Class 1 : Extravagantly Real

A. Monteverdi in Mantua and Venice

1. Title 1 (rehearsal of *Venus and Adonis*)

My title slide shows a rehearsal of John Blow's 1685 opera *Venus and Adonis* by a modern company in what it clearly intended to be a baroque set. I am amused by the contrast between the fantastic set and the performers rehearsing in sweaters and jeans. That is what this whole course is going to be about: the relationship between what is inevitably an **extravagant** art form—extravagant in emotion if not always in actual cost—and the **real-life** contexts that gave rise to it, that are involved in putting it on, and are depicted in it.

2. Menu for the class

By "real-life," I mean particularly **politics, society, or economics**, none of which are my subjects. All the same, I want to use the course to explore their impact on opera, from its earliest years to today. Some classes will focus on one composer, or even one opera; other will be surveys of a particular theme. Including this first class, which will be whirlwind trip: three major composers plus three footnotes. This class also involves pulling together material used in other courses, about 40% of the total; this figure will go way down in future classes. Anyway, let's start our tour with an evening in Barcelona.

3. Entering the Liceu Theatre
4. Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, opening (Barcelona 2002, Gilbert Deflo)
5. Montserrat Figueras as La Musica

I strung a few things together there to make a deliberate time-warp. Modern traffic in Barcelona; entering the **Gran Teatre del Liceu**, then watching the opening of *La favola di Orfeo* (The Story of Orpheus) by **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567–1643) conducted by **Jordi Savall** in 2002. Although not the first opera, Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is the first that is commonly performed. It was written for the composer's employer, the **Duke of Mantua**, in 1607, and the allegorical character of **Music**, who opens the opera, wastes no time in honoring their noble patron, and extolling his heroism and heritage.

6. Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, and Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona

Orfeo was first performed in a room in the **Ducal Palace** shown here before an invited audience. The **Liceu**, by contrast, is a purpose-built opera house, and its audience consists both of wealthy subscribers and others who buy tickets at the box office. The Liceu was founded in 1837 as an educational endeavor, with a theater to showcase the work of the students. But when the permanent building was erected ten years later, its ambitions had grown to present professional opera of the highest international quality.

7. Bellini's *Norma* at the Liceu in 1847

At the time, the Liceu, with around 3,500 seats, was the largest in Europe. The money was raised by selling shares in a limited company. Although the original foundation bore the name of Queen Isabella, she did not contribute to the construction, and her name was removed. Unlike most of the great opera houses of Europe, such as **San Carlo in Naples** shown here, the Liceu has no royal box; the structure shown in the picture is clearly only temporary. The rebuilding of the house after two disastrous fires was also undertaken by shareholders, although the theatre now receives a subsidy from both the city and the Spanish state. The move from an **aristocratic** to a **commercial** mode of opera, and nowadays to a mostly **state-sponsored** one, is an important part of the opera story. While a modern director can of course ignore these origins, there is particular interest in acknowledging them, as **Gilbert Deflo** does here. Let me show you the opening of the opera in another production, from Zurich in 1978. The productions of all three Monteverdi operas by **Jean-Pierre Ponnelle** and their musical interpretation by **Nikolaus Harnoncourt** did much to bring the composer back into public view.

8. Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, opening (Zurich 1978, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle)
9. — still from the above

How do the two versions strike you? Ponnelle, who virtually abolishes the distinction between stage, pit, and auditorium, is trying to get back, I think, to the intimacy of a private performance, but also to the grandeur of all those artistocrats in court costumes that must each have cost more than a commoner would earn in a year. He also seems to imply that the first two characters we see are the Duke himself and his Duchess. But I think he goes overboard on the elaborateness of the set. *Orfeo* was performed indoors. According to one letter, "Tomorrow evening the Most Serene Lord the Prince is to sponsor a [play] in a room in the apartments which the Most Serene Lady had the use of ...it should be most unusual, as all the actors are to sing their parts."

