

Western State University of Colorado
MFA in Creative Writing: Poetry with an Emphasis on Formal Verse
Summer Intensive 2015 / CRWR 633: Poetry and Music

Professor: Ernest Hilbert
Location: Taylor Hall 229
Times: Monday through Friday (July 13-17), and Monday through Wednesday (July 20-22), 1-4 PM

Office: Taylor Hall 208C
Office Hours: M, T, W, Th: 10:00 – 11:00 AM
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Prerequisites

CRWR 600, Summer Orientation

CRWR 631, Summer 1 Intensive: Scansion Immersion

CRWR 636, Metrical and Verse Traditions I

CRWR 637, History of the English Language / Studies in Translation

Course Description

In *ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound proposed that “poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music.” How do musical elements of poetry affect us as readers and listeners? How does one write for musical settings? Before the modern era, poetry was often sung. In fact, from its earliest uses in ancient cultures, poetry has served alongside music to entertain and enlighten in both religious and secular performance. The class will address the complex musical elements of the language and ways they may be used in both written and musical environments. The class will also focus extensively on practical aspects of writing for musical setting and constructing finished song lyrics and opera libretti. Each course begins with an archival recording of a poet reading and a student recitation of the poem.

Course Objectives

This hands-on workshop, combining musical, prosodic, and theatrical elements, will examine the ways in which a librettist or song-writer goes about preparing a text for musical setting. Progressing through both brief lectures and an intensive maieutic method, students will confront their own evolving thoughts about the relationship between poetry and music. As a centerpiece of the course, students will compose a one-act opera libretto (write synopsis, select characters and setting, determine thematic focus, write both recitative and arias, arrange stage directions) and engage in detailed discussion of theories addressed in assigned reading material.

Course Topics

- How does one begin an opera? How does one establish a relationship with a composer, find a suitable topic, and secure permissions?
- How does one develop characters and create distinctive voices?
- What tactics do opera librettists deploy when writing for a composer?
- How does opera differ from fiction? From poetry? From theatrical drama? From movies?
- How does a story emerge and how should it be told in order to be set to music?
- How do song lyrics relate historically to lyric poetry?
- What qualities are added by a composer to existing sonic effects present in a poem?
- What can be accomplished in a song that might not be possible in a poem?
- What do we mean when we talk of the “music of poetry?”

Readings/Textbooks/Recommended Further Reading

What follows is a list of books I will draw upon for the course. You need not have read them beforehand, but you may want to acquire a number of them at some point after the course, in order to continue exploration of particular topics. There will also be a number of handouts in class.

Philosophy and Critical Theory

Aristotle. Malcolm Heath, trans. *Poetics*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Auden, W. H. “The World of Opera.” In *Secondary Worlds, T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures*. London: Faber and Faber, 1968. [The Edward Mendelson-edited *Complete Works of Auden, Prose*, issued in installments by Princeton University Press, has only reached 1962 with its fourth volume. However, reading copies of *Secondary Worlds* may be found on the secondary book market at reasonable prices.]

Bridges, Robert. “A Letter to a Musician on English Prosody.” In *The Musical Antiquary, Volume I, October 1909-July 1910*. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Conrad, Peter. *Romantic Opera and Literary Form*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

Freytag, Gustav. Elias J. MacEwan (trans). *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art* (English translation of *Die Technik des Dramas*, 1863). Chicago: S.C. Griggs, 1896. [This volume is scarce. However, a serviceable reproduction of the text is readily available in print-on-demand format for little money.]

Frye, Northrop, ed. *Sound and Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956.

