

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED

originally listed as “Operatic Rediscoveries”



I Capuleti e i Montecchi

OSHER AT JHU, GRACE CHURCH, BALTIMORE

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PROBLEM OPERAS? Something must have condemned some marvelous works by the likes of Handel, Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini to linger in the relative background. What is it, and how have modern directors responded to the challenge?

Opera is an old medium. For centuries, composers have been writing in response to conditions that may no longer apply. Styles have changed, and so have tastes. A myth or fairy-tale that resonated with our ancestors may seem trivial when set beside present-day concerns. More seriously, many operas make societal assumptions very far from our own, and some may involve attitudes that are no longer acceptable. Such works demand interpretation, presenting them in a context that is as cogent to modern audiences as it was to the original ones. That's the fascination.

NOTE: Although three of the following operas have been mentioned in previous courses, the treatment in this course will generally be more detailed.



1. Waking Up (Sep. 19)

An introduction to some of the themes of the course, especially those having to do with racial and gender stereotyping and opportunities for artists of color. The second hour will be devoted to *Turandot* (Puccini, 1924).

2. Visions of Empire (Sep. 26)

Les Indes Galantes (The Amorous Indes; Rameau, 1735) was written as a celebration of French Empire, and so is permeated with stereotypes. Recent productions, however, have had much success in giving it contemporary relevance.





3. Gender Politics (Oct. 3)

Alcina (Handel, 1735), like all *opera seria*, is a long series of arias where even male roles are taken by sopranos. But in the right hands, this piece about a woman entrapping men for her collection has much to say about gender politics.



8. The Artist's Dilemma (Nov. 7)

Tannhäuser (Wagner, 1845) is about the conflict between sacred and profane love: a theme that probably had more relevance in the pious 14th century or even the moralistic 19th than in the permissive 21st—but there's the challenge!

4. Antique Roadshow (Oct. 10)

Idomeneo (Mozart, 1780) is also an *opera seria*, but the young composer stretches the form in exciting ways. The plot about love, duty, and sacrifice requires the audience to immerse themselves in the ancient world—or does it?



9. Managing Melodrama (Nov. 14)

La forza del destino (the Force of Destiny; Verdi, 1861) shows the composer at his musical peak. But the kind of sprawling and coincidence-laden Spanish melodrama that served him earlier for *Il trovatore* no longer suited his new skills.



5. East-West Encounters (Oct. 17)

Die Entführung aus dem Serail (Abduction from the Seraglio, 1781) portrays Turks as lecherous bogeymen. But **Mozart** goes deeper, as does Sir David McVicar, whose 2015 production treats the comedy as an Enlightenment object lesson.



10. Russian Legend (Nov. 28)

The problem of handling legends from other cultures, as seen in two productions of Russian operas by Dmitri Tcherniakov: **Ruslan and Lyudmila** (1841) by **Mikhail Glinka**, and **The Tsar's Bride** (1899) by **Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov**.

6. Not Shakespeare's Romeo (Oct. 24)

I Capuleti e I Montecchi (Capulets & Montagues; **Bellini**, 1830) is one of the composer's less-often-performed works, perhaps because of its variant story and compressed scale. But these qualities can also be turned to advantage.



11. Puccini Goes West (Dec. 5)

La fanciulla del West (Girl of the Golden West; **Puccini**, 1910) shows the composer using a Gold Rush saloon for local color, in his most symphonic score. But the mismatch between subject and music has made performances relatively rare.



7. Theatrical Thrills (Oct. 31)

Robert le diable (Meyerbeer, 1831) is the virtual definition of French *grand opéra*, whose emphasis on scale and spectacle dominated opera for most of the 19th-century before going out of fashion. But it is making a comeback....



12. A Classic, Hijacked (Dec. 12)

Ariadne auf Naxos (Richard **Strauss**, 1916) is a unique opera about how opera is made, but its disparate elements are difficult to pull together. Katharina Thoma created the perfect site-specific solution in her 2013 production at Glyndebourne.