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Italian in Performance:

Opera as a Holistic Framework for Language Pedagogy

Originating in Florence at the end of the 16th century, opera is a form of artistic expression that is most often associated with Italian culture. Yet the influence of opera is truly transnational. Opera arias and characters are part of a repertoire of images and sounds that have long been exploited in disparate manners across a range of national cultures – from operatic references in urban topography (streets and squares named after composers) to the use of opera arias in US commercials and movies.¹ These images have collectively forged a certain idea of Italianness – sometimes serious, other times ironic, comical, and even stereotypical. Because of its reach across times and cultures, opera can be a gateway to approaching socio-historical and political issues.² Yet, its richness is not often exploited by language teachers. As a result, language students rarely have the chance to be exposed to and analyze such dense works in their cultural specificity.

In this project, I explore the potential of opera for a performance-based pedagogy of language. I propose the study of one or more operatic works over the course of the semester; students will eventually focus on selected excerpts and stage and perform one or more scenes by the end of the course. The final performance will require students to work on the various elements of operatic stage

¹ For investigations on the influence of opera on cinema, see, among others, Jeongwon Joe and Rose Theresa, eds, *Between Opera and Cinema*, (New York: Routledge, 2002); Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005); Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000); Richard Abel and Rick Altman, eds, *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001). As for recent examples of the pervasiveness of opera in popular culture, see the commercial for the EA video game B.L.A.C.K., featuring “Siamo zingarelle” from Verdi’s *La traviata*; see also the commercial for HBO’s TV series *The Sopranos*, featuring “La donna è mobile” from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*.

² As Isabelle Drewelow and others have showed, many students view “language and culture as separate entities.” Drewelow, “Learners’ Perceptions of Culture in a First-Semester Foreign Language Course, *L2 Journal* 4, 2 (2012): 283-302, 283.

production (costumes, direction, singing and reciting). Although I intend to focus on Italian opera as a case study, I am going to present a set of guidelines for a performance-based language course that can be used by instructors across languages and without a musical background. Through my work, I aim not only to develop a pedagogic strategy but also to raise the students' critical awareness of cultural and historical soundscapes – crucial dimensions that are rarely addressed in the language classroom.

Before outlining the architecture of this course, I believe it is important to offer some critical and theoretical framework for the many components of my project: firstly, music and song; secondly, performance; and finally, opera. Performance-based pedagogy and, in particular, the use of song in the classroom, have been proven to be a successful method for teaching language and culture. In my theoretical research for this project, I have focused not only on the use of performance in Italian language acquisition, but on a broader variety of languages. German linguist Daniel J. Kramer highlights how songs utilize specific mnemonic codes (repetition, rhyme, and melody) that help the listeners familiarize themselves with and memorize grammatical and idiomatic structures.³ In addition, a systematic use of song in the foreign language classroom is a powerful and culturally rich tool to bridge what linguist Hiram H. Maxim calls “the various curricular dichotomies that characterize our discipline: language versus content, [. . .] form versus meaning, [. . .] cultural fact versus cultural inquiry.”⁴ With the systematic use of socio-politically relevant pieces of music, students can acquire a rich cultural background before they embark on further foreign language and content-based courses.

³ As Daniel J. Kramer writes: “The benefits of using songs in the FL classroom have been well documented. Songs offer a number of mnemonic codes, such as repetition, rhyme, and melody, that aid the listener’s memory (Abrate 11; Maley 93). Furthermore, the integration of target language lyrics and melodies into in-class grammatical lessons (e.g., a refrain that underscores the imperative, such as “Sei nicht dumm, frag warum” [“Don’t be silly, ask why”]) can dramatically enhance the student’s ability to recall specific points of grammar (Jolly 13). Since many students enjoy listening to songs in their native language, the teaching of songs in the FL classroom can help motivate students to learn the target language (Brady 459). A portfolio of songs representing diverse historical and cultural periods exposes students to various sociopolitical and historical aspects of the target language because songs are authentic texts, that is, they are written in the target language for its native speakers (Abrate 9; Gatti-Taylor 465).” Daniel J. Kramer based his own work on the research by Jaybe Halsne Abrate, “Pedagogical Application of the French Popular Song in the Foreign Language Classroom,” *Modern Language Journal* 67 (1983): 8-12; and Alan Maley, “Poetry and Song as Effective Language-Learning Activities” in *Interactive Language Teaching*, ed. by Wilga M. Rivers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 93-109.