Hollander, John. “The Poem in the Ear.” In *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Kerman, Joseph. *Opera as Drama*. New York: Random House, 1956. Reprinted, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Kirby-Smith, H.J. *The Celestial Twins: Poetry and Music Through the Ages*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999

Patel, Aniruddh. *Music, Language, and the Brain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Pence, Charlotte, ed. *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

Rupprecht, Philip. *Britten’s Musical Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

- Symonds, John Addington. *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*. "Is Music the Type or Measure of All Art?" London: John Murray, 1907.
- Weisstein, Ulrich, Ed. *The Essence of Opera*. New York: Norton Library, 1964.
- Winn, James Anderson. *Unsuspected Eloquence, A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

History

- Abbate, Carolyn and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.
- Kildea, Paul. *Britten on Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Lehman, David. *A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs*. New York: Nextbook, 2009.
- Schmidgall, Gary. *Literature as Opera*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Smith, Patrick J. *The Tenth Muse. A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1970,
- Wilder, Alec. *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Practice and Application

- Crist, Bainbridge. *The Art of Setting Words to Music*. New York: Carl Fischer, 1944.
- Istel, Edgar. *Art of Writing Opera-Librettos, Practical Suggestions*. New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1922. [This volume is scarce. However, a serviceable reproduction of the text is readily available in print-on-demand format for little money.]
- Jampol, Joshua, editor. *Living Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Thompson, Virgil. *Music with Words: A Composer's View*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Libretti and Song Compilations

- [Excerpts from numerous other libretti will be supplied in class by the instructor]
- Auden, W.H. (ed. Edward Mendolson). *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings, 1939-1973*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Particularly the introduction by Mendolson.
- Fellowes, E.H., ed. *English Madrigal Verse 1588-1632*. Oxford: Oxford University Press at the Clarendon Press, 1920.
- Gioia, Dana. "Sotto Voce: The Libretto as Literary Form." In *Nosferatu: An Opera Libretto*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2001.
- Gottlieb, Robert and Robert Kimball eds. *Reading Lyrics: More Than 1,000 of the Century's Finest Lyrics*. New York: Pantheon, 2000
- Mason, David. *The Scarlet Libretto*. Los Angeles: Red Hen Press, 2012.
- Muldoon, Paul. *The Word on the Street: Rock Lyrics*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Four Saints in Three Acts*. New York: Random House, 1934.
- Taylor, Deems [Preface]. *The Complete Gilbert & Sullivan: Librettos from All Fourteen Operettas (Complete & Unabridged)*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 1998.

*The Opera Libretto Library: The Authentic Texts of the German, French, and Italian Operas
With Music of the Principal Airs.* New York: Avenel Books, 1984.

Syllabus

Sessions will focus on original composition, student discussion, and classroom critique of original work. In the course of this eight-day intensive workshop, students will learn how to analyze poetry for its musical elements, compose a one-act opera libretto, create characters and voices, compose arias, duets, and trios, select texts for oratorio, and compose successful song lyrics. The class will listen closely to archival recordings of recited poetry, opera, oratorio, and song from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Advance assignments: Read the Malcolm Heath translation (preferred) of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Select a poem written in English since 1900 that makes use of a strongly musical style, which is to say one rich in assonance, consonance, alliteration, rhyme (internal or terminal), and rhythm. Select another poem that displays use of a plainer style, closer to prose, with less emphasis on the named qualities. Now do these poems succeed or fail? How much is too much? How little is too little? Read "Acoustics" segment of Ernest Hilbert's essay "Without a Net: Ernest Hilbert on Optic, Graphic, Acoustic, and Other Formations in Free Verse" from *Contemporary Poetry Review*.

M, 7/13

Topic: Introduction

- a) Opening remarks, aspects of aesthetics, ancient uses of sung poetry. Aristotle's concepts of tragedy and aspects of mimetic poetry distinguished from verse. *Melos*, *lexis*, and *opsis*; *protasis*, *epitasis*, and *catastrophe*; *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*.
- b) Archival recording and class recitation: "Lake Isle of Innisfree" by W.B. Yeats and "Kill Poem" by Frederick Seidel.
- c) Audit of archival recordings: Dylan Thomas reciting "Fern Hill" and William Carlos Williams "The Road to the Contagious Hospital." Whitman as symphonic poet (excerpt from "Song of Myself") vs. Emily Dickinson as hymnist ("My life closed twice before its close"). Free verse and syntactical parallelism vs. common meter and hymnody.
- d) Handouts for following class: (1) Arthur Symonds, "Is Music the Type or Measure of All Art?" from *Essays Speculative and Suggestive*, (2) Robert Bridges, "A Letter to a Musician on English Prosody" from *Musical Antiquary I*, and (3) J.D. McClatchy short essay on the role of the librettist. Libretto for Hilbert and *Sung's Red Silk Thread*.
- e) Assignment for following class: invent a setting, story, and three principal characters for a short opera. Be prepared to discuss character personality and motivation within the story and justify choice of setting. Read act 1 of *Red Silk Thread*.

