’s aria from Leoncavallo’s PAGLIACCI – “Vesti la giubba...”; film by Franco Zeffirelli)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hxonfpuTY
(7.5) Dramatic (Heldentenor) – Bryan Hymel (Enée’s act 5 recitative and aria from Berlioz’s LES TROYENS – “Inutiles regrets!”)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ctb3TNq3M7A

Baritone/Bass
(5.5) Baritone – Dmitri Hvorostovsky (Giorgio Germont’s act 2 aria from Verdi’s LA TRAVIATA – “Di Provenza...”; the Vienna State Opera)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVXpinw-Xu4

(4.5) Bass-baritone – George London (as Scarpia in the “Te Deum,” finale of act 1 of Puccini’s TOSCA)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nBxoDGzfI8

(3) Bass – Günther Groissböck (as the Baron von Ochs in the act 2 finale of Richard Strauss’s DER ROSENKAVALIER)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49LM4opBff8

MARCH 18. 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)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzQMtnjiceY

(8.5) Rossini (1792-1868) – SEMIRAMIDE, duet (“Serbami ognor...”; Marilyn Horne and June Anderson; the Metropolitan Opera)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9ew-_dznIg
(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)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhzmoTpM64

(5.5) Berlioz (1803-1869) – LES TROYENS, Act 2 finale (Anna Caterina Antonaci [Cassandre] with the chorus and orchestra of the Théâtre du Châtelet)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yujWl4rjAE

(2.5) Wagner (1813-1883) – DIE GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG, end of Brünnhilde’s “Immolation” from the opening of act 2 (Birgit Nilsson in a TV production)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRj9f3PCe0M

(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)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njs-aQy_89c

(2) Bizet (1838-1875) – LES PÊCHEURS DE PERLES, act 1 duet (“Au fond du temple saint...”; Javier Camarena, tenor, and Mariusz Kwiecen, baritone; the Metropolitan Opera Company, Emmanuel Villaume, conductor)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHec1ymDmsE

(6.5) Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) – QUEEN OF SPADES, act 2, scene 2, “the death of the Countess” (Vladimir Popov and Régine Crespin)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxBmZvtxzWo

(15:00-18:10 - 3.5) Puccini (1858-1924) – MADAMA BUTTERFLY, Butterfly’s (Cio-Cio-San’s) act 1 entrance (Ying Huang; Frédéric Mittérand film of 1995)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3stgof-xyN0

(10.5) Richard Strauss (1864-1949) – ELEKTRA, finale (Hildegarde Behrens [Elektra] and Deborah Voigt [Chrysothemis]; the Metropolitan Opera, James Levine, conductor, 1994)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSV90-w1pz
MARCH 25. 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-mention operas.

(2:29:00-end - 11) Mussorgsky (1839-1881) – BORIS GODUNOV, finale of act 3, scene 2 (Boris’s death – 1978 Bolshoi production with Evgeny Nesterenko)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfz7JItzijs&list=PLALGnCAxu-90B0ndrr3vqiCJhEDtLnsAA

Festspiele St. Margarethen)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVdxqovl7wo&t=5757s

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAyEEL0icOo

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qiSbrDNIPgA&t=61s