after:hours Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication

**Course Descriptor**

**Course Title:** Discovering Opera

**Type of Course:** Adult Education

**Credit:** Not credit bearing

**Weekly Session Titles and Descriptions**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Week | Session Title | Description |
| 1 | **Introduction**  | Puccini *Madame Butterfly.* This class takes one of the most famous operas as a case study for the issues that the rest of the course will cover, looking at practicalities, social and cultural context, and some of the more aesthetic ideas as well. |
| 2 | **Singers** | Strauss *Ariadne auf Naxos.* Starting with the basics, this class will talk in detail about the voices that appear in opera and the different styles of vocal tone they might adopt. The discussion will centre around an opera that dramatises the distinction between singers from different traditions, showing them bickering in a prologue set ‘backstage’ as well as how they interact in the ‘opera’ itself. |
| 3 | **Dancers** | Rameau *Hippolyte et Aricie*. Here we will see the important role that dance played in French opera in particular, highlighting the fact that singers are not the only performers to appear on stage for most of opera’s history. Taking a key example from the French Baroque, we will discuss how the demands of King Louis XIV shaped the future of much French opera to come. |
| 4 | **Orchestra** | Wagner *Die Walküre*. Most changes to the orchestra (unlike the Rameau from the previous week) happened very slowly over time. This class will explore how Wagner was able to exploit new technology and new instruments to expand the sonic palette of his operas, as well as to make some innovations of his own in how the orchestra interacts with the action on stage. |
| 5 | **Staging** | Meyerbeer *Robert le Diable*. This is the first of two classes that explores the visual aspect of an opera production, covering the full range of scenery, props, costumes, stage effects (particularly popular among in the world of French opera) and lighting. We will see how they all played their role in the stupendous success of one of the most famous operas of the nineteenth century |
| 6 | **Musical Structures** | Rossini *La Cenerentola*. The structures that composers used to organise the music in opera are essential knowledge for anyone getting to know the form, as they provide an immediately accessible way to make sense of the longer sections. We’ll cover some of the structures from Baroque and Classical opera, as well as the ways that Rossini expanded them to produce a standardised ‘number’, allowing him to compose at speed. |
| 7 | **Text** | Verdi *Otello*. Adaptations of Shakespeare are common across the operatic canon, but huge numbers of changes need to be made in order to make the originals suitable for singing. Here we’ll explore the changes that Verdi and his librettist Boito made to *Othello*, looking at how they made it practical for opera but also how they transformed it into something ‘Italian’ in the process. |
| 8 | **Direction** | Mozart *Cosi fan tutte..* This is the second class to look at the visual aspect, but this time from the perspective of the person making the decisions, covering the aesthetic design and the behaviour of the characters towards each other. Mozart’s opera will serve as an excellent case study, as it contains lots of issues that need to be resolved in order for contemporary audiences to accept the events that happen on stage. |
| 9 | **Technology** | Machover, *Death and the Powers*Here we will look at all of the practical aspects of technology that make a modern opera production possible, but also will start to make the transition into ideas around opera that will form the focus of next term’s classes. In particular, we’ll use Machover’s recent work as a way of thinking about why technology itself almost never forms the actual subject of an opera. |
| 10 | **Art** | Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Formally moving into the world of ideas, this class will explore the ways that operas have interacted with the contemporary artistic movements happening around them. In particular, we’ll see how important it is to know the fine distinctions between artistic ideas that would have been clear at the time and that might have been lost now, such as between Impressionism and Symbolism in the case of Debussy’s opera. |
| 11 | **Politics** | Adams *Nixon in China*. Politics might form a deep and important layer to most operatic plots, but it’s interesting that recent politics almost never make it to the stage, and we’ll explore some of the reasons why that might be so. Adams’s opera on Richard Nixon’s visit to China is rare example, and shows how difficult it is for opera to negotiate the latest events without descending into satire. |
| 12 | **Nationalism** | Weber *Der Freischütz*. This class will discuss an especially important topic for the nineteenth century, the period in which many of the modern nations we now recognise emerged. Germany is a particularly important example, unifying in 1871. Until that point, operas by German composers such as Weber navigated an interesting middle ground, signalling changes that were to come but showing their allegiance to the ideas of the past as well. |
| 13 | **Religion** | Poulenc *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Here we will explore the role that religious ideas have played in opera throughout its histories, mostly taking a very ambivalent position in the background rather than being a subject in its own right. Poulenc’s opera show’s how these ideas were changing into the twentieth century, particularly in post-WW2 France, with a new need to promote and defend religious ideas shown in the way that the characters openly discuss their faith on stage. |
| 14 | **Other times** | Prokofiev *War and Peace*. This is the first of a series of three classes that outline the various kinds of escapism that operatic plots engage with, starting with works that look to the historical past for their subjects. The idea of treating real historical events on stage seems to have particularly emerged during the nineteenth century, but political plots also caused issues with the authorities of the day. Prokofiev in particular shows how tricky it could be to make a plot about war acceptable in the middle of an actual war. |
| 15 | **Other places** | Bizet *Carmen*. We continue our theme of escapism by looking at operas which happen in foreign lands, thinking about how they portray other people as excitingly different, but also how these topics are used as a way of safely thinking about matters closer to home. The Spain depicted in *Carmen* is a particularly useful example to think about this dual nature, especially the way that Carmen herself is shown to be an outsider within an already foreign place. |
| 16 | **Other worlds** | Donizetti *L’Elisir d’amore*. At the root of so many opera plots is the fine distinctions between the ranks and classes of the different characters, dramatised on the stage but also across the different genres and even the physical theatres of opera itself. The plot of *L’Elisir d’amore* hinges on so many of the different societal positions of its characters, even featuring songs on the subject, showing how crucial this topic is for opera audiences. |
| 17 | **Class and Status** | Donizetti *L’Elisir d’amore.* At the root of so many opera plots is the fine distinctions between the ranks and classes of the different characters, dramatised on the stage but also across the different genres and even the physical theatres of opera itself. The plot of *L’Elisir d’amore* hinges on so many of the different societal positions of its characters, even featuring songs on the subject, showing how crucial this topic is for opera audiences. |
| 18 | **Gender** | Puccini *Tosca*. Here we will explore a topics that has been especially important for opera scholarship, looking at how the characters in opera embody societal ideas about femininity and masculinity, with the latter being somewhat neglected. In particular we will see how the two sides of the coin interact with each other, with the character of Tosca demonstrating the way that a death at the end can mean more than it seems. |
| 19 | **Anti-Opera** | Shostakovich *The Nose*. This class covers an important topic for anyone getting to know the form, as the persistence of works which actively make a mockery of opera as a form might be easy to miss, perhaps coming across as more general satire. We will see how twentieth-century composers went about attacking the genre and what it stands for, with Shostakovich’s utterly bonkers opera based on Gogol serving as an excellent example. |
| 20 | **Opera on Screen** | Britten *Death in Venice*. The final class in the course will look at some of the mediums in which present-day audiences might encounter opera, and how the phenomenon of operas made into films or broadcast ‘live’ in cinemas or on DVD shapes what they end up looking and sounding like. Tony Palmer’s version of Britten’s last opera shows both the possibilities and complications that arise when the medium changes from the original. |