Workshop: Audit of recordings will be followed by discussion with the instructor. Discussion of musical and plain poems selected by students.

T, 7/14

Topic: Opera 1

- a) Archival recording and class recitation: "The Fish" by Elizabeth Bishop and "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke.
- b) Hilbert theory of three principal tenets of successful opera: Story, Singing, Spectacle.

- c) Examples of syllabic or “patter song” (opposed to melismatic) writing for music (Gilbert and Sullivan, “Major-General’s Song” from *Pirates of Penzance*), melisma (Mark Adamo, “I Love You” aria from *Little Women*) and the ways in which music and text inform each other.
- d) Gustav Freytag’s Pyramid from *Die Technik des Dramas*. Gary Schmidgall’s Hierarchy of musical concentration in language.
- e) Parts of libretto: Recitative, aria/air, duet/trio/quartet. Patter song. Melisma. Dipodic scansion. Solfège and spoken text. Voices in canon. Repetitive sequences.
- f) Finding a suitable topic. Historical vs. modern, adaptation (Mason/Gioia) vs. original work (Hilbert/Yezzi). Recognizable characters and stories. Locating principal themes. Use of particular language for character (Mason). Discussion of “pocket” or “chamber” opera. Narrative vs. symbolic, episodic style vs. portraiture.
- g) Short remarks on opera in English, major examples of modern opera in the language.
- h) Handout: (1) David Mason on “Opera Language” from *The Scarlet Libretto*, (2) Ernest Hilbert’s essay on modern opera “An Otherwise Threatening World,” (3) and “Aspects of the Later Twentieth-century Libretto” from Smith’s *Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto*.
- f) Assignment: Prepare an aria for one of the three characters: (1) exposition of character, (2) exposition of situation, or (3) pivotal scene displaying plot twist or emotional transformation. Read act 2 of *Red Silk Thread*.

Read: Handouts from Session 1

Workshop: Live Skype session with composer Stella Sung, who will discuss the collaborative and purely musical aspects of opera composition. Students will discuss choices made for their operas: period piece or modern, adaptation or original, characters. Students will be asked to give examples of language appropriate for a given character.

W, 7/15

Topic: **Opera 2**

- a) Archival recording and class recitation: “Sunlight on the Garden” and “Bagpipe Music” by Louis MacNeice.
- b) Finding and working with a composer. Rights and properties. Green opera.
- c) Writing a key scene. Establishing setting (sing of what is physically present). Recitative/dialog.
- d) Henry Purcell and Nahum Tate, *Dido and Aeneas*, settings and styles of early opera in English.
- e) Discussion of assigned readings. Audit of scene one from Yezzi’s *Firebird Motel*. Yezzi’s use of couplets written-through as recitative, deployment of modern stage technology (radios) and traditional hymnody to create sense of alienation and suspension, lyric poem as aria, aria as poem.
- f) Bringing the characters to life. Relationships, interactions, movement, tension, traits. Magnetizing and directing audience attention. Examples from Act I, Scene 1 of *Red Silk Thread*.
- g) Practical considerations drawn from *The Art of Writing Opera-Librettos* by Edgar Istel, translated from the German by Dr. TH. Baker, G. Schirmer, Inc., New York, 1922.

- h) Handouts of (1) excerpt from Auden's libretto for *Rake's Progress*, two readings from *Sound and Poetry*: (2) "Lexis and Melos" by Northrop Frye and (3) "Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to the Text" by Edward T. Cone," and, from Virgil Thompson's *Music with Words*, (4) "Nature of Opera" and (5) "After All."
- i) Assignment: Prepare a duet between two characters. Read act 3 of *Red Silk Thread*.

