

RUSS 382: Introduction to Russian Opera

Prof. Anna Berman
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Office Hours: Wed 4:00-5:00

Course Objectives

This course is an introduction to Russian opera that assumes no prior background in music or Russian culture. By placing this emerging tradition in the broader context of Russian culture as well as in the context of European opera trends, we will explore questions of national identity and the relationship between music, literature, and ideological and political concerns in the 19th and 20th centuries. The outside of class work will be composed of extensive watching and listening to opera along with targeted readings to provide context and analysis. The goal is to create an understanding of how the Russian opera tradition emerged and evolved over the course of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries and to trace its relationship to cultural and political trends.

Structure of the Course and

This is a very interdisciplinary class. Depending on the week there will be some combination of read, listening, and viewing and then we will come together for a weekly Zoom session. I know that people come from very different backgrounds and some of you will be familiar with music theory, while others will not know how to read music. Some of you will have a rich background in Russian history and culture, while others of you may know almost nothing about Russia. This is fine and actually great because one of the things that happens over the course of the semester is that in our discussions, we can benefit from everyone's different expertise. So there is no prior knowledge required. I will never test you on musical analysis, so you do not need to stress about that. However, I do firmly believe that you can learn a lot about music just from listening, and I strongly encourage you to take advantage of the incredible amount of music our wonderful music librarian, David Curtis, has made available for us on the myCourses site. The more you listen and watch, the more you will get out of this course.

Our hub for everything will be our myCourses page. I will post announcements regularly when there are any updates or changes you should be aware of (or if we find problems with links or other technical issues). You will see in the contents section that there is a module for each week that tells you what we're doing that week and has links to all the readings and content I have created. Below these modules you will find the modules created by David Curtis, organized by genre or composer. In those modules you will find links to all the music for the course that can be streamed through the library (and some MP3s) and scans of libretti for the operas we are studying. So these composer modules with the music work together with the weekly modules, but I found it was simplest to leave them separate given the vast quantity of content.

Communication Plan

I will be holding office hours via Zoom on Wednesdays 4-5. (the one exception is January 20, when we have a guest speaker at that time, so office hours are cancelled). If you would like to meet with me, but are not available Wednesdays 4-5, please email me and we may be able to set up another time to meet. I can also be reached by email: anna.berman@mcgill.ca I will do my best to reply promptly, but please remember that even professors sometimes observe evenings or weekends as non-work time.

Policies and Expectations

My expectation is that this class is going to be really fun and exciting because we're watching and listening to lots of amazing Russian operas ☺ That said, I realize there are going to be unforeseen complications arising this winter. You may experience technical difficulties accessing online materials or participating in online discussions. You may not be able to attend Zoom meetings. We may experience a third/fourth wave of the virus and people may get sick. I am happy to try to accommodate your needs as the situation evolves, but you need to inform me if you are having difficulty completing an assignment so that I can help you find a solution. If you will need an extension for one of the assignments, out of fairness to your fellow students, you need to ask for that in advance of the deadline.

As I noted above, myCourses is our hub for everything. All deadlines are listed there, all links to readings, music, and videos, all Zooms, all discussions, guidelines for assignments and links to them, this syllabus... everything. Please check it regularly. I will post announcements if we discover glitches or need to modify activities.

Assignments/Evaluations

In the first half of the class I am introducing you to a lot of history and information that you need to learn to understand the rise of Russian opera. The means of evaluation will be quizzes. As the semester progresses further, we will start watching full operas and discussing them. At that point, we will shift to writing discussion prompts and using them to structure our Zoom discussions.

- **Quizzes:** there will be two quizzes that cover the material discussed in class as well as in the readings and in the watching/listening assignments.
- **Discussion prompts:** after watching each full opera, you will be required to write a one paragraph response that poses some question or makes an argument about the opera we have watched. The point of these responses is to facilitate our discussion, so they must be posted on our myCourses page by 8:00pm the night before our Zoom session. You are expected (if at all possible) to show up and discuss your prompt in the live Zoom discussion.
- **Adaptation Assignment:** read Pushkin's "Queen of Spades" and write your own scenario for an opera based on it (details on myCourses).
- **Final Essay Assessment:** essay assessment giving you the chance to synthesize and summarize what you've learned this semester.
- **Self-Evaluation of Engagement:** This will be a short questionnaire that allows to have direct input in deciding the grade you deserve for your engagement with the course materials. It replaces a participation grade.

Grade Breakdown

- Quizzes: 30%
- Discussion prompts: 20%
- Adaptation assignment: 15%
- Final Essay Assessment: 30%
- Self-Evaluation of Engagement 5%

Reading

There are no books to purchase for this course. All of the readings will be available on myCourses either as links or as PDFs.

