Class 1 : Waking Up

A. Some Opera Problems

1. Class title 1 (*Idomeneo* at the Met)

This course will consist of a dozen operas spanning two centuries, from about 1730 to the early 1900s. All are great, all are worth watching, but none of them are in the Top Twenty of performances today. All present problems that the directors and conductors of today must solve. I want to start, as I often do, with a brief preview of what's to come, but then to move on to one particular issue that is different in kind from those we shall see later in the course. Unlike the later classes, each of which presents a single opera, this one is frankly a lecture, jumping all over the place to make points. Starting with the closing duet in *Giulio Cesare* (1724) by **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759) in the Glyndebourne staging by **David McVicar**.

2. Handel: *Giulio Cesare*, closing duet (Danielle de Niese and Sarah Connolly)
3. Sarah Connolly and Danielle de Niese in *Giulio Cesare* (2005).

What's the problem there? We may be approaching the point where you—and audiences generally—simply reply "What problem?" but I don't think we're quite there yet. For one thing, a woman singing a man's role (in this case, Julius Caesar as sung by **Dame Sarah Connolly**). It so happens that most of the heroes in Handel's operas, and many others of the period, were written for a male *castrato*, meaning that now we have to choose between sopranos in drag or countertenors with soprano voices. Then there's the form itself: a drama composed almost entirely of solo arias; this is one of only two duets in the whole piece. And finally the subject: a snatch of history over two milennia old; why should audiences care about that today?

4. Operas to be studied in the course

Here are the operas we are probably going to be hearing in the coming weeks. I say "probably" because I am preparing this in May, before deciding the final syllabus, and don't want to redo the graphics if I change my mind. But it will make the point nevertheless about what kinds of problems we shall be looking at. Tell me if you notice any recurring threads.

5. Operas in the Course: *Alcina*
6. Operas in the Course: *Idomeneo*
7. Operas in the Course: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*
8. Operas in the Course: *I Capuleti e I Montecchi*
9. Operas in the Course: *Robert le Diable*
10. Operas in the Course: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*
11. Operas in the Course: *Tannhäuser*

12. Operas in the Course: *La forza del destino*
13. Operas in the Course: *Pelléas et Mélisande*
14. Operas in the Course: *La fanciulla del West*
15. Operas in the Course: *Capriccio*
16. Operas to be studied in the course (repeat of all eleven)

Did you catch any common themes? The ones that come up most often for me are dramatic conventions that are no longer fashionable, subjects that belong to a different culture or are buried in the past, and plots or settings that make identification difficult. Then there is this . . .

B. The Elephant in the Room

17. Section title B (The Elephant in the Room)

So what *is* the elephant in the room? To answer, let me play three versions of Othello's entrance from the *Otello* (1886) of **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901). Otello will not have a scene of his own until the end of the first act, but Verdi needs to establish him early, in such a way that he is clearly the leader and not easily forgotten. So he gives him one of the most challenging entrances in all opera! I'll show the clips in chronological order. The singers are **Plácido Domingo**, **Jonas Kaufmann**, and **Russell Thomas**. What else do you notice about the three versions?

18. Verdi: *Otello*, "Esultate!" (Domingo)
19. Verdi: *Otello*, "Esultate!" (Kaufmann)
20. Verdi: *Otello*, "Esultate!" (Thomas)
21. Domingo, Kaufmann, and Thomas

I'm sure I hardly need to point it out. **Domingo**, in a performance from Paris in 1976, like most stage Othellos of the day, whether in Verdi or Shakespeare, was wearing dark make-up; he continued doing this until he gave up the role in the early 2000s, though his skin tone got gradually lighter. **Kaufmann**, singing in an updated production in Naples a few years ago, does not alter his complexion beyond a slight tan. And **Thomas**, singing with the Canadian Opera Company in 2019, is the first ever Black tenor to perform the role on international stages; personally, I find him the best of the lot!

22. NYT article, 2020: "Opera Can No Longer Ignore Its Race Problem"

Does this matter? I'd say there is a distinction to be made here between racial issues that are intrinsic to the work itself, and those that are endemic in the industry. When Joshua Barone wrote in the New York Times in 2020 that "Opera Can No Longer Ignore Its Race Problem," he was not primarily talking about makeup or the casting of individual roles, but the fact that the big opera companies have virtually no persons of color as artistic or business leaders, very few in the middle ranks, and very few roles that require performance by Black singers. The photo is from the Met production of *Porgy and Bess* (1935) by **George Gershwin** (1898–1937), which was written specifically to provide such roles—indeed, it is

written into the contract. But isn't there also something patronizing about an opera about Black life entirely written, and as often as not conducted and directed, by Whites?

