Italian Opera (V71.9121.001) – Fall 2010

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Course description

The course covers the evolution of opera from Monteverdi to the early 20th century. The approach is interdisciplinary and aims at a comprehensive survey of the music theatre in Italy with special emphasis on Verdi and Puccini. Literary sources, musico-dramatic features are studied in connection with major works that can best exemplify trends and genres (favola in musica, intermezzo, opera seria, opera buffa, grand opera, dramma lirico). Operatic production styles are considered with regard to the recordings used in the course; class discussion is meant to help students develop a critical approach to opera appreciation.

No specific musical training is required. Music students are expected to make good use of their competence when planning their research papers and in contributing to class discussion.

Reading and listening assignments

Recordings are an essential feature of the course: listening to whole operas (possibly watching them on video) is essential in the students’ private work. A bibliography is provided as a follow-up to the basic information offered by the course textbook. Weekly reading assignments should be completed in time for students to acquire adequate background information on all scheduled operas.

Students will attend three performances at the Teatro Comunale in Florence: Summertime, a concert of excerpts from Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, on September 21; Strauss's Salome and Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro. Dates to be announced later.

All events are mandatory for students of the Opera Course.

Grading

Students are required to write an essay (1500 words) halfway through the course (midterm paper) and a review of each opera seen at the Comunale. A list of essay topics will be given in Week 4 for students to plan their research work. A final class test will consist in written questions covering the operas and the composers scheduled in Weeks 9 to 13. The test will be arranged in two sessions (Tuesday & Thursday, class time) in the Final Exams Week.

Students are expected to attend all classes; absences will affect their course grade. The midterm paper, the reviews and the final test will count for the course grade together with regular attendance and contribution to class discussion.

COURSE SCHEDULE - Classes on Tues. and Thurs. from 9.00 to 10.15am

WEEK 1

Tue. Sept. 7  Introduction to the Opera Course
The aesthetic of staged sung drama; the composer as dramatist; libretto and score; performance and production

Thur. Sept. 9  Reading: Osborne (L’Orfeo); Kimbell, ch. 3: 53-56; ch. 4: 63-74
Orpheus, the archetypal hero. The favola in musica
The beginnings of opera in Florence; Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo (Mantua, 1607)
WEEK 2
Reading: Gallo (Aria: pp. 20-27)

Tue. Sept. 14  **Defining genres: opera seria**
Vivaldi’s *Orlando Furioso* (1727); the *da capo aria*; mad scenes; the *lieto fine*; the case of Rossini’s *Tancredi* (Venice / Ferrara, 1813): *lieto fine* or tragic end?

Thur. Sept. 16  **Defining genres: opera buffa**
*Commedia dell’arte*; *intermezzo*; Pergolesi’s *La serva padrona* (1733); Rossini, *L’italiana in Alberi* (1813): the Act 1 finale

WEEK 3
Reading: Gallo (Bel Canto: pp. 77-8); Osborne (Il barbiere di Siviglia; Norma)

Tue. Sept. 21  **The age of bel canto (1)** – Rossini, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1816)
Beaumarchais, *Le barbier de Séville* and *Le mariage de Figaro*; Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786)

Thur. Sept. 23  **The age of bel canto (2)** – Bellini, *Norma* (1831)
The *prima donna* in the *tragedia lirica*

WEEK 4  (students receive list of essay titles for midterm paper)
Reading: Osborne (Lucia di Lammermoor, Rigoletto); Kimbell, ch. 24, 430-36; 444-47

Tue. Sept. 28  **Romantic opera (1)** – Donizetti, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835)
Walter Scott's novels as libretto sources; mad scenes; Bellini, *I puritani* (1835)

Thur. Sept. 30  **Romantic opera (2)** – Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (1851)
Victor Hugo’s *Le roi s’amuse*; musical characterization

WEEK 5
Reading: Osborne (La traviata, Don Carlo); Kimbell, ch. 29: 540-7; Anthony Arblaster, *Viva la Libertà. Politics in Opera*, 1992, pp. 133-41 (on Don Carlos)

Tue. Oct. 5  **Verdi, La traviata** (1853)
Alexandre Dumas, *La dame aux camélias* (1852); opera as a social drama

