

Class 12 : Outside the Box

A. The Stage is Yours

1. Class title 1 (Ekman: *Play*)
2. Section title 1 (Kirsten, Walshe, Horáková, Ekman)

The first hour of this class will contain clips of four pieces, three of which are the work of women. Women feature large in the second hour, too, possibly because the theme of the day, Thinking Outside the Box, is something women are particularly good at. Take the composer at the top, for example, **Amy Beth Kirsten** (1972–). I had the honor of being midwife to her first opera, *Ophelia Forever*, in which she split Shakespeare's character between three different singers, each showing some different personality that she claims can be found in all women, not just Shakespeare's tragic heroine. Her entire career has been a series of collaborations that invariably step outside the boundaries of what is expected.

3. Emma Resmini performing *Pirouette on a Moon Sliver*

Here is one of the simplest of them, *Pirouette on a Moon Sliver*, one of two pieces for solo flute that she wrote in 2011. As you may guess from the title, it is a homage to Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* from a century earlier. But whereas in the Schoenberg it was only the singer being asked to use what are now called **extended techniques**, here it is the instrument. The player here is **Emma Resmini**, who I think was a student at Curtis at the time. [Listen, and tell me how many ways it goes outside the box.](#)

4. Amy Beth Kirsten: *Pirouette on a Moon Sliver*, opening
5. Emma Resmini performing *Pirouette on a Moon Sliver* (repeat)

So, outside the box? An instrumentalist appearing in theatrical make-up, for one, not the usual concert neutral, but evoking a character. Her use of breath, voice, inarticulate sounds, and eventually text. The length of time the flute it used in other ways before notes are played on it. And the nature of those notes: theatrical gestures, rather than developed musical ideas.

6. Marion Barbeau and Stephane Bullion in Alexander Ekman's *Play*

I will be ending the hour with two later clips from *Play*, the evening-long work created in 2017 for the Paris Opera Ballet by Swedish choreographer **Alexander Ekman** (1984–). It is sheer fun from beginning to end, as you will see, but in some ways it is also as *avant garde* as the Kirsten. For example, in replacing conventionally notated music with sound created by other means—here a microphone dragged over a hollow wooden box by one of the dancers. Or by taking an established performing tradition—in this case, a ballerina floating on point—and emphasizing things that the tradition normally works hard to hide, in this case, the sound of the wood-blocked shoes hitting the floor. Here is the entire

episode; the dancer is **Marion Barbeau**, with **Simon Le Borgne** as her foil. It is way outside the box, as I have described, but are there any qualities that make it seem, nonetheless, completely normal?

7. Ekman: *Play, Woman on a Box*

8. — still from the above

I hope you liked it. It is a one-off, of course; you couldn't imagine an entire ballet created in this way. But why I loved it, and why despite its radical reinvention it seems so normal, is that so much humanity comes through. It is not a performance so much as a dialogue between the girl and the boy; she is performing for him, teasing him, flirting with him. I fell in love with her the first time I saw it, and I still feel the same as that first time.

9. Laura Bowler

I said I would only have four works in the first half, and three women. Too bad. I find I need to sneak in a minute of another work, *FFF*, by another woman, **Laura Bowler** (1986—). Here it is, with her performing it, as it reaches the first of its searing climaxes.

10. Bowler: *FFF*, brief clip

11. Laura Bowler and Jennifer Walshe

Unfortunately, I have no idea what she is shouting, which is the main reason I am not showing a longer clip; the piece is more nuanced than might appear. Laura Bowler is certainly not always the screaming termagant you saw just there, and the Irish composer **Jennifer Walshe** (1974—) appears comfortably bourgeois; the photo was probably taken when she was elected Professor of Composition at Oxford University in 2021. Yet both belong to a generation of composer-performers who use the music-theatre medium as a form of social protest, and whose careers have been devoted to skewering the *status quo*. Bowler has recently completed an opera for the Royal Opera House about rape survivors, and Walshe's best-known work is probably *XXX_LIVE_NUDE_GIRLS!!!*, which also ends in a rape. Though she calls it an opera, it is really a multi-media piece using two singers (one of them herself), an instrumental ensemble who also serve as actors, and a host of Barbie and Ken dolls used as puppets. I don't have any footage of a performance, but I do have this very interesting video from Vienna which explains the whole thing.

WARNING: the actual rape comes about 4 minutes in; it is acted by Barbies, but the implications are still disturbing; but of course it is the point of the whole work.