23. Poster for *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*

Last season and this one, the Met, along with several other houses, has been working to remedy this to some extent by performing two of the operas by Black composer **Terence Blanchard** (1962–), *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* (2013) and his earlier *Champion* (2013). Both are genuine works about the Black experience, written entirely by Black artists. Here is a trailer of *Fire*.

24. Blanchard: *Fire Shut Up In My Bones*, excerpts
25. Amonasro and Aida at the Met

Two other roles that permit Black casting, if not actually require it, are those of **Aïda** and her father **Amonasro** in Verdi's Aïda (1870). The opera is set in ancient Egypt, but Aïda and her father are Ethiopian captives, so it makes sense that they should be Black. In fact, the Met has been casting Black sopranos in the title role ever since the 1950s, long before they were colorblind in other roles; **Leontyne Price**, **Grace Bumbry**, and **Shirley Verrett** are some names that come to mind. What do you make of these two? Both the Amonsros, **Roberto Frontali** and **Quinn Kelsey**, are white. **Kristin Lewis**, on the left, is Black, but the Aïda on the left, **Anna Netrebko**, is white, and was roundly criticized for performing the role in brown makeup.

26. Amonasro and Aida in Australia

Here is one more to add to the mix, a recent production in Australia where both father and daughter are white, but Aïda wears traditional Egyptian costume, while her father and the other Ethiopians show their foreignness by being in modern dress. I'll get back to the discussion in a moment, but as this is a class on opera rather than politics, let's go back to music and play the climax of the scene, as performed at the Met in 1985 by two great Black artists, **Leontyne Price** and **Simon Estes**.

27. Verdi: *Aïda*, climax of the Aïda/Amonasro duet (Price/Estes)
28. Domingo, Kaufmann, and Thomas (repeat)

Aïda and Amonasro have been sung by artists of all races, with or more recently without ethnic make-up. Otello, though, is a different matter. His race is an intrinsic part of the plot; Shakespeare's play, after all, is called *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. It seems wrong to give Otello to a white artist if there are Black ones available of the same caliber—but the number of heroic tenors of that caliber worldwide is very small indeed. And for those that *can* sing it, the role is one of the peaks of the repertoire; the greatest artists are going to want to challenge themselves with it, and who is to say them nay?

29. Domingo, Kaufmann, and Thomas (repeat, with "Blackface" slogan)

But the kind of make-up they wear is a different matter entirely. In 2015, the Met staged a new production of Otello in which the tenor, **Aleksandrs Antonenko**, wore no especially dark make-up. They announced that henceforth they were ending the practice of wearing **blackface**. Not entirely, apparently; when Anna Netrebko went on as Aïda, she was accused of wearing **brownface**; and the

practice of using heavy Asian makeup for Western singers in roles like *Madama Butterfly* continued, and was referred to as **yellowface**. More on that in our second hour.

30. Russell Thomas and WNO discussion

Blackface, *brownface*, *yellowface*: the terms themselves are offensive. Using them to label the casting of Otello, Aïda, or Butterfly with white singers was supposed to reflect a **Woke** sensitivity to the feelings of racial minorities. But around the same time, the Washington National Opera convened a panel of five Black singers, including our recent Otello, **Russell Thomas**, and what they said was surprising; I'll put the whole article on the website. Everybody without exception agreed that the use of "blackface" in this context was inappropriate. It does have a meaning, dating from things like **Minstrel Shows** or Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*, where the exaggerated makeup is a deliberate caricature. For a role that is indeed African (or Asian), it's just another aspect of the costume, simply makeup. Speaking of *Aïda,* Thomas said this: "I don't believe it is offensive at all. I would be more offended if I didn't see artists on stage with a tan. Those singers are playing characters. The makeup allows them to realize those characters." Here is a longer quote.

31. Russell Thomas, with a quote from the WNO discussion

C. Not Merely Makeup

32. Section title C (*Così fan tutte* at Aix, 2016)

I have a few minutes left, so I want to give you something really radical: a scene from a recent production of *Così fan tutte* by a director, **Christophe Honoré**, who uses blackface for altogether more pernicious purposes. **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91) wrote *Così* in 1790 as the third of his collaborations with librettist **Lorenzo da Ponte** (1749–1838). It follows *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni,* both of which are socially fluid and sexually unstable, and I have always felt that *Così* was the most unsettling of the lot. Its title, *That's What Women Do*, is essentially a sexist joke: you can never trust the fidelity of women. Two men boast of the fidelity of their fiancées; a cynical older friend bets that he can prove the contrary; the men, who are soldiers, are to pretend to be called off to war, but return in disguise as "Albanians" to woo each other's fiancées. Of course, the girls eventually succumb.