|  |
| --- |
| Course OverviewThe aim of this course is to give you new ways of listening to opera, whether you are getting to know the form for the first time or you already familiar with it and are looking for something unusual.Together we will explore a wide variety of operas and their social and cultural contexts, ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day, catering to all tastes. If you are new to the genre will get to hear some of the most famous works in the form. If you are more familiar with opera you will gain fresh perspectives on the works you already know, and will have the opportunity to discover some less well-known works as well.The course will introduce the various elements of opera production in the first term, and will explore some of the more general ideas around opera in the second term. In each class we will take a single work as a case study, outlining some of the general history of the composer and of the background to the opera, looking at all of the relevant social and cultural context. We will also go into some depth on nuts-and-bolts the opera itself, discussing the plot, the characters, the music, and different approaches to staging, all illustrated with plenty of audio and visual examples.Required Previous Experience (if any)No previous experience of philosophy is necessary, but you should have some background in psychotherapy.Required Reading Material or Special Equipment Needed (if any)* None specified

Learning Outcomes At the end of this course you should be able to* Understand aspects of the history and performance of opera
* Identify some of the themes that have appeared in opera and why
* Identify some of the historical stories can we discover through opera
* Understand some of the ways in which opera been shaped by the social and cultural context of the time
 |

# Possible Further Study

Further courses on the after:hours programme in music might be useful to you.

# Additional information

This course descriptor may be subject to change during the delivery of the course, depending on the specific direction and nature of the learner cohort, and is intended to be responsive to the group dynamics as they emerge during the delivery of the course.