

OPERA AND REAL LIFE

Featured composers/operas: John **Adams** (1947–): *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1981); Ludwig van **Beethoven** (1770–1827): *Fidelio* (1814); Georges **Bizet** (1838–75): *Carmen* (1875); Philip **Glass** (1937–): *Satyagraha* (1980); Jules **Massenet** (1842–1912): *Werther* (1892); Wolfgang Amadeus **Mozart** (1756–91): *Così fan tutte* (1790), *The Magic Flute* (1791); Giacomo **Puccini** (1858–1924): *Il tabarro* (1919); Kevin **Puts** (1972–): *Silent Night* (2012); Richard **Strauss** (1864–1949): *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919); Giuseppe **Verdi** (1813–1901): *Attila* (1846); Kurt **Weill** (1900–50): *Mahagonny* (1929), *Street Scene* (1946)

Names (and directors) of operas shown in the pictures: **Cover:** Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*, at the English National Opera (Phelim McDermott). **Inside:** John Adams's *The Death of Kinghoffer* at the Met (Tom Morris); Mozart's *Così an tutte* at the Royal Opera House, London (Jan Philipp Gloger); Janacek's *From the House of the Dead* in Berlin (Patrice Chéreau); Bizet's *Carmen* in Paris (Calixto Bieto); Kevin Puts's *Silent Night* in Saint Paul (Eric Simonson); Massenet's *Werther* in Zurich (Tatjana Gürbaca); Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*, as above; Puccini's *Il tabarro* at the Royal Opera House, London (Richard Jones)

Note: these are not necessarily the productions to be shown in class.

For more detail and different images, see the class website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/TowsonReal/>

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OSHER AT TOWSON UNIVERSITY

Thursdays at 1:00, Fall 2026

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THIS COURSE DEALS WITH TWO TOPICS UNDER THE SAME TITLE. One, as represented by the image of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King from Philip Glass's *Satyagraha* on the cover, is the way in which opera can address real-life topics such as social inequality, freedom from political oppression, anti-Semitism, and environmental destruction. True, comparatively few operas deal with such things directly, but in recent years especially, inventive directors have found ways to stage fictional operas to address factual concerns. The odd-numbered classes in this course will look at several such topics, drawing material from multiple sources.

The even-numbered classes, however, will deal with an even more basic way in which opera can be real: by being filled with people just like ourselves, whose decisions we care about, and whose feelings we recognize as our own. Not every production achieves this, admittedly; most are content to follow Dr. Johnson's definition of opera as "an exotic and irrational entertainment." But my 50-year career as a stage director and trainer of young singers has been dedicated to proving Johnson wrong. We will watch scenes from operas where the characters are emotionally exposed, and look how their interpreters bring them to life. *rb.*



1. What is Reality in Opera (September 17)

A series of in-class experiments to explore what defines reality in opera: the music, the acting, the plot, the production, or (as in this picture) the depiction of third-rail real-world events.

2. Mozart's Devious Humanity (September 24)

The farcical plot of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (roughly "women are like that") is about as artificial as you get. Yet his ability to fill it with real human beings leads to emotional insights that are painfully true.



3. Through Prison Bars (October 1)

This is the final scene in Janacek's *House of the Dead*, set in a political prison. Beethoven tackled a similar topic in *Fidelio* a century earlier. Both share the theme of freedom, and ultimately achieve it.

4. Extravagance Eschewed (October 8)

Why should a director stage *Carmen*, that most colorful of operas, on a patch of waste ground at night? To transfer the focus to where opera really belongs: the performances of the singers.

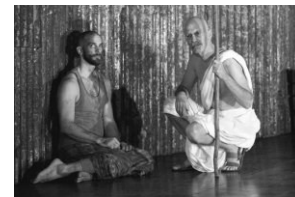


5. In Time of War (October 22)

Kevin Puts set his *Silent Night* in the trenches of WW1 at Christmas 1914. But directors can also use battlefield imagery to add a charge of reality to operas on quite different subjects.

6. In the Wrong Marriage (October 29)

Charlotte loves the poet *Werther* in Massenet's opera, but marries a more conventional husband instead. In Act III, she finally rejects Werther's entreaties, even as she fears his suicide.



7. Street Politics (November 5)

Satyagraha, the Philip Glass opera about the Ghandi's early years as a labor organizer in South Africa, is only one of a number of 20th-century protest operas that we shall sample in this class.

8. Murder Afloat (November 12)

We sum up the themes of the course with Puccini's *Il tabarro* (the cloak), an opera set on a working barge on the Seine, about a woman torn between duty to her older husband and desire for escape.