Thur. Oct. 7  **Italian grand opera (1)** – Verdi, *Don Carlo* (1867/1884)
Verdi’s ‘operas of ideas’; French influence; Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* (1836)

WEEK 6
Reading: Osborne (Aida, Otello); Arblaster (see above), pp. 141-45 (on Aida)
Kimbell, ch. 31: 607-11 (on Otello)

Tue. Oct. 12  **Italian grand opera (2)** – Verdi, *Aida* (1871)
Orientalism and imperialism

Arrigo Boito: poet, composer and librettist; the *dramma lirico*

WEEK 7  **Deadline for midterm paper: Thur. March 11**

Tue. Oct. 19  **Verdi, Otello, Acts 3-4**
The *commedia lirica*

**WEEK 8**
**Fall Break (Oct. 25 – Nov. 1)**

**WEEK 9**
Reading: *The New Grove* (on Verismo); *International Dictionary of Opera*, I, 228-9 (on *Cavalleria rusticana*); II, 977-79 (on *Pagliacci*)

Tue. Nov. 2  **Verismo opera (1) – Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890)**
Giovanni Verga’s Sicily in his novels and plays

Thur. Nov. 4  **Verismo opera (2) – Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* (1892)**
*Commedia dell’arte*; Pierrot pantomimes; the play-within-the-play

**WEEK 10**
Reading: Osborne (*La Bohème*); Budden, *Puccini*, Ch. 6: 157-180 (on *Bohème*)

Tue. Nov. 9  **(1) Puccini, *La Bohème* (1896); L. Illica & G. Giacosa, librettists**
Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851); Leoncavallo’s *La Bohème* (1897)

Thur. Nov. 11  **(2) Puccini, *La Bohème*: staging a masterpiece**
Pathos and humour in Puccini’s dramaturgy; Mimi’s death

**WEEK 11**
Reading: Osborne (*Tosca*)

Tue. Nov. 16  **The prima donna as an actress: Puccini, *Tosca* (1900)**
Sarah Bernhardt; Maria Callas

Thur. Nov. 18  **Puccini’s contemporaries: Debussy and Strauss**
*Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902); *Salome* (1905); the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio

**WEEK 12**
Reading: Osborne (*Madama Butterfly, La fanciulla del West*)

Tue. Nov. 23  **Orientalism and Puccini: *Madama Butterfly* (1904)**
Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*; J. L. Long; David Belasco


**WEEK 13**
Reading: Osborne (*Turandot*); Budden, *Puccini*, ch. 12: 446-473 (on *Turandot*)

Tue. Nov. 30  **Puccini and 20th-century music (2): *Il Trittico* (1918)**

The *femme fatale* and the Unknown Prince; “great sorrow in little souls”; Liú

**WEEK 14**

Tue. Dec. 6  **Unfinished *Turandot* as the end of the “Great Tradition” of Italian opera**

Thur. Dec. 9  **Review of Verismo and Puccini's operas**

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Course textbook: Charles Osborne, *The Opera Lover’s Companion*, Yale University Press, 2004
Bookshop: Feltrinelli International, Via Cavour, 12r

Photocopied librettos with English translation and recordings of most scheduled operas are available in Villa Ulivi Library.
See also “Opera in Video” and “Classical Scores Library” in: [http://nyu.libguides.com/music](http://nyu.libguides.com/music)

Bibliography  (all listed books available in Villa Ulivi Library)

General reference: Denise Gallo, *Opera. The Basics* (for musical terminology)
David Kimbell, *Italian Opera*
*Oxford Who’s Who in Opera*, ed. Joyce Bourne
*Opera. A History in Documents*, ed. Piero Weiss

Studies on composers:
R. Osborne, *Rossini*
J. Budden, *The Operas of Verdi. 3 vols.*
W. Weaver (trans.), *Seven Verdi Librettos*
M.J. Phillips-Matz, *Verdi. A Biography*
M. Girardi, *Giacomo Puccini: His International Art*
J. Budden, *Puccini. His Life and Works*
J. Keolker, *Last Acts. The Operas of Puccini and His Italian Contemporaries from Alfano to Zandonai*

General studies on opera:
R. Donington, *Opera and its Symbols: the Unity of Words, Music and Myth*
J. Kerman *Opera as Drama*
P. Robinson, *Opera, Sex and Other Vital Matters*
D. Charlton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*