10. Rooms in the Palazzo Ducale

Nobody is quite sure what that room was. Perhaps the *Sala dei Fiumi*, or River Room, though that is indeed small. Perhaps the *Sala dei Specchi*, of Hall of Mirrors, which is larger, but could hardly be described as “which the Most Serene Lady has the use of.” But at any rate small.

11. Monteverdi: *Orpheus*, directed by Barrie Kosky, Komische Oper, Berlin

In the later 20th century, when it was still something of a musicological endeavor to bring Monteverdi to the stage, productions tended to emphasize historicism. In the 21st, when these works are almost standard repertoire, the approach is more to bring them closer to the lives of a modern audience. I have already shown in two other courses an excerpt from **Barrie Kosky’s** way-over-the-top production in Berlin. Here is another German modernization, a trailer from the 2015 production in Munich.

12. Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, trailer (Munich 2015, David Bösch)
13. — still from the above

This takes a piece that was born of one historical era and places it in another. But not our own; the flower-power hippie setting is that of our youth; **it too is historical**; it might as well be *Hair*. But it has a point, I think: this is an Orfeo who will grow up, shake off the wildness of youth, and become a

responsible ruler. This is what **John Bokina**, the author of the book *Opera and Politics* listed in my bibliography, thinks is the essential political point of *La favola di Orfeo.*

14. Monteverdi in Venice

Although the Duke of Mantua afforded Monteverdi the luxury of what was by all accounts a splendid spectacle with lavish costumes, scenic effects, and an unusually large orchestra, it was all to his own glory, to shore up a status that was already in decline. Monteverdi was essentially a servant, providing what his master required. As his fame grew outside Mantua, this began to chafe, and six years after *Orfeo*, he accepted a job as *maestro di musica* at **San Marco in Venice**, which—importantly—was not a dukedom but a **republic**. Here, he was still an employee, but with the time to pursue his own career both inside the city and elsewhere, including some more operas for Mantua, which are now lost. Only his last two operas remain: *Il ritorno di Ulisse in patria* (The Return of Ulysses, 1641) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea, 1642).

15. Eduardo Barrón: *Nero and Seneca* (1908, Madrid Prado)

Even though Venice was a republic and Monteverdi no longer had a royal master, his operas still continued the political theme of the proper education and conduct of the Prince. In *Poppea*, the prince is the young **Emperor Nero**, and the text, by the playwright **Francesco Busenello** (1598–1659), is virtually an object lesson of what *not* to do. Nero is sexually obsessed with **Poppea Sabina**, and is prepared to divorce his wife and murder anyone who stands in his way so that he can marry her. Here is his scene with his tutor **Seneca**, and it doesn't go at all as calmly as in this 1908 sculpture by **Eduardo Barrón** (1858–1911). Two things to note as you listen. Nero, like so many later principals in baroque opera, was written for a ***castrato***, a singer castrated at puberty to preserve the purity of a boy's voice with the power of a grown man. As you will hear in this performance by **Philippe Jaroussky**, it plays well into the character's psychopathic hysteria. I have given you the text of the scene in a handout; keep an eye open for it as you watch, for Seneca's advice is virtually a manual of good government.

16. Monteverdi: *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Nero/Seneca scene
17. — still from the above

Poppea was performed in a **public theater**, one of about a dozen that were active in Venice at the middle of the century. These represented a kind of half-way stage between the private court theaters of rulers like Federigo Gonzaga and the civic enterprises such as the Barcelona Liceu. For these theaters were still owned by aristocratic families, and they were still small. But few families could sustain the expenses of such a venture on their own, so they moved their activities to a purpose-built theater in the city, invited other families to purchase boxes, and sold individual tickets to those able to afford them.

