Mozart’s operas and Enlightenment social thought
AHA Vienna program – Winter 2007

Instructor

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Description

Eighteenth-century Europeans went to operas for the same reasons we go to movies: to learn how to love, to fight, to grieve, to celebrate. This course explores four of Mozart’s operas and connects them to the social thought of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. From the 1690s through the 1790s, philosophers and artists sought to re-found society on the principles of reason and nature rather than the dictates of religion and tradition. Mozart was deeply immersed in these discussions, and used the music, theater, and social conventions of Viennese opera to articulate his own understandings of human social interaction.

Objectives

• Study the wider European Enlightenment in the local context of Vienna
• Examine operas for answers to the question: “What holds society together?”
• Appreciate the artistic conventions of European opera in four of Mozart’s works
• Learn basic pronunciation and relevant vocabulary in German and Italian

Excursions

• Performance of Idomeneo at the Theater an der Wien, W 1/17 or M 1/29
• For the material culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Vienna:
  o Biedermeier exhibit at the Albertina Museum, Su 3/4
  o Liechtenstein Palace and Museum, Su 3/4
• Trip to Prague, where most of Amadeus was filmed, H 2/15 – Su 2/18
  o Performance of Don Giovanni at the Estates Theater, the site of its 1787 premiere
  o Tour of the old city conducted by Prof. Karl Vocelka
  o Visit to Kutná Hora and Sedlec hosted by Prof. Lisa Wolverton (my wife, and a specialist in medieval Czech history)
• For background to The Magic Flute’s Egyptian, Orientalist, and masonic themes:
  o Kunsthistorisches Museum Egyptian collection, H 2/1
  o Schatzkammer des deutschen Ordens (recommended)
  o Freimaurermuseum Rosenau in Zwettl (possibility; optional in any case)
Method of instruction

Nicholas Till’s fascinating study of the social thought embodied in Mozart’s operas provides the textbook for this course. We use it to ground students in the cultural milieu of the Viennese Enlightenment, and to pose the question “What holds society together?” Starting in week 2, we will screen three Mozart operas (and parts of a fourth), each of which provides a different answer to this question. For each opera, we will:

1. Read the libretto in English translation facing the German or Italian original
2. Screen the opera in whole or in part
3. Read the relevant chapters from Till’s book
4. Read short excerpts of relevant Enlightenment-era philosophers
5. Return to the analysis of key scenes in order to deepen our understanding

Class meetings will be oriented toward discussion and analysis of texts, with some background and contextual lecturing by the professor.

Grading

I grade on a four-point scale (4 = A, 3.7 = A-, 3.3 = B+, 3 = B, and so on). The following are the main graded requirements. *Note that quarter students and semester students have slightly different requirements.*

- Three tests, each focused on textual analysis and Enlightenment thought, on W 2/7, W 2/28, and W 3/21 (each 20% for semester students, 25% for quarter students)
- A journal, focused on opera viewing experiences, due W 3/21 but spot-checked periodically (20% for semester students, 25% for quarter students)
- Group project: staging Mozart for a modern context, week of M 3/26 (20%, *for semester students only*)

Class attendance is mandatory. Every unexcused absence will result in a deduction of 0.15 points from your overall course grade.

Texts

Nicholas Till, *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue, and Beauty in Mozart’s Operas*  
(New York: W.W. Norton, 1992)

*Three Mozart Libretti: The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così Fan Tutte, Complete in Italian and English* (New York: Dover, 1993)

Schedule

Posing the question: What holds society together?

M 1/15, 11:00-12:30  Introduction to the course
W 1/17, 1:15-3:00  Read Till, introduction, chapters 1, 3, 7, and 8
F 1/19, 9:00-12:00  Screening of movie Amadeus

Answer #1: Social contracts and natural laws: Idomeneo

See Idomeneo at the Theater an der Wien, either W 1/17 or M 1/29 at 7pm

M 1/22, 11:00-12:30  Read Till, chapter 6

Answer #2: Bonds of marriage and civil society: The Marriage of Figaro

W 1/24, 1:15-3:00  Read the libretto, intro. and acts I & II
M 1/29, 11:00-12:30  Read the libretto, acts III & IV and begin screening
U 1/30, 3:00-5:00  Screening of the opera
W 1/31, 1:15-3:00  Read Till, chapter 12
H 2/1, 3:00-6:00+  Kunsthistorisches Museum (including Egyptian collections)

M 2/5, 11:00-12:30  Wrap-up and re-analysis
W 2/7, 1:15-3:00  TEST #1

Answer #3: Sexual attraction and materialist ethics: Don Giovanni

M 2/12, 11:00-12:30  Read the libretto, act I
W 2/14, 1:15-3:30  Read the libretto, act II

H 2/15 – Su 2/18  PRAGUE EXCURSION
H 2/15, 7:00-10:00+  Performance of the opera at Estates Theater

M 2/19, 11:00-12:30  Read Till, chapters 15 and 16
W 2/21, 1:15-3:00  Wrap-up and re-analysis

M 2/26, 11:00-12:30  CLASS CANCELLED
W 2/28, 1:15-3:00  TEST #2

Su 3/4, TBA  Biedermeier exhibit at the Albertina/Liechtenstein Museum

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Answer #4: Moral education through art and ritual: *The Magic Flute*

M 3/5, 11:00-12:30  
Read Till, chapters 10, 13

W 3/7, 1:15-3:00  
Read the libretto, act I

M 3/12, 11:00-12:30  
Read the libretto, act II and begin screening

U 3/13, 3:00-5:00  
Screening of the opera

W 3/14, 1:15-3:00  
Read Till, chapter 18

M 3/19, 11:00-12:30  
Wrap-up and re-analysis

W 3/21, 1:15-3:00  
TEST #3

M 3/26 – W 3/28  
GROUP PROJECT: Restaging Mozart (semester students only)