Read: Handouts from Session 2

Workshop: Students will read out three arias written for characters.

Th, 7/16

Topic: Opera 3

- a) Archival recording and class recitation: "The Niagara River" by Kay Ryan and "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost.
- b) Examination of the aria/lyric. Discussion of the notion of pivotal song (expression of character). Discussion of ways in which Stravinsky set Auden's libretto. Audit of first two scenes of Act I of *The Rake's Progress*. Scan for examples of terms discussed. Vaughan Williams' choral *Symphony No. 1*, "A Sea Symphony" with settings from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.
- c) Discussion of assigned readings.
- d) Practical examples of techniques for setting contemporary opera. Excerpt from *Vignettes of Two Lovers* (LaRossa/Hilbert), aria from Last of Manhattan, "Of All Those Who Held it Would Come" from *The Bridge* (Felsenfeld/Hilbert).
- e) Handouts of (1) "Liturgy and Trope in the *War Requiem*" by Philip Rupprecht, (2) "On Writing English Opera" by Benjamin Britten, and (3) Dana Gioia's "Sotto Voce: The Libretto as Literary Form,"
- f) Assignment: Title your opera and begin writing dialogue for recitative/arioso/speech leading up to and concluding the duet and aria.

Read: Handouts from Session 3

Workshop: Student reading of arias and critique.

F, 7/17

Topic: Opera 4 / Oratorio / Requiem

- a) Archival recording and class recitation: "Sonnet [Nothing was ever what it claimed to be]" by Karen Volkman and "Whitsun Weddings" by Philip Larkin.
- b) Discussion of Britten's use of trope in *War Requiem* and thoughts on English opera. Example of Oratorio, Britten's *War Requiem*, use of Latin Mass and lyric poems of Wilfred Owen. Abstract libretto, Gertrude Stein/Virgil Thompson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Aaron Copland's *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson*.
- c) Handouts of liner notes from (1) Ned Rorem's "Evidence of Things Not Seen" and (2) "An Opening Perspective" by Gary Schmidgall, from *Literature as Opera*.
- d) Assignment: If relevant, compose an opening chorus for your opera. If not, work on another aria, duet, or trio.

Read: Handouts from Session 4

Workshop: Students to explain text selection for oratorio or "found opera."

M, 7/20

Topic: Art Song

- a) Archival recording and class recitation: “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath and “One Perfect Rose” by Dorothy Parker.
- b) Discussion of art song, song cycles. Archival recordings of poets followed by songs. How are lyric poems and songs different?
- c) Discussion of “found opera” derived from existing poems. Archival recordings of Allen Ginsberg followed by audit of Philip Glass’s setting of poems in *Hydrogen Jukebox*. Discussion of Ned Rorem’s long cycle *Evidence of Things Not Seen*. Ib Norholm settings of Robert Bly, John Berryman, Edgar Lee Masters in “Americana,” Op. 89. Comparison of several settings of Christina Rossetti’s “Song” (“When I am dead, my dearest”) by several composers, including T. Wallace Southam, Lori Laitman, Leonard J. Lehrman, Vaughan Williams.
- d) Handout of “Whistle While You Read,” David Yezzi’s New York *Times* review of *Reading Lyrics*.
- e) Assignment: Complete story. Continue work on recitative. Write synopsis.

Read: Handouts from Session 5

Workshop: Students will explain the ways in which they have used particular musical elements in composition for emphasis or mimesis.