33. The four lovers in *Così fan tutte* (Aix 2016)

I have always felt that there was something dangerous and transgressive about *Così,* and that the men are as much to blame as the women are, despite the title. But Christophe Honoré goes further. He points out that we are often sexually attracted to people other than the ones we marry, or even those we love. And instead of the vague disguise as "Albanians," he goes to outright blackface, fully knowing what a socially-loaded concept it is. He sets the opera in a soldiers' garrison somewhere in Africa, where European officers serve with native troops. There is a double standard from the start: even as the men are protesting the fidelity of their sweethearts, they are fooling around with a Black barmaid; even when

the women sing of the virtues of their officers, they are eying the half-naked men ironing their uniforms. I'll play the seduction of the flightier sister, **Dorabella** (**Kate Lindsey**, *mezzo*), by the more sexually-aggressive solider, **Guglielmo** (**Nahuel di Pierro**, *baritone*). Normally, it is a matter of his exchanging her fiancé's locket with one of his own—albeit with the implication that they then go off to have sex—but Honoré makes it something more than a simple switch of affections. Guglielmo's power is that he sees that Dorabella is turned on by forbidden fruit, including people of a different race. And oh yes, Honoré also shows that Dorabella has seen through the disguise all along, but is still prepared to play along with it—an idea I have used a couple of times in my own productions, but never with the potency of this.

34. Mozart: *Così fan tutte*, Guglielmo/Dorbella duet (Aix en Provence, 2016)
35. Class title 2 (still from the above)

D. Chinese Commedia?

36. Section title D (Ping, Pang, and Pong)
37. Operas in the course: *Turandot*

The other classes in this course, as I said, will each be devoted to a single opera. Still continuing my theme of characters of color in Western opera, I will devote the second hour of this one to a single opera also, *Turandot* (1924), the final opera of **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924). Like *Aïda* and *Otello,* but unlike the others in the course, it is a Top Twenty work, but it absolutely checks the boxes in terms of its problems: cultural appropriation, ethnic and gender stereotyping, and a plot that the composer himself did not know how to finish. The Met obtained it for New York only six months after its Italian premiere, and their 1987 production by **Franco Zeffirelli** has thrilled audience for four decades with its over-the-top lavishness. It comes through even in an old video.

38. Puccini: *Turandot*, opening of Act II, scene 2 (Met 1987)
39. — still from the above

I showed that because the other two scenes I want to play both take place at night, in a set that, though very detailed, has little splendor at all. We'll start with the first appearance of the three characters in extravagant costumes that you see here, three court counsellors named **Ping**, **Pang**, and **Pong**, who serve as a kind of Greek Chorus to the action. They are the "Comic Chinamen" of my admittedly ironic section title. The background in short: Princess Turandot has agreed to marry any princely suitor who can answer her three riddles; if he fails, however, he gets his head chopped off. The exiled Prince Calaf (Plácido Domingo) arrives in Peking with his blind father and faithful slavegirl Liu. Seeing Turandot, he is immediately struck by her beauty and prepares to strike the gong to signal his candidacy; the three ministers try to head him off with warnings of what will happen if he fails. Tell me what you think.

40. Puccini: *Turandot*, Act I, first Ping/Pang/Pong scene (Met 1987)
41. Ping, Pang, and Pong in the Australian Opera *Turandot*, February 2022

What did you think? Puccini never went to China, any more than he visited Japan for *Madam Butterfly.* His source, actually was Venetian, a 1762 play by **Carlo Gozzi** (1720–1806), whose counsellors are three characters taken from *commedia dell'arte,* the street-theater tradition that gave us our repertoire of circus clowns. Puccini pulled together some Chinese-sounding tunes and altered his harmony a little, and directors go to town on the costumes and physical antics. But operagoers who are themselves Asian may find this repellent.

42. The above, with quotation from a Vietnamese operagoer
43. — continuation of the above

I am putting links on the website to various articles that have appeared about *Turandot* in recent years; I urge you to read them in full. This one comes from a Vietnamese refugee in Sydney, **Cat-Thao Nguyen**, who went to see *Turandot* with her Chinese-born husband; they walked out at the intermission. But the production itself got universal praise; as Nguyen says, everyone else thought it was perfectly normal.

44. Robert Wilson's production of *Turandot* in Madrid, 2018

What happens if you strip away all the Chinoiserie and stylize the production until it is almost abstract, as director **Robert Wilson** did in Madrid in 2018? It won't attract the people who come for the Zeffirelli spectacle, but it does have a cold impressiveness that I think might work well for the bigger scenes. But the production moved to Toronto in the next year, and Canadians tend to be more Woke to racial issues than Americans. Fearing that even Wilson's stylization would cause offence, they made further alterations to the production, as described in this piece from Toronto television.

