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Italian in Performance:

Opera as a Holistic Framework for Language Pedagogy

** Website: ItalianInPerformance.wordpress.com **

Possible operas to explore

- ✠ 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.

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?***
- ✠ Weeks 2 and 3: ***Focus on a specific opera***
- ✠ Week 4 and 5: ***Staging as learning***

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 reintrodotto [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:

1. 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).

2. 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? *[See Example 2 on page 4]*

3. The instructor collects and corrects the compositions.

4. 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:

1. **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...)

2. **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?

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

Example 2

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.	*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.
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 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.

Weeks 4 and 5 – Staging as learning

***Preliminary work*: Production Groups**

Discuss with the students the specific aspects of opera performance in which each student is interested:

1) singing/acting;   2) costumes/setting;   3) direction.

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

Act III, Scene 2 [*excerpt*]	Atto 3, Scena 2 [*excerpt*]
MARCELLINA *(embracing Figaro)*	MARCELLINA *(abbracciando Figaro)*
Recognise in this embrace	**Riconosci** in quest'amplesso
your mother, beloved son.	una madre, amato figlio!

FIGARO *(to Bartolo)* My father, do the same, and let me no longer be ashamed. BARTOLO *(embracing Figaro)* Resistance, my conscience no longer lets you rule. *(Figaro embraces his parents.)* CURZIO He's his father? She's his mother? It's too late for the wedding now. COUNT I'm astounded, I'm abashed, I'd better get out of here.	FIGARO *(a Bartolo)* Padre mio, **fate** lo stesso, non mi fate più **arrossir**. BARTOLO *(abbracciando Figaro)* Resistenza, la coscienza far non lascia al tuo desir. *(Figaro abbraccia i genitori.)* CURZIO Ei suo padre? Ella sua madre? L'imeneo non può **seguir.** CONTE Son smarrito, son stordito, meglio è assai di qua **partir**.

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.