⁴ Hiram H. Maxim, “Integrating Language Learning and Cultural Inquiry in the Beginning Foreign Language Classroom,” *ADFL Bulletin* 32, 1 (2002): 12-17, 12.

The regular employment of song in a classroom allows for the development of a performance dimension to language pedagogy. What exactly, we might ask, are the benefits of adding such a complex dimension in a classroom focused on language acquisition? Nicoletta Marini-Mayo and Colleen Ryan-Scheutz underline how a performative method promotes the incorporation of social practices across different historical times and places.⁵ Specifically, this means that performative methods offer the possibility of addressing a diversity of genres and textual modes (tragedy, satire, monologues, ensemble scenes...), therefore enhancing the acquisition of grammatical forms in context.

Moreover, Ryan-Scheutz and Marini-Mayo have shown that the creative milieu that takes place in a performance-based course has proven successful in cultivating a dimension of language that is the most neglected: the oral sphere. Performance allows for a focus on phonetics, cadence, intonation, and non-verbal language (such as gestures), thus giving students the possibility to develop an awareness of language as an extensively bodily practice.⁶ As Ryan-Scheutz and Marini-Mayo remind us, “performance is an ideal setting for communicative language teaching to unfold thanks to the interpersonal and contextualized practice it requires. When rehearsals are conducted solely in Italian, students rely on and reinforce many facts of oral communication in the social interactions that lead up to the final performance: from lexicon to morphological and syntactic normal all the way to supra-segmental (accent, stress, intonation, and length) and paralinguistic elements (kinesthetic and proxemic: gestures and body distance).”⁷ In other words, through a performative approach, language learning becomes a full immersion experience, as they create their own unique multi-faceted texts. In this way, both receptive and productive skills are stimulated and emphasized.

⁵ See “Introduction” in Nicoletta Marini-Maio and Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, eds, *Set the Stage! Teaching Italian Through Theater* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 1-18.

⁶ In particular, the non-verbal and gestural dimensions of a language are usually underestimated and ineffectively addressed in the classroom, despite the fact that non-verbal features are fundamental for the creation of meaning. Among European languages, Italian is the one that is mostly characterized by a close relationship between gestures, body language and verbal language. As Giuliana Salvato remarks, “encoding meaning in speech or in gestures depends not only on the linguistic habits that we transfer from one language into another but also on the verbal and non-verbal possibilities available in different languages.” Salvato, “The Interpretation of Emblematic Gestures in L2 Users of Italian,” in Vivian Cook and Benedetta Bassetti, eds, *Language and Bilingual Cognition* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2011), 385-405, 390.

⁷ Marini-Mayo and Ryan-Scheutz, 4.

There is yet another dimension that comes to the surface in this form of pedagogy: emotional engagement is crucial in performance, and putting together a performance requires effort, communication, collaboration, and vulnerability on behalf both instructors and students. Acknowledging and embracing the emotional dimension of language learning can strongly benefit students and help them both remember linguistic structures and develop a passionate engagement with broader cultural aspects.⁸ In my work as a scholar, as a performer, and as an instructor, I am inspired by our own Annamaria Bellezza. After working for years in the fields of pedagogy and performance, both as a actor/director and as a lecturer, in 2012 Bellezza put together the first edition of *Words in Action*, a multi-lingual and multi-cultural event featuring more than twenty language sections from UC Berkeley, including hundreds of students and instructors [Images 1 and 2]. Sponsored by the Berkeley Language Center, *Words in Action* became a laboratory for many of us GSIs and lecturers to incorporate performance in our teaching.



Image 1: Words in Action 2012



Image 2: Words in Action 2012

In her 2010 BLC article, in which she developed a performance-based course in Italian

⁸ See the research by Giuliano Iantorno and Mario Papa, “The Use of Songs in the Language Class,” *Rassegna italiana di linguistica applicata* 11, 1-2 (1979): 179-185; Yukiko S. Jolly, “The Use of Song in Teaching Foreign Languages,” *Modern Language Journal* 59 (1975): 11-14; Stephen D. Krashen, *Language Acquisition and Language Education* (New York: Prentice, 1989).

theater, Bellezza elaborates on her “belief in a humanistic affective education.”⁹ In such an approach, what is activated and fostered is not only is the intellectual side of students and instructors, but also the emotive dimension. She reminds us that a performative approach “requires empathy on the part of the instructor, and a willingness to be vulnerable, to take risks, to share ourselves through storytelling and active listening.”¹⁰ I share the same passion for such an approach – I am a fellow believer in the power of performance, to use Bellezza's expression. In designing my performance-based course, I aim to integrate this humanistic perspective with the classroom-based learning of a language.