T, 7/21

Topic: Hymn, Air, Madrigal, Bop Prosody, Spoken Word, and Popular Song

- a) Archival recording and class recitation: “As I Walked Out One Evening” and “Fall of Rome” by W.H. Auden.
- b) Examples of air and madrigal from John Dowland. Discussion of troubadour/minnesinger tradition.
- c) Discussion of poems set as hymns, William Blake, “Jerusalem.” Poets writing rock lyrics, Paul Muldoon, “Julius Caesar was a People Person” and “Owls to Athens.” Rock musicians setting traditional poetry, Natalie Merchant’s *Leave Your Sleep*, “If No One Ever Marries Me” and “The Land of Nod.”
- d) *An Evening of Elizabethan Verse and Its Music*, W.H. Auden and *New York Pro Musica Antiqua*, “Sweet Kate of Late” and “I Saw My Lady Weeping.”
- e) How do lyric poems differ from song lyrics?
- f) Richard Wilbur’s lyrics for “Glitter and Be Gay” from Leonard Bernstein’s *Candide*.
- g) Reading free verse over music. Example: Jack Kerouac. Bop prosody. Improvisation. Scoring of poems by a composer, with Hilbert’s poems with backing rock band and orchestra from *Elegies & Laments* album.
- h) Handout: “The Poem in the Ear” by John Hollander in *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*.

Read: Handouts from Session 6

Workshop: Second Skype session with composer. Critique and review of libretti. First full group table read of libretto.

W, 7/22

Topic: Presenting the Opera

- a) Archival recording and class recitation: “Advice to a Prophet” by Richard Wilbur and “Recuerdo” by Edna St. Vincent Millay.
- b) Final group table read.
- c) Discussion Hollander’s essay (time permitting).
- d) Broad review of topics covered.

Evaluation Procedures and Grading Policies

Course Grading Scale

- 100%-90% = A
- 89%-80% = B

Evaluation of Student Work

CRWR *** will use the following grading scale. I have taken the terms from the late, great Robert Fitzgerald, who used them to evaluate student exercises in his own courses on versification:

- “NB” = “A”: student demonstrates complete mastery of the assignment
- “NTB” = “B”: student demonstrates solid mastery, but with occasional flaws
- “NTG” = “C”: student demonstrates working with the assignment, but has not mastered it
- “NG” = “D”: student wrestles with the assignment, but ineffectively or incorrectly
- “RNG” = “F”: student shows little evidence of understanding the assignment
- “0”: assignment is absent or incomplete

Students must average at least a “B” on the above scale for the collective assignments in order to meet minimum requirements for this course.

Late Assignment Penalties

- Attendance – the candidate will earn a zero each week of the class if he/she does not attend discussions.
- Half-grade penalty per day that an assignment is late.
- The instructor will notify support team members (i.e., mentor teacher, school administrative representative and regional coordinator) if a master’s degree candidate misses too much class or submits assignment(s) over ONE week AFTER the due date. The team will meet and discuss ways to support the candidate in the course work.

Course Incomplete

- Only given in extreme circumstances that involve a medical, family or personal emergency. The candidate must provide supporting documentation.

Academic Polices

Special Needs Students

The MFA in Creative Writing and Western State College seek to provide reasonable accommodations for all qualified persons with disabilities. This College will adhere to all applicable federal, state and local laws, regulations and guidelines with respect to providing reasonable accommodations as required to afford equal educational opportunity. It is the student's responsibility to register with Disability Services and to contact the faculty member in a timely fashion to arrange for suitable accommodations.

Academic Dishonesty/Plagiarism

The MFA in Creative Writing operates on the assumption of honesty, integrity, and fair play by all involved. When students commit academic dishonesty of any kind, this trust is violated, whether the student acted inadvertently or deliberately. Faculty members may fail the student for the particular assignment, test, or course involved, or they may recommend that the student drop the course in question. These penalties may vary with the gravity of the offense and the circumstances of the particular case.

Academic dishonesty can be divided into four categories and defined as follows

- Cheating: Intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information or study aids in any academic exercise.
- Fabrication: Intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.
- Facilitating academic dishonesty (collusion): Intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another to commit an act of academic dishonesty.
- Plagiarism: Intentionally or knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own without proper citation.

Appropriate Classroom Behavior

The MFA in Creative Writing faculty are committed to creating and maintaining an interactive learning environment. Rude, sarcastic, obscene, or disruptive behavior and/or harassment have a negative impact on everyone's learning and therefore are not allowed in the program. When a student disrupts class in the before mentioned ways, the course professor will remove the student from the class.