45. Canadian Opera Company altering some of *Turandot*'s Asian characters, video
46. Ping, Pang, and Pong in the Canadian Opera *Turandot*, 2019

Katherine Hu, the daughter of the Chinese-American singer interviewed in that piece, who was a junior at Yale at the time, wrote an article for the *New York Times* decrying the Canadian Opera Company's "botched attempt" (her words) to mask the opera's inherent racism. Again, I urge you to read the whole thing. For she doesn't leave at the intermission; she recognizes that the cultural appropriation is intrinsic to the work, which is one of the glories of the repertoire; the solutions she proposes, which are very much in line with the comments made by the panel in Washington, are intelligent and practical.

47. Poster for the Finnish National Opera *Turandot*, Spring 2023

It so happened that, while I was contemplating this course at the beginning of the summer, there was a live simulcast of a production from the **Finnish National Opera** that addresses the question of the three comedians in a more direct way. I would be interested to know what you think.

48. Puccini: *Turandot*, Act I, first Ping/Pang/Pong scene (Helsinki 2023)
49. Poster for the Finnish National Opera *Turandot*, Spring 2023 (repeat)

Did that work for you? You may have noticed that the photos I have been showing lately have all been a bit grey, and this production was no exception. What's the point of performing such a brilliantly colored score as Puccini's if you don't have color on stage as well?

50. Ping, Pang, and Pong in the Royal Opera House *Turandot*, directed by Andrei Serban

So I want to give you a production that is all color, and indeed seems to double down on those Asian caricatures. Ping, Pang, and Pong in **Andrei Serban's** 1984 production for the Royal Opera House in London are clearly not real people; their makeup is what you'd expect of circus clowns. But look how he contextualizes them; here is the opening of the show in a recent revival:

51. *Turandot* at the Royal Opera House, opening
52. — still from the above production

Do you see what Serban is doing? By presenting the opera within an obviously theatrical space, with the chorus lining the stage in little balconies, the Emperor flown in on a giant pillow, and the actors appearing on little platforms, he is removing the action from any pretense of reality. Yes it makes no bones about being Chinese, but the Asian quality is that of **traditional Chinese theater**, not real life. The three counsellors return to their exact roles in Gozzi's play, as theatrical clowns. Let's watch their entrance in the Serban production, and continue immediately to the ending of the first act, where Calaf (**Roberto Alagna**) ignores their advice and strikes the gong to accept Turandot's challenge.

53. *Turandot* at the Royal Opera House, entrance of Ping, Pang, and Pong
54. *Turandot* at the Royal Opera House, Act I finale
55. — still from the above

E. Curse of the Ice Princess

56. Section title E (Australian Opera)

We have hardly mentioned the title character, **Turandot**. Nor, for that matter, her foil **Liu**, the devoted servant who accompanies Calaf to Peking and ultimately dies to protect his secret. This photo is from the Australian Opera production in Sydney that so upset **Cat-Thao Nguyen**, in the letter to the editor I have already quoted. She has something to say about the two women also:

57. Cat-Thao Nguyen on the binary descriptions of Asian women

I will end by playing the scene of their confrontation in the third act, using the London production. But first, a very brief section from the production in **Helsinki**. It is a much less opulent staging, as you will see. But note that there is virtually no attempt to make the characters Chinese; Turandot's two attendants might equally easily be Finnish.

58. *Turandot* at the Finnish National Opera, scene from Act III
59. — still from the above

This scene, as I say, comes from Act III. Calaf (who at this stage is known only as the **Unknown Prince**) has correctly solved Turandot's riddles, but he gives her one more chance. If she can correctly guess his real name before dawn the next day, she shall have won and he will go to his death. Turandot

commands the people to try every means of discovering the name. The soldiers sieze Calaf's aged father **Timur**, but **Liu** intervenes, saying that only she knows the name. So Turandot orders her to be tortured. She cries out, but still doesn't confess. Turandot asks her what gives her such strength… and this is where we come in. The Turandot is **Lise Lindstrom** and the Liu is **Aleksandra Kurzak** (Alagna's wife).

60. *Turandot* at the Royal Opera House, the death of Liu
61. Class title 3: An Opera Without an Ending

Puccini was sick with cancer when he wrote this scene. Though he had over a year of his life left, he could never finish the opera and provide an ending for Turandot to match the power of the one he had already given to Liu. **Arturo Toscanini** presented the opera at its premiere in its truncated form, but at subsequent performances used the ending composed from Puccini's sketches by **Franco Alfano** (1876–1954); it is very loud, rather trite, and commendably brief. Puccini knew how to write for human beings, but he was out of his depth with mythical ones; Puccini was no Wagner. This is the true *Curse of the Ice Princess!*