So, finally: why opera? My choice is partly driven by the fact that music is both my specialty and my passion, as a scholar and as a singer, and I believe that I can contribute to my student’s learning by exposing them to the Italian soundscape and its socio-political context. The broad sonic aspects of Italian culture are frequently overlooked not only in the language classroom but also in Italian Studies curricula. Yet their pedagogic potential is remarkable. I experienced this first-hand as an organizer and participant in Bellezza's *Words in Action*. For this event, I proposed to stage a scene from Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* (sextet from Act III) with my students of Elementary Italian in Spring '12 [Images 3 and 4].

⁹ Annamaria Bellezza, “Teaching Italian through Theatre: A Performative Approach,” BLC Lecture, April 30, 2010, http://blc.berkeley.edu/index.php/blc/post/lecture_april_30_blc_fellows_presentations/. Bellezza bases her theory on Gertrude Moscovitz' studies: “Effects of Humanistic Techniques on the Attitude, Cohesiveness, and Self-concept of Foreign Language Students,” *Modern Language Journal* 64 (1981):149-157; *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class. A Sourcebook on Humanistic Techniques* (Boston: Heinle and Heinle: 1978).

¹⁰ Bellezza, *ibid.*



Image 1: Elementary Italian students rehearsing *Le nozze di Figaro*



Image 2: Elementary Italian students performing *Le nozze di Figaro* (Words in Action 2012)

In our staging, we updated the action from 18th-century Spain to 1970's Italy. The environment that was created in the classroom was one of enthusiastic and productive collaboration. One of the students involved in this project commented as follows: "We were able to deeply feel the passion and meaning behind the words we had been memorizing. This experience made me thirsty for more of the culture, not just the pursuit of the language itself." Other students also remarked that

learning about the culture behind specific Italian events and history was a rewarding experience:

“Working on this project, I learned about Italian music, about political and social issues, and also just how much work goes into putting on a live performance!”

My work with the students in 2012 benefited greatly from Bellezza's expertise and mentorship. However, our preparation lasted less than a month, which meant that I did not have enough time in class to explore many of the contextual aspects of the whole opera and of Italian opera. The project that I am presenting today represents the continuation and elaboration of that experience.

My choice of opera for my project is rooted in some unique characteristics of this art form: its multimedia qualities and its collaborative dimension. As a multimedia form of art, opera includes reciting, singing, and acting. It therefore offers a multilayered experience of a text, and numerous possibilities for exploring many different aspects of language, culture and history – such as the gestural one, and the use of the voice in singing and speaking. The collaborative aspect plays out powerfully in the preparation for the performance. Multiple artistic skills are involved in an operatic staging: direction, costume design, set design. For these reasons, this course would be highly translatable for different language levels, pedagogical needs, talents, and interests (of students and instructors), and specific dimensions could be stressed according to the requirements of each course.

So, how do we stage scenes from an opera in the language classroom? How do we integrate texts that are so complex in terms of performativity, linguistic features and layers of significance while using them as pedagogic tools? To answer these questions, I am going to briefly outline the teaching units for a 5 week-long course in a second semester Italian classroom – a course which can be expanded into upper levels of language proficiency and, time-wise, into a full semester course. Driven by my wish to make this project as accessible as possible, I have created a website, *Cultura in Performance*, in which I offer all the material that I have created – assignments, videos, opera selections – and that can be used by instructors according to their needs [Image 5]. While the learning

material is for a course based on Italian opera, the structure can be easily adaptable for different languages and language levels. Moreover, the blog section will feature interviews and contributions by educators, students and activists who use performance as a pedagogic tool.



Image 5: Click here for the Cultura in Performance website

In designing this course, the first step is to select operas. These should be suitable for historical, musical, and critical analysis in the classroom, and useful for significant linguistic goals according to the language level. A few operas that can be explored are the following:

- ⤴ Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) – Written by an Austrian composer, it is sung in Italian and set in Spain, and it offers the basis for a reflection on the representation of European cultures and globalization.
- ⤴ Rossini's *La cenerentola* (1817) – As the re-writing of a text with which most students will be familiar (*Cinderella*) it presents itself as a rich field for comparison.
- ⤴ Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1816) – It features some of the most popular opera arias that have become almost clichéd in popular culture; an analysis of this opera would help the students to place the opera back to its historical context, consider its cultural legacy, and then re-interpret it in the light of contemporary sensitivity.