12. Walshe: *XXX_LIVE_NUDE_GIRLS!!!*, documentary

13. Jennifer Walshe and Barbara Horáková

Did anyone count any outside-the-box elements I omitted to mention? There could hardly be a greater contrast between Walshe in her social protest mode and this lovely picture of director **Barbora Horáková** (*bdnk*) who is responsible for our next piece. But I am showing it to effect a complete change of pace from protest to contemplation. One of the consequences of the blurring of genres as the 20th century slid into the 21st was that stage directors started paying attention to works that were not originally conceived for the theater. In my collection alone, I have stagings of both **Bach Passions**, **Handel's Messiah**, and Horáková's production for the Dutch National Opera of the *Missa in Tempore*

Belli (1796) by **Franz Joseph Haydn** (1732–1809). It begins with a boy with a toy drum going up and down the aisles of the theater. There is music in the background which sounds vaguely like an orchestra tuning up, but is in fact electronically produced. I'll pick it up where the conductor, **Lorenzo Viotti**, begins Haydn's score. The text of this movement is "Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy," but the production plays down the specifically Christian elements. Instead it tells a story, or the beginning of several stories: what do you think they are?

14. Haydn: *Missa in Tempore Belli*, Kyrie

15. — still from the above

Was there anything there that especially caught your interest? I found myself being quite drawn to the young mother, and curious about the man in the cycling helmet who did not seem to share the joy of the others. These threads and many others will be explored in the subsequent movements, which become increasingly darker and more fraught, though with the possibility of redemption at the end. This arc is previewed, as it were, in the first of the solo movements, a beautiful melody for the baritone, accompanied by a solo cello, whom you will see onstage. The words are "You who lift the sins from off the world, have mercy on us," but that is only a guide. I have watched it many times, and find myself drawn in to the character of the old janitor, and think I know where Horáková is headed with this. But then she proves me wrong, and I find myself admiring her *lack* of clear meaning even more than I do the parts where the symbolism is obvious. The singer is **Johannes Kammler**.

16. Haydn: *Missa in Tempore Belli*, Qui tollis

17. — still from the above

Does anyone have any theories about that? I can't even begin to explain the clumps of hair, but I find the image on screen now extraordinarily evocative, given the background ideas of Jesus carrying His cross to the crucifixion. The male dancer is certainly carrying a weight, but there is nothing tragic about the woman with outstretched arms; I would call it redemptive, rather.

18. Alexander Ekman: *Play*, shower of green balls (repeat of title slide)

19. — the same, with Karlsson text

So we're back to **Ekman's Play**. And play is exactly what it is: an evening of sheer fun, without deeper moral meanings, social protest, or anything like that. I'll play two clips, back to back. The first comes from near the end of Act I; it shows the moment when those iconic green balls appear. And the second is not even part of the show proper. It comes after the curtain has fallen. It opens again on a singer (yes, in a ballet!), **Callie Day**, singing a song with text and music by the composer **Mikael Karlsson** (1975–), which I must say is better than his music elsewhere in the ballet. The words might stand for the anarchic spirit of the entire work.

20. Ekman: *Play*, green balls

21. Ekman: *Play*, curtain call

22. Class title 2 (still from the above)

B. Lockdown

23. Section title B (theater going dark)

So far in this course, I have concentrated on music being performed live on stage, mostly with some theatrical component such as opera or ballet, but recently including a certain amount of live concert music. Now I want to do the opposite: to consider music that is either intended not to be watched live at all, or that is designed to be heard under strictly controlled conditions. The COVID pandemic of 2021/22 had the interesting effect of forcing musicians to think outside the box, to come up with ways to keep performing and maintain the loyalty of their audiences.

24. Collage of music videos

There is one performance medium that predates COVID by almost half a century, but was very influential once the pandemic broke out, and that is the **music video**. It started around the 1960s as a way to promote pop music acts. Videos began to attract name directors, and the form was given a tremendous boost by the founding of MTV in 1987 and YouTube in 2005. Now it was the video, not the disc, that would go viral. Classical music was slower to catch up, but all the same the medium has produced some extraordinary examples. Here is one of them, “I want to live where you live,” by **David Lang** (1957–) for the Norwegian group, **Trio Mediaeval**, who perform it here. It dates from 2005, but the video by **Evan Chapman** and **Kevin Eikenberg** is actually quite recent. How much do you think that the setting (a barn in rural Pennsylvania) and filming add to the total experience?

25. Lang: “I want to live where you live”

26. — still from the above

In some ways, it was a pointless question, since clearly the piece had an independent existence for many years. But seeing it now, how essential do you find the visual element to your appreciation of the work?