Listening

The music we are discussing in class is available through our myCourses page. Again, I encourage you to listen as much as possible, as this is the only way to truly become familiar with the sound of Russian folk music, church music, romances, and the styles of the various composers we will be studying.

Watching Assignments: I will post some videos on myCourses for operas that we cover more briefly. We will be watching the following six operas in their entirety. In normal years we had screenings (i.e. viewing parties), but this year I have found streaming versions for you to watch from home. This means that in some cases we are not watching the version I would ideally have chosen, but for those I also include information for anyone who may have access to the DVD. Links to streaming versions are provided on myCourses as well as here. I strongly recommend that you watch the productions I am assigning (or the alternate recommendations). As we will be discussing in class, many of these operas exist in different versions, and if you watch a different production, you may miss entire scenes that will be crucial to our discussion!

- *Boris Godunov* (Musorgsky, 1872)
 - (Gergiev, Met Opera, 2010): <https://metopera-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/season/on-demand/opera/?upc=811357013939>
 - Alternative: if you have access, the version I used to show on DVD was: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0254193/> (Kirov, directed by Gergiev)
- *Eugene Onegin* (Tchaikovsky, 1879)
 - (Met 2006): <https://metopera-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/season/on-demand/opera/?upc=811357011379>
- *The Queen of Spades* (Tchaikovsky, 1890)
 - (Gran Teatre del Liceu, 2011): <https://edu-medici-tv.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/en/operas/queen-of-spades-michael-boder-gilbert-deflo-gran-teatre-del-liceu-2010/>
 - Alternative: the version I used to show on DVD was from the Kirov (Philips, 2002), directed by Gergiev
- *The Nose* (Shostakovich, 1929)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muxgjshs6MY>
- *Lady Macbeth* (Shostakovich, 1932)
 - (Netherlands Opera, 2006) <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/watch/lady-macbeth-of-mtsensk?context=channel:music-online-opera-in-video>
- *War and Peace* (Prokofiev, 1959, first un-cut performance)
 - (Moscow State Stanislavsky Music Theatre, 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kweLqgK36K0>
 - Alternative: the version I would have showed on DVD was from the Paris Opera (2003), directed by Bertini

Zoom

We will have weekly Thursday Zoom sessions 1:05-2:25 where we will come together as a group to synthesize the material we have covered for the week and to discuss. Links to the Zooms can be found on our myCourses page through the Zoom tab in the top bar. In the first part of the semester I will be helping you understand the content we are covering and as we move into the second half of the semester, we will shift into having discussions of the operas we

have viewed. For those discussions we will be guided by the Discussion Prompts that you have posted on myCourses. Zoom sessions will be recorded. My expectations for class conduct are that everyone will be respectful and open to others' ideas. In the past one of the best aspects of this course has been students with different backgrounds learning from each other, so don't be afraid to ask questions when there is something you don't understand, even if you think it may be basic. Often these seemingly simple questions have led to the best discussions and the most learning for the whole group.

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In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

McGill University is on land that has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous people whose footsteps have marked this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Introduction (material for the half-week created by the delayed start to classes)

Welcome Video: This will orient you to the class and give you an overview of how things will work.

Listening: start listening to Russian folk music, church music, and romances to get a feel for what they sound like (and how they are different)

Week 1: Introduction to Opera

Viewing: Intro to Opera video

Reading: Grout, *Short History of Opera* (Introduction: 1-6); Matthews, “The Conventions of the Music-Drama” + look over the glossary of opera terms

Zoom: Thursday, January 14 at 1:05-2:25 (all Zooms will be at 1:05pm; Password: **opera**)
This session will be a chance for us to get to know our group and an introduction to opera.

Week 2: Introduction to Russian Music and Its Place in the Quest for National Identity

Listening: Podcast, “How we got to Russia’s quest for national identity in the nineteenth century”

Reading: Jahn, “‘Us’: Russians on Russianness”; Chaadaev, “Philosophical Letter to a Lady”; Taruskin, “Nationalism”; Frolova-Walker, “Music of the Soul?”; Reeder, *Russian Folksong Lyrics*

Zoom: Thursday, January 21

We will focus on the place of music in the quest for Russian national identity

Week 3: Glinka’s Operas

Podcast: “Introduction to Glinka and his two operas”

Listening: Listen to *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) and *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842). Keep them on while cooking dinner, while doing dishes, while walking the dog. Get familiar with the sound... and how different the two operas are.

Reading: Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism* (74-91); Campbell, *Russians on Russian Music*: Odoevsky (1-3), Neverov (4-8), Odoevsky (28-37), F. M. Tolstoy (53-55), Tchaikovsky (134-137)

Watching: There are a series of video clips posted on my courses with explanations of what they are and what to listen for.