- ▲ Verdi's *Falstaff* (1883) – The plot of this opera draws from several Shakespeare's plays (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*; *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Part 2*). Its intertextuality and comedic features make it a particularly fruitful text to analyze and perform in the language classroom.
- ▲ Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (1918) – Musically groundbreaking because of its harmonic dissonances and innovative style, this one-act opera is based on a story from Dante's *Inferno* and its protagonists are a re-elaboration of characters from the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*.

As seen above, my selection ranges from 18th-century opera to 20th-century *verismo* works, from Mozart to Puccini. In the case study that I want to present in this paper, I chose to concentrate on *Le nozze di Figaro*. Premiered in 1786, this opera was composed by Mozart with an Italian libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte. It was based on the French stage comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais, *La folle journée, ou Le mariage de Figaro* (1784). *Le nozze* exemplifies the transnational character of opera: written by an Austrian composer, it's sung in Italian and set in Spain. The story unfolds over the course of a single day, and revolves around Susanna and Figaro, the two trusted servants of the Count and the Countess of Almaviva. Susanna and Figaro are in love and about to get married, but the Count, a ruthless womanizer, decides to reinstate the *ius primae noctis* (or *droit du seigneur*), which states that he has the right to have sex with Susanna precisely because she is getting married with his own servant Figaro. Susanna is aware of the Count's plan, and she reveals it to her fiancé and to the Countess. Together with Figaro and the Countess, she will try to prevent the Count from acting on his desires while, at the same time, they all get caught up in a web of misunderstandings, in a true operatic comedy of errors. Weaving complex socio-historical into a comedic story, this opera is particularly suited for analysis in the classroom. Its libretto, written in the late 18th-century, is definitely a complex text and it requires particular care and attention from the part both of instructor and students, and I want to show how it is possible to successfully take advantage of its richness even in an Italian 1 or Italian 2 classroom.

In designing my course and selecting this opera, I first outlined the broad cultural goals. The following are some major topics to take into consideration:

- ♣ The representation of European cultures and globalization within an European context (How did the Italian librettist approach a French play? How did they portray the Spanish characters and milieu?);
- ♣ Gender roles and relationships (*ius primae noctis*; presence of subversive female characters; discussion of gender stereotypes in the form of arias - see: “Aprite un po’ quegli occhi”);
- ♣ Class struggles (aristocracy vs. working class in the 18th century) – both in the libretto and in the music (is the music for aristocratic characters different than that composed for the servants?);
- ♣ An introduction to 18th-century operatic music and musical tropes.

These broad topics represent the guidelines for the whole course. The specific teaching units for my 5-week course are the following:

- ♣ **Week 1:** *What is opera? – Familiarizing students with opera*
- ♣ **Weeks 2 and 3:** *Focus on a specific opera – Context, text, music*
- ♣ **Weeks 4 and 5:** *Staging as learning – Staging *Le nozze di Figaro**

During **Week 1**, students will be guided, through mini-lectures and assignments, to an understanding of opera as a genre. Our goals will be to get familiar with opera and building a vocabulary to talk about it. This will be achieved through several assignments. Among them,

1. Discussion on pervasiveness of opera at a societal level in contemporary Italian (and not only) culture (references in pop culture, research and discussion);
2. Presentation of historical origins and formal structure of an opera, and introduction to basic music notions/terminology (e.g., differences between 18th-century opera and 19th-century Romantic opera; voice types - soprano, tenor, mezzo soprano, baritone) through short

lectures, handouts, and screenings;

3. Introduction to basic music technical terms (which are used in Italian in any language; these are terms or expressions that they know already - *lento*, *allegro*, *veloce*, *rubato*, *rallentando*...).

While, in this context, I cannot go in depth into the specific assignments for each unit, I listed some of them in the *Appendix* following this paper; moreover, you can find a wider selection and a more thorough explanation of these assignments in the dedicated section of my website.