27. Caroline Shaw

28. — the same, with words of “Sing On”

Caroline Shaw (1982–) was the youngest-ever recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, which she got in 2013, while still a student at Princeton for a piece called *Partita* written for a group in which she herself sings, *Roomful of Teeth*, calling for extended vocal techniques. A triple-threat, with degrees in voice and violin as well as composition, she also has a more popular side—a one point, for example, making a video with **Kanye West**. *Sing On*, the video I am going to play, also by **Evan Chapman** and **Kevin Eikenberg**, is somewhat in this vein; she wrote and performs it in collaboration with the **Sō Percussion** group (based in New York, but the name is Japanese), that specializes in unfamiliar instruments (including, though not in this piece, an **amplified cactus**). The words are her own adaptation of a poem by **Christina Rossetti**.

29. Caroline Shaw: “Sing On”

30. — words of the above (repeat)

Although that was released only a few months ago, it has all the hallmarks of a COVID video, in which a number of musicians collaborate on Zoom, each from their own homes. I have watched a lot of these, but I know none as impressive as this. The piece is *La ritirata notturna di Madrid*, or The Night Watch of Madrid, coming originally from a chamber quintet by **Luigi Boccherini** (1743–1805), but arranged for full orchestra by **Luciano Berio** (1925–2003). This performance is by the Basel Symphony Orchestra, led by their Madrid-based British conductor **Ivor Bolton** from his home. What I love about it is not merely the catchy tune, but the degree to which it manages to show the players as real people with their own lives and families. And to think that, without COVID, we would never have had anything so splendid!

31. Boccherini/Berio: *La ritirata notturna di Madrid*

32. 20 Shots of Opera

When COVID hit, the **Irish National Opera** was not content with people merely singing together on Zoom. They embarked on an adventurous project of commissioning 20 Irish composers (Jennifer Walshe was one of them) to write 5-to-7-minute pieces specifically for streaming. I have sampled them all; some are terrific, some less so, but the project as a whole is mighty impressive. It was hard to choose just one, but in the end I went with *Dichotomies of Lockdown* by **Jenn Kirby** (*bdnk*) because it takes the lockdown as its specific subject, and goes through a whole variety of operatic tropes in doing so. It consists of 7 short vignettes, each in a different style; I'll play the first four. The singers are **Aebh Kelly** and **Andrew Gavin**. My question is whether this is merely a makeshift solution to a temporary problem, or whether it has anything lasting to say about opera on the one hand or human relationships on the other?

33. Jenn Kirby: *Dichotomies of Lockdown*

34. Lisenka Heijboer Castañon and Manoj Kamps

So what? Is that just an exercise, or something more? My other example of reaction to COVID by an opera company is rather more complex. The Dutch National Opera (the same company as did the Haydn Mass staging) was scheduled to open their 2020–21 season with a production of Boito's *Mefistofele*, one of the many operas on the Faust legend. But COVID put an end to that. So they scrambled and got one of their resident directors, **Lisenka Heijboer Castañon** (*bdnk*) and a conductor-composer, **Manoj Kamps** (1988–), to put together a substitute program that might be performed once in a empty theatre and streamed. It was to have at least some connection to the original Faust idea, yet be flexible enough to accommodate day-to-day changes. Knowing that most of the pieces would have to be recomposed to work within pandemic restrictions, they got composers from all over the world to work on the chosen numbers, which also included some things from non-classical and even non-western music. The staging is all simple, but amazingly poetic and inventive, as I hope the section I am going to play will show; I have added labels saying where each comes from.

35. Scene from *FAUST* [*working title*], Dutch National Opera, 2020

Frankly, I don't understand how they were able to put such large forces together under pandemic conditions. The adults at least seem to keep a reasonable distance, but children play a large part in the production, and seem to be able to run around anywhere without precautions at all. Did people back then believe that kids couldn't catch it, or couldn't transmit it? Anyway, each of the sections begins with

a little statement by one of the children. If there is time, I'll play the one that leads into the continuous sequen I have chosento feature. It begins with an aria for Helen of Troy written by the French composer **Lili Boulanger** (1893–1918), who died tragically young; it comes from her one-act opera *Faust et Hélène* (1913) and shows Helen lamenting her fate which is to bring disaster to men. The numbers that follow—a Romanian folksong and a Spanish popular song, with a song by **Emmanuel Chabrier** (1841–94), an aria by **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759), and various bits of **Mahler** in between—seem vaguely connected by the theme of fate and misplaced love. But I really can't analyze it that much; I am just happy to go along for the ride! At the end, also if time, I'll throw in the last minute of the show.

- 36. FAUST [working title]: child's address
- 37. FAUST [working title]: Boulanger aria etc.
- 38. FAUST [working title]: ending
- 39. Class title 3 (still from the above)