Zoom: Thursday, January 28

Quiz 1: Available Thursday 2:30pm till Saturday 2:30pm (covers all the material in this class through week 3)

Week 4: Introduction to the Kuchka

Reading: Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme* (“Russian Music in the Reform Decade,” 155-157); Ridenour, *Nationalism, Modernism, and Personal Rivalry* (65-85); Taruskin, *Musorgsky* (“What is a Kuchka,” xxxiii-xxxiv)

Zoom: Thursday, February 4

We will be discussing the *Kuchka* and the warring factions in the Russian musical world

Week 5: Musical Realism and Adaptation

Reading: Emerson, *Boris Godunov* (“From Pushkin to Gogol,” 159-162); Taruskin, *Musorgsky* (71-74, 80-83); Taruskin, *Opera and Drama in Russia* (ix-xi, 263-272); Emerson, *Boris*

Godunov (“The Translatability of Narrative,” 3-11) – this last one will be helpful for the adaptation assignment

Listening: Dargomyzhsky, *The Stone Guest*; Musorgsky, “The Nursery,” “Pictures at an Exhibition”

Zoom: Thursday, February 11

Quiz 2: Available Thursday 2:30pm till Saturday 2:30pm (covers the material from weeks 4 & 5)

Week 6: Boris Godunov

Watching: *Boris Godunov* (Musorgsky, 1872)—OUR FIRST FULL OPERA!

Reading: Emerson and Oldani, *Modest Musorgsky & Boris Godunov* (3-11, 23-34); Emerson, *Boris Godunov* (“The Boris Tale as Libretto,” 170-175); Taruskin, *Musorgsky* (123-130)

Discussion Prompt: due on myCourses by Wednesday at 8:00pm

Zoom: Thursday, February 18

This will be our first regular discussion of an opera we’ve all watched in its entirety. Over the rest of the semester, we will have more and more of these discussions.

Week 7: Orientalism and Rimsky-Korsakov

Reading: Pushkin, “The Golden Cockerel”; Pushkin’s “Queen of Spades” – for adaptation assignment (we will not be discussing it at this point, so you can save it to read over break)

Zoom: Thursday, February 25 with guest, Dr. Adalyat Issiyeva

WINTER BREAK WEEK ☺

Week 8: Eugene Onegin

Watching: *Eugene Onegin* (Tchaikovsky, 1879)

Reading: Taruskin, “Chaikovsky and the Literary Folk: A Study in Misplaced Derision”; Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (“Chaikovsky and the Ghetto”); *Russians on Russian Music*: Laroche (245-248)

Discussion Prompt: due on myCourses by Wednesday at 8:00pm

Zoom: Thursday, March 11

This will be our discussion of *Eugene Onegin* and the problem of adaptation.

Adaptation Assignment: due Friday, March 12 by noon

Week 9: The Queen of Spades

Watching: *The Queen of Spades* (Tchaikovsky, 1890)

Reading: Taruskin, “Another World: Why *The Queen of Spades* is the Greatest Symbolist Opera”

Discussion Prompt: due on myCourses by Wednesday at 8:00pm

Zoom: Thursday, March 18

This will be our discussion of *The Queen of Spades*.

Week 10: The Nose

Watching: *The Nose* (Shostakovich, 1929)

Reading: Gogol, “The Nose”; Tumanov, “Correspondence of Literary Text and Musical Phraseology”; Zhitomirsky, “*The Nose*”

Discussion Prompt: due on myCourses by Wednesday at 8:00pm

Zoom: Thursday, March 25

Week 11: *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*

Watching: *Lady Macbeth* (Shostakovich, 1932)

Reading: Leskov, “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District”; Shostakovich, “A Tragedy-Satire”; Taruskin, “The Opera and the Dictator”; “Muddle Instead of Music”

Discussion Prompt: due on myCourses by Wednesday at 8:00pm

Zoom: Thursday, April 1

Week 12: Visit from an opera singer, Joanne Kolomyjec (week of visit subject to change)

Zoom: Thursday, April 8

This is our chance to hear what it’s like to be on the other side of the operatic process creating a role and performing it. Professor Kolomyjec had a career as a professional opera singer and teaches vocal performance at McGill. She has spoken to my opera class every year and it’s always a highlight. Come with any questions you may have about what it’s like to perform opera!

Week 13: *War and Peace*

Watching: *War and Peace* (Prokofiev, 1959 – first uncut performance)

Reading: plot summary of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* for anyone who has not read the book

Discussion Prompt: due on myCourses by Monday at 8:00pm

Zoom: TUESDAY, April 13

We will discuss making *War and Peace* into an opera in the wartime Soviet Union.

Final Essay Assessment: self-scheduled April 19-21 on myCourses

Self-Evaluation of Engagement can be completed any time between April 13 and April 22