

Opera and Musical Theater (MUSC 126): Syllabus

Prof. Cashner (Fall 2021)

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Course Details

Instructor

Andrew A. Cashner, PhD, Assistant professor of music
Office: Dewey Hall room 1-318
E-mail: andrew.cashner@rochester.edu
Phone (call or text): (585) 851-8552
Pronouns: he, him, his; please call me “Professor Cashner”

Meeting Times

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:40 a.m. to 10:55 a.m., Dewey Hall room 1-305

Office hours: Tuesdays, 2 to 3 p.m.; or by appointment

Resources and Materials

- The class website will always have the current schedule and course information.
- You’ll find assignments and turn them in on Blackboard.
- Course materials will either be freely available online or on course reserve in the Art/Music Library.

Course Description

Since ancient times people have used music to tell stories on stage, from Oedipus and Orpheus to Tosca and Hamilton. This course gives students the opportunity to engage closely with works of musical drama on related themes from multiple global traditions, including American musical theater, Italian opera, and Beijing opera. We will explore how composers, performers, and producers combine drama, music, staging, spectacle, and dance to create multisensory dramatic experiences for audiences. The creative contributions of women and people of color will be highlighted as we consider these controversial traditions, which have so often entertained the wealthy while reinforcing inequity but have also enabled people to question power by envisioning a new society on stage. Emphasis on discussion and group work; no prior musical knowledge or ability is required. (4 credits)

The theme this semester is **society on stage**: community, tradition, and disruption in musical drama. We will focus on these works:

Musical Theater	Opera
<i>Fiddler on the Roof</i> (Bock/Harnick)	<i>The Marriage of Figaro</i> (Mozart)
<i>West Side Story</i> (Bernstein/Sondheim)	<i>Billy Budd</i> (Britten)
<i>Falsettos</i> (Finn)	<i>La bohème</i> (Puccini)
<i>Hamilton</i> (Miranda)	<i>The First Emperor</i> (Tan Dun)

Anti-Racist Goals

Music teaching in North American universities has traditionally emphasized almost exclusively the work of European and white North American men, cultivated by the upper classes of the most powerful societies at the height of colonialism. It has also traditionally ignored or silenced any discussion of that fact. Doing so has resulted in a false, whitewashed history and the promotion of the value system and ideology of white supremacy. Moreover, this institution and others like it have historically discriminated against women and non-white people, and continues to do so in both overt and hidden or even unconscious ways. We have a moral obligation to work against racist structures, policies, and attitudes in our academic disciplines as researchers, in our classrooms as teachers, and in our university as faculty members.

In my research and teaching I am committed to the work of presenting an accurate history of music as a human activity, that gives due respect and attention to the music-making of people across social stations and in everyday life. We cannot understand, for example, the “art music” of the elite without understanding its intimate relationship with more popular and traditional forms of music-making. We must actively work to give more attention to the music of women, ethnic minorities, historically disadvantaged peoples, people of lower economic status, and people outside Europe and North America—including not just as composers but as performers, patrons, and listeners. Educators like me must work harder to make sure that we give the musical creativity of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color the central position in our histories and theories of music that it deserves.

My own training was, unfortunately, narrowly Eurocentric, and I have been working over many years to try to expand my horizons and appreciation of a broader world of music, and to sharpen my critical understanding of the power dynamics that created the white-dominated worldview in which I was raised. But I recognize I have a long way to go, and I ask for your help in identifying ways that I and my colleagues can improve our anti-racist efforts.

Learning Goals

1. Develop an understanding of how creators use music and other media to create an experience of drama for an audience, and how this works differently in different types of musical drama.
2. Develop skills in critical reading and listening so that you can analyze and interpret what a musical drama is communicating, with an understanding of the way that communication is mediated by history, culture, and personal viewpoints.
3. Develop an understanding of how musical drama shapes social and political structures, and reflect on the ethical implications of its social dimension.
4. Develop skills in active listening, verbal communication, and collaborative critical thinking, and a deepened respect for different individual and cultural points of view.

Assessments

1. For each of the eight major works on the schedule, write a short essay in which you analyze the way music and other elements create drama in one particular scene (eight short essays total; goal 1).
2. For three out of the four pairs of works on the schedule, write a longer essay in which you compare and contrast the two works, focusing on a particular theme that these works are communicating about, in your interpretation (three essays total; goals 2, 3).

3. Give a short in-class presentation on an opera or musical theater work of your choosing that is not included on the syllabus, in which you give an overview of the work and focus on the drama of a particular scene (goals 1, 4).
4. Participate actively in class discussions (goal 4).

Grading

Assignment	Percent of Grade
Short analysis essays (8)	40% (5% each)
Comparative thematic essays (3)	30% (10% each)
Presentation	10%
Attendance and participation	20% (for each class session, 1 pt. attendance, 1 pt. participation)

Please note: There will be no final exam in this course.

Grade Scale

Percent	Letter
93–100	A
90–92	A-
87–89	B+
83–86	B
80–82	B-
77–79	C+
73–76	C
70–72	C-
67–69	D+
63–66	D
60–62	D-
0–59	E

Policies

Attendance and Participation

This is an in-person, discussion-based class, so every student must participate actively in order to accomplish the course goals, and that means every student must be present. I define active participation to mean that a student was present, responded to questions, and contributed to discussions with both speaking and engaged listening.

- For each class session I will give one point for attendance (were you there?) and one point for participation (were you involved?).
- If you must miss a class, you may still earn the participation point by doing an additional writing assignment, and you may earn the attendance point by meeting with me in office hours.

Due Dates and Late Assignments

- The assignments are due at on the day and at the time listed on the schedule, via the relevant assignment portal on Blackboard.

- I am happy to grant assignment extensions or modifications as they are needed, but I must to do them in advance of the due date and in writing.
- Without an extension, I will accept late assignments for 50% credit at any time up until the beginning of the final class session.

Academic Honesty

- You must adhere to the university's policies for academic honesty. In short this means doing your own work, and not giving or receiving unfair or non-permitted help on your work.
- The university requires me to report every case of academic dishonesty to the Academic Honesty Board, and I will report every case.
- Academic dishonesty includes plagiarism, which means using other people's ideas and words with giving them appropriate credit, including verbatim copying and missing, false, or misleading citations.

Disability Accommodations

If you need a disability accommodation, please contact the Disability Office and they will let me now how to accommodate you without specifying the nature of your disability.

Creating a Supportive Classroom Community

I need your help in creative a supportive community in our classroom. I want to build a space in which students feel safe enough to take the risks necessary to engage with new ideas and develop new skills. We must be careful to avoid any kind of bullying or harrassment; and we must cultivate respect, humility, and kindness. No point of view is out of bounds for discussion, as long as we can find a respectful and sensitive way to talk about it.

I will give you opportunities for feedback throughout the course and I would ask, please let me know if there is anything I can do (or anything I need to change) in order to accomplish these goals. Please be reflective about your own contributions to the classroom environment as well.