



School of Humanities and Social Sciences

SOC 307-AIX 1

**Opera, Women and Politics: How Music and Theatre
Portray Femininity and Class
202425 Fall**

Course Details

Credit Hours: 3

Days: Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays

Time: 09:00-10:25

Prerequisites: This course is suitable for an undergraduate student who has successfully completed at least 3 semesters of college-level course work. Successful completion of ENG 101 or equivalent, and 6 credit hours above the 100-level (introductory) in art, art history, literature, music, or the humanities are strongly recommended; or instructor permission.

Instructor Information

Jonathan Bell

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Course Description

This course will provide an overview of the history of opera, examined from both artistic and sociological perspectives. By examining the different disciplines involved in the marriage of music and drama (singing, orchestral playing/conducting, staging, dance/choreography, costumes, lighting...), we will investigate how what Wagner calls the total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk) has often reinforced gender norms, portraying women as mere love interests or eternal victims. The focus on female characters will also lead us to consider examples that have helped shake those stereotypes (Poppea, Carmen, Turandot).

Observing how the genre has historically emerged in aristocratic circles and how it is still today typically associated with class, we will critically discuss why and how opera is considered good taste by some, or, on the contrary, mocked by others.

Course Objectives

- Develop an appreciation for opera, incorporating elements of aesthetic and historical contextualization.
- Identify the historical period of opera compositions (e.g., Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Post-Romantic) by analyzing their musical characteristics.
- Recognize and describe stylistic cues that are characteristic of Italian, German, French, American or Chinese opera.

Learning Outcomes

- Students will be able to analyze and interpret the representation of women and femininity in operatic works from various historical periods and cultures.
- Students will attend two operas and watch recordings of iconic operatic scenes that they will review and discuss through both written and oral assignments.

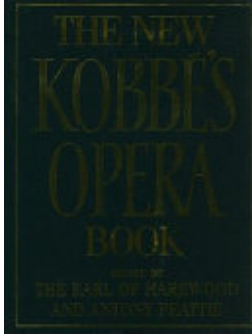
Instructional Methods and Activities

Whilst no musical training will be required to follow this course, some knowledge about the main characteristics of musical styles will be provided in class, along with the historical context of the source material and libretto. The course is therefore suitable for students from varied academic backgrounds. Emphasis will be placed on the student's personal interpretation of the works, supported by their knowledge of the content and context.

Recommended/Optional Materials

The New Kobbé's Opera Book

Authors: Antony Peattie, George Henry Hubert Lascelles Earl of Harewood



Publisher: Random House
Publication Date: 1997-01-01



Feminine Endings
ISBN: 9781452906362
Authors: Susan McClary
Publisher: U of Minnesota Press
Publication Date: 2002-01-01



Distinction
ISBN: 9781135873233
Authors: Pierre Bourdieu
Publisher: Routledge
Publication Date: 2013-04-15

Assessment, Evaluation, and Grading

- Students will be required to attend all classes and take part in listening and observation exercises. Their participation to debates, discussions and analysis will be evaluated (20%).
- Each student will also deliver an oral 20 minutes presentation about an opera of their choice. They will choose to give either a general-purpose overview of the opera, or to examine the work under a particular angle, e.g. political such as Pagliacci's or Wozzeck's depiction of marital violence (20%).

- An essay of 3 pages will also be submitted during the session: like in the oral presentation, the student is free to an overview of the piece, or to examine it through a specific angle (political, sociological, theatrical, musical... 20 %) You will consult with the instructor on your choice of opera and first draft. This essay may discuss how the opera follows the moral and political standards of its time. The essay may for instance depict female tragic representations from pieces such as Pelléas and Mélisande or Dido and Aeneas, reflecting on society's attitudes towards women. This essay will require a comparative and cross-disciplinary approach.
- The students will attend a performance of one or two operas. The performance will be assessed by the students in the form of a critical journalistic review (20%). Examples of critical reviews will be examined in class to help you.
- A final written examination will also determine the student's capacity to situate in time and space the composition of a given opera (20%).

Grading System/Grade Distribution

Grading System/Grade
Distribution

U.S	ACM	French Equivalent
95-100%	A	17-20
90-94%	A -	16
88-89%	B+	15
84-87%	B	14
80-83%	B-	13
78-79%	C+	12
74-77%	C	11
70-73%	C-	10
68-69%	D+	9
64-67%	D	8
60-63%	D-	7
0-59%	F	0-6

Attendance

One of the primary requirements this semester is that you attend class. This is not a lecture class; it's essential that you come to class on time, be prepared for the lesson, and be ready to participate in discussions and activities. Attendance will be part of your final grade. Any absences can harm your final grade. It will be up to the student to manage and communicate with professors about their absences. For every absence, your final grade may be lowered by one half-letter grade (B+ to become a B, B to become B-, and so on). ACM-IAU professors are empowered to impose academic sanctions (including a lowered grade or even failure) upon students for unexcused absences, frequent tardiness, work submitted late, or any other actions or behaviors that violate ACM's academic standards and policies.

Academic Policies

All students are responsible for reading, knowing, and understanding the information pertinent to their areas of study available in the ACM Catalog. The catalog contains requirements for all degree programs, course descriptions, academic policies, and regulations that govern ACM. All parts of the catalog are subject to annual changes as university rules, policies, and curricula change. It is your responsibility to keep informed of such changes; failure to do so will not exempt you from whatever penalties you may incur. Catalogs are published from August through July.

Review the latest catalog at: <https://www.acmfrance.org/academics/catalog>

Schedule of Classes and Assignments

This calendar is subject to slight changes in relation to the presentations scheduled throughout the course.

Week 1: Introductory Class.

Week 2: Before Orfeo: Why was there no opera in the Middle Ages and Renaissance?

Week 3: Monteverdi's Orfeo and Poppea: Monteverdi's depiction of monarchy and female sovereigns.

Week 4: French and British Baroque opera.

Week 5: Mozart's Don Giovanni: A pursuer and abuser of women. The Magic Flute and the French Revolution.

Week 6: Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini: Italian bel canto.

Week 7: Verdi's La Traviata: A musical ode to fallen women.

Week 8: Bizet's Carmen: Female seducers and their tragic demise.

Week 9: Puccini's Tosca and Madame Butterfly: Heroism and vulnerability in Italian verismo.

Week 10: Strauss's Salomé & Elektra, Schoenberg's Erwartung: German Expressionism.

Week 11: Gershwin's Porgy and Bess: An American opera blending jazz and musical theatre.

Week 12: Musical Theatre: From West Side Story to Hamilton.

Week 13: China in Opera: Orientalism in Puccini's Turandot, traditional Chinese opera, Nixon in China (P. Glass, P. Sellars).

Week 14: 21st Century opera: Sivan Eldar and Peter Sellars' 2025 Aix production