As we move onto **Weeks 2 and 3**, the class will focus on a selected opera – in our case, *Le nozze di Figaro*. The goal for this unit is to provide students with tools to analyze and think critically about a text in all its dimensions—verbal, non-verbal, dramatic, and musical. Students will be exposed to different stagings of the opera so that they can become aware of the proliferation of meanings in a text once it is brought to life in a performance. Moreover, students will also focus on linguistic and analytical strategies so that they will be able to present their own original performance of the opera in the final unit. The following are some of the activities in which the students will engage in this unit:

1. Introduction to a selected opera. Example: *Le nozze di Figaro* (Mozart/Da Ponte);
2. First reading of the libretto (or selected excerpts);
3. Analysis of the libretto in class: what type of text is this (comedy? tragedy? psychological? realistic?); who are the main characters? How are they characterized? At a first reading, how is the language different from the Italian we've studied so far? (we'll go into linguistic details when working on specific scenes);
4. Screening of the entire opera in several installments;
5. Selection and analysis of specific scenes that are relevant for musical/cultural reasons (the students would express their preferences with the instructor's guidance);

6. Screenings (in class or as homework) of selected scenes in different productions.

Once again, I created several assignments for this unit – some of which you can find in the *Appendix*.

Finally, **Weeks 4 and 5** are the phase in which performance and staging become part of the learning process. By this point, students are already familiar with the characters, their motivations, gender and societal roles, and the historical perspective. In this unit, students will focus on the performance of the text: they will recite different scenes in class, and will focus on correct and clear pronunciation, rhythm and intonation, and on non-verbal communication (gestures, body language, pauses). In doing so, they will learn how to reflect on the ambiguity and proliferation of meaning in the literal, dramatic and musical interpretation of complex texts. Collaboration and teamwork are also essential in this phase, as the students stage their own adaptations of one or more scenes.

The preliminary work for this unit will be to discuss with the students the specific practical aspects of opera performance based on their own interests. Students will choose tasks from the areas of singing/acting, costumes/staging, or direction.

Once again, I do not have time to go in depth into the specific exercises for this week. But I want to offer an example of the type of analytical work in which students will be involved. For this purpose, let us turn to two scenes from Act I and act II: in the first one, Susanna is revealing to Figaro, her fiancé, that the Count has reinstated the *droit du seigneur* in order to have sex with her. In the second one, a similar situation is taking place: Susanna is confessing the same story to the Countess – who, in turn, complains about the infidelity of her husband:¹¹

¹¹ For the Italian libretto, I am referring to the sources in the Stanford opera archive *Opera Glass* (<http://opera.stanford.edu/>): *Le nozze di Figaro*, libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, <http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/figaro.htm>

Atto I, Scena 1

SUSANNA:

Il signor Conte,
stanco di andar cacciando
le straniere bellezze forestiere,
vuole ancor nel castello
ritentar la sua sorte,
né già di sua consorte, bada bene,
appetito gli viene ...
[...]
Ei la destina [la dote e la
stanza]
per ottener da me certe mezz'ore ...
che il diritto feudale ...

FIGARO:

Come? Ne' feudi suoi
non l'ha il Conte abolito?

SUSANNA:

Ebben; ora è pentito,
e par che tenti riscattarlo da me.

Atto II, Scena 1

LA CONTESSA:

Dunque volle sedurti?

SUSANNA:

Oh, il signor Conte
non fa tai complimenti
colle donne mie pari;
egli venne a contratto di danari.

LA CONTESSA:

Ah, il crudel piu non m'ama!

SUSANNA:

E come poi è geloso di voi?

LA CONTESSA:

Come lo sono i moderni mariti: per sistema
infedeli, per genio capricciosi,
e per orgoglio poi tutti gelosi.

Act I, Scene 1

SUSANNA

My lord the Count,
weary of pursuing beauties
from far and near,
wants to try his luck again
within his own castle walls.
But it is not his wife, mind you,
who whets his appetite.
[...]
He bestowed it [this room and my dowry]
in the hope of a few half-hours of dalliance
which feudal right... [ius primae noctis/ droit du
seigneur]

FIGARO

What! On his estates
has the Count not abolished all that?

SUSANNA

Maybe, but now he regrets it,
and intends to redeem it with me.

Act II, Scene 1

COUNTESS

So he wanted to seduce you?

SUSANNA

Ah, my noble lord
would hardly flatter a woman of my station
to that extent;
he came with a business proposition.

COUNTESS

Ah, the cruel man loves me no longer.

SUSANNA

Why then is he jealous of you?

COUNTESS

He's like all modern husbands, compulsively
unfaithful, naturally headstrong
and jealous out of pride.

These scenes are dense in terms of socio-ideological nuances, and it is impossible to analyze their complexities (for instance, social class tensions between the characters). But what I want to bring to light at the moment is how, by reading only the libretto, they can be immediately interpreted as two

tragic moments in the story: Susanna reveals that she is aware that the Count wants to have sex with her without her consent, and she discusses it with her own fiancé and with the Count's wife. For these reasons, it would seem likely that a performance would highlight the emotional distress of characters. Yet, when looking at several productions of this opera, we find that these scenes are traditionally staged in a comedic fashion. In addition, in most contemporary stagings Susanna is revealed to be the strongest character – not focusing on her own dangerous situation but instead consoling Figaro and the Countess who, in turn, both appear to fall into despair at Susanna's exposure of the Count's foul behavior.