18. Pietro Longhi: *Il Ridotto* (18th century)

Most of the performances took place during the months of the Venetian Carnival, when Venice itself became a giant theater, with people donning masks and costumes to pursue a life of pleasure. And Monteverdi's *Poppea* fits right in, steeped in sex and sensuality, at times going right over the top as Nero and Poppea continue on the murderous path to matrimony. For she has only to mention the name

of Seneca in bed with him the next night for Nero to summon a guard and order his death. And no sooner does Seneca commit suicide as ordered, than Nero celebrates the news and his adulterous affair with his court poet, Lucan. Here is just a bit of their scene; watch:

19. Monteverdi: *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Nero/Lucano scene

B. Handel in London

20. Handel: *Tamerlano* (Madrid 2007, d. Graham Vick)

Monteverdi's Emperor Nero is clearly a tyrant. Here is another one, **Tamburlaine the Great**, as depicted in *Tamerlano* by **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759), written in 1738 and just one of his immense output of 42 operas. Rather than giving you a period production, I am showing it in a contemporary staging by the British director **Graham Vick**, because we are discussing politics, and what could be more political than this image: an Asian ruler crushed under the feet of a Western potentate! The foot on the globe represents Tamburlaine, Emperor of the Tartars. Lying on the ground is Bajazet, the defeated Sultan of the Turks. The person with his back to us is Andronico, one of Tamburlaine's allies; it is another *castrato* role, sung this time by a mezzo-soprano.

21. — the same with Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*

At about time time that Shakespeare arrived in London (1587 or so), Christopher Marlowe scored a big success with his *Tamburlaine the Great*. His Tamburlaine imprisons Bajazet in a cage that he tows behind his chariot. In keeping with 18th-century decorum, Handel makes his hero humane and magnanimous; indeed the first thing that happens is that Bajazet is released from captivity. When he learns that he owes his life to the hated conqueror, Bajazet refuses; it is only the thought of his daughter Asteria that stops him from taking his own life. Indeed the tension between the two kings is not caused by blood lust, but simply because Tamburaine want to marry Asteria,

22. Ingredients of *opera seria*

In this short excerpt from the very beginning of the opera, you will hear the three principal ingredients of Handel's operatic language: **Orchestrally-accompanied drama** (to accompany intense or passionate action); **Secco recitative** accompanied only by harpsichord (to advance the plot); and **Aria** (to explore personal emotion)—for in Handel, even the political comes down in the end to the personal.

23. Handel: *Tamerlano*, opening (Madrid 2007, Graham Vick)
24. Some Handel *opere serie*

Tamerlano is what is known as an ***opera seria***, an opera on an elevated subject from history or myth, posing significant moral dilemmas, and always coming down to a happy resolution: a tragedy, in effect, until the final curtain. *Opere serie* always had small casts and minimal chorus. They were comprised of

the same ingredients: orchestra, recitative, and arias, arias, arias. They were performed in **public theaters** that needed to make a profit; the key ingredient was the **star singer**, especially the great *castrati* of the day. Handel wrote 42 of them, catering both for his public and his stars.

25. Hogarth: *Scene from "The Beggar's Opera"* (c.1728, Tate)

But Handel's *opera seria* was not the only show in town. For several years, his company was in competition with another London group, trying to attract (and pay) the biggest stars. From time to time, Italian touring companies would arrive with lighter comic opera, or ***opera buffa***. And in 1728, a playwright named **John Gay** (1685–1732) came out with ***The Beggar's Opera***, a parody of *opera seria*, right down to the dueling sopranos, but taking place among the lower echelons of society: beggars, highwaymen, and whores. Real life, indeed—but of course glamorized for the stage. And the beauty of it was that it didn't need a fancy composer writing Italian music; all the songs were **popular ballads** of the day, arranged by **Johann Pepusch** (1667–1752). Here are three of them, "Fill every glass," "Let us take the road," and "Over the hills and far away," in the **Peter Brook** film from 1953. **Laurence Olivier** plays the romantic lead, the highwayman **Macheath**; **Polly Peachum**, his girlfriend (one of them), is played by **Dorothy Tutin**.

26. Gay/Pepusch: *The Beggar's Opera*, excerpts (film by Peter Brook, 1953)
27. Handel: *Saul* (1738), record cover

Whether because of competition with new taste for ballad operas, or worn down by the financially precarious opera business, Handel began to diversify. His *Saul*, written in 1738, the same year as *Tamerlano*, was the fourth of what would turn out to be 18 dramatic oratorios—that is to say works that tell a story, but are designed for concert rather than stage performance. Leaving the theater for the concert hall might seem a backward step, but in fact it had several advantages. It eliminated production expenses and opera singers' fees. It allowed him to perform in far larger venues. It opened the possibility of using stories from the Bible, which were not permitted on the London stage. And compared to the Catholic associations of Italian opera, it was more in tune with the increasingly Protestant leanings of the country.

