

Opera and Real Life



Osher at JHU

Spring 2022, Tuesday Mornings on Zoom

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Opera has a reputation as an elitist, extravagant, or escapist form, with little connection to real life. But not even the most extravagantly imagined operas were created or performed in a vacuum. They were sponsored by a prince for his own glory, written for profit in a commercial market, or produced with institutional assistance. Even when representing events from mythology or the distant past, they also reflected the social and political conditions of their own time.

Audiences have changed also over the span of opera's history, four centuries and counting. Courtiers have given way to private citizens. Opera houses founded as jewels of the gilded age now struggle to attract a more diverse public. To do so, they have had to present works from earlier eras in ways that reflect the experience of our own. They have faced an even greater challenge in launching new works by contemporary composers born out of present-day conditions and concerns—but these are essential if the art form is to continue to flourish.

The twelve classes below are listed in chronological order of the earliest opera to be presented in them. But most include reference to later operas as well, including many written in our own lifetime that approach similar themes from radically different directions. There will be some familiar operas here—which I hope to show mainly in new versions—but also many wonderful works you may encounter for the first time. *rb.*



1. Extravagantly Real (February 22)

In a rapid overview of the ground, we look at Monteverdi in Mantua and Venice, Handel in London, and Verdi writing as an Italian patriot in a country under foreign political control.

2. Pleasing the Prince (March 1)

Lully's accepted that his operas should include praise for Louis XIV. Mozart was less explicit, but knew what to do. But writing for the coronation of Elizabeth II, Benjamin Britten miscalculated.





3. Fantasy Made Real (March 8)

Baroque opera composers created myths; romantic ones explored the imagination. We look at new productions of a fantasy by Rameau and a fairy tale by Dvorak, both made relevant to modern realities.

4. Twilight of an Era (March 15)

Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro*, which features the comeuppance of a lascivious aristocrat, is inevitably a political play; yet Mozart's genius was to make it equally a drama of human emotions.



5. Through Prison Bars (March 22)

Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1814) pulses with the spirit of revolution, and echoes to the cry of Liberty. We shall pair it with a more modern opera that uses the prison setting to plead a humanitarian cause.

6. The Oldest Hatred (March 29)

Two operas dealing with historical Antisemitism: Fromental Halévy's *La Juive* (1835) and *The Passenger* by Mieczysław Weinberg, a post-Holocaust opera composed in 1968 but lost until 2010.



7. History Revisited (April 5)

In his historical operas, Verdi often had to alter their settings to get them past the censors. But in adapting Schiller's *Don Carlos* in 1867, he created a drama true to both history and human feeling.

8. If the Ring Fits (April 12)

Wagner's Protean *Ring* tetralogy (1869–76) deals with many themes important to his time and to ours: toxic nationalism, political morality, the corruption of power, and evils of capitalism.



9. Russian History, Russian Myth (April 19)

Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1874) is a study both of Russia history and the Russian soul. Rimsky-Korsakov's *Invisible City of Kitezh* (1904) is a fairy tale, but it too can make trenchant political points.

10. Verismo, really? (April 26)

Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry, 1890) is hailed as the first *verismo* (realist) opera. We shall look at some productions to question just how realist *verismo* actually is.



11. Street Politics (May 3)

Three operas that deal with contemporary social conditions: *Mahagonny* (1929), *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) by Marc Blitzstein, and Philip Glass' opera about Gandhi, *Satyagraha* (1979).

12. Pop Icons (May 10)

Three real lives turned by the media into virtual operas long before any music was written: *Jackie O* (Daugherty 1997), *Anna Nicole* [Smith] (Turnage 2011), and *Jerry Springer* (Thomas 2001).



For more detail, color illustrations, composer bios, and suggestions for further reading, see the class website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/opera-life/>

Illustrations: Cover: *Nixon in China* at the Met; 1. *Orfeo* in Barcelona; 2. *Atys* in Paris; 3. *Les Indes galantes* in Paris; 4. *Le nozze di Figaro* in London; 5. *Fidelio* in Seattle; 6. *La Juive* in Gothenborg; 7. *Un ballo in Maschera* in Parma; 8. *Das Rheingold* in Madrid; 9. *Boris Godunov* in London; 10. *Cavalleria rusticana* in London; 11. *Satyagraha* at the Met; 12. *Anna Nicole* in London.