In considering such complex scenes, students would first read and analyze the libretto; then re-write the dialogues in contemporary Italian, and perform their own versions, first in small groups and then in front of the class. This activity would be the starting point of a conversation on gestures and non-verbal communication, characters' motivations, on the different tone and atmosphere of every interpretation, and on the critical responsibility in interpreting a text. Only at the end of this process would they be asked to watch and discuss the scene as staged in different productions – an activity which would bring to light even more surprising interpretations, as I have mentioned above.

Once students are acquainted with the numerous ways in which to manipulate a dramatic text – and the responsibilities that come with it – their own creative process will take place. The students, together with the instructor, will select one (or more) suitable scenes, according to the number of students willing to perform. Each production group will be asked to start imagining their own version of the staging for the selected scene: in which historical time and place is their opera set? What is the age, gender, and social class of their protagonists? What are the musical dynamics – forte, piano... – that they want to explore in acting and singing? Once the performance details are set, students will use class time to bring props, costumes, and start rehearsing: students in charge of singing and acting will practice in class, with the support of those responsible for costumes and direction.

This final teaching unit that I have just outlined, as well as the whole course, is one that is both complex and rewarding. At the end of this learning experience, students will be able to articulate their artistic choices in terms of historical, political and cultural issues central to the opera; they will have contributed to the interpretation of a text according to their own sensibility and personal experiences, and their perspectives will have evolved over the course of the semester, both through individual scrutiny and collective investigation. Also, they will be able to identify how different modalities of expression – musical, textual, gestural – can drastically transform the meaning of a text. Finally, they will (hopefully) be able to enjoy and be inspired by their own original creation, informed by an in-depth knowledge of the text. Through this process, a new community will be born: one in which students are not only learners of a language, but also critics, performers, directors, storytellers. In other words, both the affective dimension and the various cultural and linguistic areas will be activated and developed as the students partake in this holistic experience.

What will this community of language learners and performers look like? Instead of explaining it in words, I want to show you. In the link below, you will find a video of students from my Italian 1 section in Spring '12. As I mentioned above, we staged a sextet from *Le nozze di Figaro's* Act III for the first edition of Words in Action, rehearsing for about a couple of weeks. The scene portrays the moment in which Figaro, due to complicated financial circumstances, is about to be forced to marry Marcellina, an older aristocrat friend of the Count's. Because of a birthmark on his arm, Figaro is unexpectedly recognized as the son of Marcellina, and of her old lover Bartolo, also present in the scene. At this joyous moment of recognition, Susanna storms into the scene with the sum of money necessary to release Figaro – but she is surprised and furious, as she witnesses Figaro embracing Marcellina. What happens next, you'll find out in *this video [click here]* – enjoy!

Appendix

Design of Teaching Units

Case study: Italian 2 or upper

Module length: 5 weeks + rehearsal time (2-4 meetings outside class time)

Teaching Units:

- ▲ Week 1: *What is opera? – Familiarizing students with opera*
- ▲ Weeks 2 and 3: *Focus on a specific opera – Context, text, music*
- ▲ Week 4 and 5: *Staging as learning – Staging Le nozze di Figaro*

Week 1 – What is opera?

Sample assignments

1. In-class discussion about each students' experiences (if any) of opera, in smaller groups and eventually in plenum; conversation on first reactions or preconceptions about opera.
2. *Homework:* students are asked to look for videos, films, songs, pop culture items in which opera is referenced or quoted; then, in-class presentations and discussion: what is the effect of having operatic pieces embedded in a different context/medium? Why is opera specifically used in each of those instances?
3. The instructor creates grammar assignments which feature references to the cultural issues covered each week [see **Example 1 below**].
4. Creation of a collective opera/theater vocabulary on a GoogleDoc that the students can edit. Students are asked to contribute to the GoogleDoc with new theater/opera-related terms over the course of the semester.