28. Handel: *Saul* (Glyndebourne 2015, Barrie Kosky)

And though the Bishop of London would not allow sacred subjects to be performed in theaters, that does not deter modern directors, who have found Handel's oratorios just as dramatic as his operas. Here is a scene at the end of Act II from the 2015 Glyndebourne production by Barrie Kosky. This particular scene does not include an aria, but it has the other two elements we noted in *Tamerlano*: orchestral music (here with dancers) illustrating Saul's growing madness, and an unusually dramatic recitative. The one element that is new is the much expanded role of the chorus. Unfortunately, I have to fade out before the end, but you will hear enough.

29. Handel: *Saul*, end of Act II (Glyndebourne 2015, Barrie Kosky)
30. Main title 2

C. Verdi and the Risorgimento

31. Gustave Wappers: Episodes in Brussels, September 1830 (Brussels NG)

The small picture shows a scene from an opera you never hear any more, *La muette de Portici* (The Mute Girl of Portici), written in 1828 by **Daniel Auber** (1782–1871). It is historically significant as the first French *grand opéra*, but also as the opera that launched a successful revolution in real life. This was the fight of the Southern Netherlands to shake off Dutch rule and establish themselves as the independent country of Belgium. And it was timed to start during a performance of the opera, after a stirring patriotic duet whose words are "*Amour sacré de la patrie*" (Sacred love of the Fatherland).

32. Viva Verdi

Nationalism was very much in the air in the second quarter of the 19th century, and nowhere more than in Italy, which was then a set of separate states, not yet a united country; most of the North was governed from Austria. **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901) was sympathetic to the unification movement, known as the *Risorgimento*, but it was pure coincidence that his name was an acronym for the movement's goal, to put Vittorio Emmanuele II, King of Sicily and Piedmont, onto the throne of a united Italy. Although it did not come into use until Verdi was already famous, the fans shouting "Viva Verdi!" were also proclaiming "Vittorio Emmanuele Re D'Italia!" Verdi was aware that patriotic fervor adds spice to other emotions, and would return to it again and again in his work. But he was circumspect; he never wrote anything that could alert the censors to any hint of revolution. All the same, the chorus of Hebrew slaves yearning for their homeland in his first great tragedy, *Nabucco* (1842), was picked up in the streets as the unofficial anthem of the *Risorgimento*.

33. Verdi: *Nabucco*, Act III, scene 2, "Va pensiero" (Met 2002)
34. Verdi: *La battaglia di Legnano*

But there was an exception. In 1848, a revolution broke out in Milan (as in so many places around Europe), which temporarily suceeded in driving the Austrians out of the city. Hearing the new, Verdi dashed back from Paris, where he was living at the time, and dashed off an opera to mark the occasion. No, it was not about recent events, but about a piece of history safely buried in the middle ages: the **Battle of Legnano** in 1176, when Italian armies finally repelled the invasion of Emperor Barbarossa from the other side of the Alps. So Verdi was once more writing in code. In fact, the Austrians regained control of Milan before he could finish. But the next year, the Roman people threw out the Pope and declared Rome a republic. So it was in the midst of that burst of revolutional fever that *La battaglia di Legnano* was first produced. It was wildly successful, and the entire fourth act was encored at the premiere and each subsequent performance. So, as a break from all my snippets, and because you are unlikely to see it anywhere else, I am going to play you that act complete. It opens with the heroine, Lina, praying for the safety of her husband Rolando and her bosom friend Arrigo in the distant battle. Distant trumpets proclaim victory, but Arrigo has been mortally wounded. He tells Rolando that his love is unconsummated and that Lida has always acted honorably, then dies on the words "I die for Italy."