Example 1: *Excerpt from a longer assignment created for my Italian 1 section, Spring '12*

“Conosci le Nozze di Figaro? *Ecco la storia!*”

- ▲ Riempi gli spazi con le *preposizioni semplici o articolate*, e con *sapere o conoscere*.
- ▲ Fai attenzione a “molto/molti/molta/molte”

Le avventure de *Le nozze di Figaro* iniziano **molti anni** fa, nel 1780. La storia ha luogo [takes place] _____ palazzo _____ Conte Almaviva, _____ Siviglia _____ Spagna. E' il giorno _____ nozze di Susanna e Figaro. Susanna e Figaro sono i camerieri personali [valets] _____ Conte di Almaviva e _____ Contessa Rosina. Loro sono **molto amati** da tutti. La Contessa è **molto contenta** _____ i due innamorati, ma il

Conte vuole rovinare [spoil] la festa. Lui ha deciso che vuole andare a letto con [sleep with] Susanna. Il Conte può fare questo perchè ha reintrodotta [reintroduced] una legge feudale, la *ius primae noctis*: questa legge dice che il padrone può fare l'amore con la figlia _____ servo. Però Susanna è arrabbiata: lei vuole stare solo _____ suo vero amore, Figaro.

La Contessa ha un paggetto [page-boy] che si chiama Cherubino. Lui la aiuta sempre. Tuttavia [however], Cherubino comincia a innamorarsi _____ Contessa.

All'inizio [at the beginning], il Conte non lo _____ [sapere/conoscere]. Ma quando lo capisce, lui è **molto arrabbiato**. Dà a Cherubino il lavoro di capo _____ suo esercito [army], per allontanarlo [send him away] _____ Contessa.

Nel frattempo [in the meantime], la Contessa ha scoperto il piano _____ Conte. Lei è **molto triste**: lei ha capito che suo marito non la ama. Però lei non vuole abbandonare tutte le speranze. [...]

Weeks 2 and 3 – Focus on a specific opera (*Le nozze di Figaro*)

Sample assignments

– Work on libretto only:

- ▲ In class, the students are divided in different groups; each group chooses one of the protagonists (covering all the main characters: Conte, Contessa, Susanna, Figaro, Cherubino).
- ▲ At home, each student is asked to write a composition about the selected character, also focusing on a particular scene in which the character appears: How is the character described? How does s/he relate to the other characters? What is the character's background? Any incoherencies or details that they would modify?
- ▲ The instructor collects and corrects the compositions.
- ▲ The instructor gives back the corrected compositions; in class, the students working on the same character discuss their own views. Then, collective discussion about all the characters.

– Work on libretto and music/staging [See Example 2 below]:

In class: analysis of a scene, focusing on the musical and gestural characterization of the different characters.

- ▲ What kinds of instruments are used to portray different characters?
- ▲ How does the music and the singers' voices manage to convey the presence of characters that are absent in the scene but present in the dialogue?
- ▲ How does the music contribute to create different atmospheres/tones? (minor/major tones, crescendo and diminuendo, dynamics...)

At home: Watch the same scene in a different production: how does the acting (gestures, tone) and the staging affect the meaning of the words and of the story/characters?

Future assignment: Focus on how the music (specific instruments or musical phrases) portray or stereotype specific actions/emotions/genders.

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| <p><i>Example 2</i></p> <p><i>Atto I, Scena 1</i> SUSANNA: Il signor Conte, stanco di andar cacciando le straniere bellezze forestiere, vuole ancor nel castello ritentar la sua sorte, né già di sua consorte, bada bene, appetito gli viene ... [...] Ei la destina [la dote e la stanza] per ottener da me certe mezz'ore ... che il diritto feudale ...</p> <p>FIGARO: Come? Ne' feudi suoi non l'ha il Conte abolito?</p> <p>SUSANNA: Ebben; ora è pentito, e par che tenti riscattarlo da me.</p> | <p><i>Act I, Scene 1</i> SUSANNA My lord the Count, weary of pursuing beauties from far and near, wants to try his luck again within his own castle walls. But it is not his wife, mind you, who whets his appetite. [...] He bestowed it [this room and my dowry] in the hope of a few half-hours of dalliance which feudal right... [ius primae noctis/ droit du seigneur]</p> <p>FIGARO What! On his estates has the Count not abolished all that?</p> <p>SUSANNA Maybe, but now he regrets it, and intends to redeem it with me.</p> |
| <p><i>Atto II, Scena 1</i> LA CONTESSA: Dunque volle sedurti?</p> <p>SUSANNA: Oh, il signor Conte non fa tai complimenti colle donne mie pari; egli venne a contratto di danari.</p> <p>LA CONTESSA: Ah, il crudel piu non m'ama!</p> <p>SUSANNA: E come poi è geloso di voi?</p> | <p><i>Act II, Scene 1</i> COUNTESS So he wanted to seduce you?</p> <p>SUSANNA Ah, my noble lord would hardly flatter a woman of my station to that extent; he came with a business proposition.</p> <p>COUNTESS Ah, the cruel man loves me no longer.</p> <p>SUSANNA Why then is he jealous of you?</p> |

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| <p>LA CONTESSA: Come lo sono i moderni mariti: per sistema infedeli, per genio capricciosi, e per orgoglio poi tutti gelosi.</p> | <p>COUNTESS He's like all modern husbands, compulsively unfaithful, naturally headstrong and jealous out of pride.</p> |
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Weeks 4 and 5 – Staging as learning

Preliminary work: Production Groups

1. Discuss with the students the specific aspects of opera performance in which each student is interested: 1) singing/acting; 2) costumes/setting; 3) direction.
2. According to their preferences and to the number of students willing to perform, students and instructor select one or more suitable scenes.

Sample assignment 1

1. Discussion of relevant linguistic details of selected scene: verb tenses, sentence structure, idiomatic expressions, archaisms... **[See Example 3 below]**
2. Each group is asked to find a way to re-write the dialogue in the scene in contemporary Italian, respecting the tone and the formal/informal features of the dialogue.
3. Students practice reciting their own versions of the dialogues, first in small groups and then in front of the classroom. They give each other comments and feedback, guided by a worksheet.

Sample worksheet: Pay attention to your classmates' performances. Using the notes you took for your own group's performance, write down a few sentences for each of the following questions.

- What are some elements that you chose to perform differently compared to the performances you are watching? \
- What kind of tone did your classmates chose for their scene? (ironic? serious? farcical?)
- Did they interact between each other through their body language and gestures? Did you learn a new gestures from their performance?

Example 3

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| <p>Act III, Scene 2 [<i>excerpt</i>] MARCELLINA (<i>embracing Figaro</i>) Recognise in this embrace your mother, beloved son.</p> <p>FIGARO (<i>to Bartolo</i>)</p> | <p>Atto 3, Scena 2 [<i>excerpt</i>] MARCELLINA (<i>abbracciando Figaro</i>) Riconosci in quest'amplesso una madre, amato figlio!</p> <p>FIGARO (<i>a Bartolo</i>)</p> |
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| <p>My father, do the same, and let me no longer be ashamed. BARTOLO (<i>embracing Figaro</i>) Resistance, my conscience no longer lets you rule. (<i>Figaro embraces his parents.</i>)</p> <p>CURZIO He's his father? She's his mother? It's too late for the wedding now.</p> <p>COUNT I'm astounded, I'm abashed, I'd better get out of here.</p> | <p>Padre mio, fate lo stesso, non mi fate più arrossir. BARTOLO (<i>abbracciando Figaro</i>) Resistenza, la coscienza far non lascia al tuo desir. (<i>Figaro abbraccia i genitori.</i>)</p> <p>CURZIO Ei suo padre? Ella sua madre? L'imeneo non può seguir.</p> <p>CONTE Son smarrito, son stordito, meglio è assai di qua partir.</p> |
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Grammar/linguistic notes:

- Marcellina (older, upper class) to Figaro (younger, servant): use of informal language (second person singular).
- Figaro to Bartolo (older, upper class): use of formal language (second person plural, archaic)
- Rhyme patterns
- Poetic elision of the “e” in the infinitive (“arrossir” - “arrossirE”, to blush). Poetic choice, but also in use as a regionalism in Northern Italy → discussion on dialects and regional expressions
- Use of antiquated words: “imeneo”, “ei”, “desir”, “amplesso.” Work on synonyms.

Sample assignment 2

Students are asked to start imagining how to stage the scene, first individually and independently from their production group. They will be given a worksheet with some guidelines according to their group:

- ♣ *Setting/Costumes:* Historical time? Place? Age and gender of characters? Social class?
- ♣ *Direction:* Gestures? Relationships between characters? How to underline the differences between the characters?
- ♣ *Singing/Acting:* Pronunciation and pauses, gestures, dynamics (forte, piano, rallentando, accelerando, rubato...)

N.B. The groups are porous, there can/will be overlapping.

Students will present their ideas to those belonging in their production group. Finally, each group will submit a proposal for the staging and will present their ideas to the whole class. During Week 5, they also start gathering materials (props, costumes...) and use the time in class to start rehearsing the scene(s).

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