35. Verdi: *La battaglia di Legnano*, Act IV complete

D. Three Footnotes

So we have visited three composers—Monteverdi, Handel, and Verdi—who have developed political themes in operas written in very different social contexts; I will come back to these ideas in later classes. But now, I want to throw in three footnotes as previews of other themes that relate to my rubric of Opera and Real Life: operas that reflect **contemporary social conditions**, operas about **real people**, and **performers** who manage to erase the line between artifice and reality.

36. Dix: *Match Seller* and Grosz: *Street Scene* (both 1921)

Footnote 1: In the aftermath of World War I, Germany was in a mess, exacerbated by massive inflation and the punitive reparations forced upon them by the Treaty of Versailles. These two pictures from 1921 show something of the conditions in the early years of the **Weimar Republic**: mutilated veterans begging on the streets, while a few fat cats continued to live in style.

37. Brecht and Weill

In 1928, this dichotomy spurred the leftist playwright **Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956) to rewrite Gay's *Beggar's Opera* as a satire of the dog-eat-dog conditions in his own day, which he called ***Die Dreigroschenoper***, or "The Threepenny Opera." Like the original, this was interspersed with ballad-type songs rather than arias, but these were all new compositions by his collaborator **Kurt Weill** (1900–50). Many of them, however, have since become pop standards, such as the opening number, "Mack the Knife." This is a performance from Hamburg in 2004.

38. Weill: *Die Dreigroschenopen*, Ballad of Mack the Knife
39. The Nixons arrive in China

Footnote 2: Emperor Nero and Tamburlaine the Great were both historical figures, but they died many centuries before being depicted in opera. The idea of writing an opera about a contemporary figure is a late-twentieth-century phenomenon. In fact **Richard Nixon** (1913–94) was still alive in 1987 when **John Adams** and his librettist **Alice Goodman** premiered *Nixon in China*, as was **Henry Kissinger** and many of the other real figures represented onstage. The opera is a dramatization of the outstanding foreign-policy success of Nixon's career, his visit to China in February 1972. I will play the scene shown in real life here, the arrival of Air Force One at the Beijing airport. You will see that director Peter Sellars is extraordinarily accurate in his treatment of the setting and costumes, but is quite stylized in his treatment of the singers, deliberately moving from photo-op to photo-op, while the sound seems to emerge in bursts like ticker tape. It is only in the third act of the opera that we really get into the inner minds of the characters, but that is too complex to play.

40. Adams: *Nixon in China*, arrival of Air Force One (Met 2011)
41. Barrie Kosky and publicity shot for La bohème

Footnote 3: *La bohème* (1896), by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924) is a product of the Italian movement called ***verismo*** that claimed to portray common people with all their faults and foibles. Its characters are students and seamstresses; a production like the one by **Franco Zeffirelli** at the Met seems to bring an entire Paris *quartier* onto the stage in Act II. This is something we'll look at again in a later class, the question of whether *verismo* really is real life or merely another theatrical artifact. Right now, I want to make a rather different point, the ability of a remarkable performer to very occasionally cut right through your awareness that you are watching a performance, so that you catch your breath and exclaim, "My God, this person is REAL!" This is the performer's skill, not the director's, although the director provides the context and coaching that make this possible. In Act II of the opera at the *Komische Oper* in Berlin in 2019, **Barrie Kosky** is as exuberant as we have seen in the photos of his *Orfeo* and *Saul*, but he strips the other three acts down to almost nothing. He makes **Marcello**, the friend of the hero **Rodolfo**, into a photographer rather than a painter, and the attic set is simply a bare studio. But this simplicity allows the actress who plays **Mimì**, **Nadja Mchantaf**, to do something that I find quite remarkable. I shall play two scenes back to back: the duet at the end of Act I when she agrees to go out with Rodolfo (Jonathan Tetelman) on their first date, and then her aria in Act III when she tells him they must part. Such reality in opera acting is very rare indeed.

42. Puccini: *La bohème*, "O suoave fanciulla" and "Donde lieta uscì"
43. Main title 3: still from the above