Opera consists of a collaboration among a number of arts: sets, costumes, and theatrical expertise must accompany the basic mixture of dramatic language and music. One of opera’s most revered composers, Giuseppe Verdi, commented, “Anything can be set to music, true, but not everything will be effective,” and opera history is littered with interesting examples of varied compositional assimilations of literature.

Composers have turned to a variety of literary sources for their libretti (operatic texts). While the short, and not entirely accurate, definition of opera is “a play set to music,” libretti have been taken from mythology (the first operas in the early 1600s were mythologically-based), novels, short stories, epics, and poetry, as well as plays. Each play, story, novel, or poem presents unique challenges and felicities, which the composer and librettist may heighten, transform, and, in instances, distort or misinterpret. You will read the original sources of a selected list of operas in paperback editions, as well as the libretti fashioned from them. You will be provided with historical background on both the literary source and the resulting opera, after which you will be asked a number of questions involving analytical thinking (see next paragraph). The operas are carefully chosen to represent a variety of answers to these questions. While you are not required to read music, you will be given a basic vocabulary with which to describe what you hear.

Basic questions for each source-libretto pair would include the following: What was the attraction of that source for the composer? What structural changes were made in the libretto-writing process and why? This is an important question. No literary source can be transplanted as is to the operatic stage because of what I label “opera time.” It takes significantly longer to sing lines of text than to speak them. Were certain characters in the original source drastically altered in their operatic personalities, and, if so, why? How does each opera fit in its cultural context? Are there political implications? With that last question in mind, have modern directors chosen to put a different spin on an opera, and, if so, why? Such productions fall into the category of Regietheatre. Why would a director locate Gluck’s Iphigénie en Tauride on another planet? (I saw this production in Munich, Germany.) Why transport Ruggero Leoncavallo’s Pagliacci to Naples just post-WWII? Seeing Placido Domingo arrive in a tail-finned pink Cadillac on the stage of the Washington National Opera was one of my more memorable opera experiences! The Metropolitan Opera’s magazine Opera News always includes reviews of productions.

There will be two exams, the second one not cumulative and offered on the day of the final exam. Each exam will require command of factual information and discussion
points from each class plus one essay. I will give you a review sheet of terms and hold a review session outside of scheduled class time.

At some time during the last eight classes of the semester, after the practice of studying the assigned operas and hearing my explanations, you will be required to make a 20-30 minute oral presentation in class on an opera that was not assigned. You must pick the topic by the midterm in advance and have it approved by me. The class period before your presentation, you will provide the class with a plot synopsis of your opera (I will make copies for you, if you would like, or upload it to Blackboard). Many opera synopses are available on the Internet, and *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* provides synopses and helpful historical information under the opera’s title. (It’s a wonderful resource, and you might want to start with it.) After providing the appropriate historical background, you must pose and answer the kinds of analytical questions you will have heard applied to the assigned operas. Students must critique each presentation as a part of their grade, and I will give each of the presenters a detailed individual commentary and grade.

I encourage you to go outside the chronological boundaries of my selections. Why not pick an opera earlier than Mozart’s? George Frideric Handel’s *Rinaldo* is based upon a famous epic poem of the sixteenth century and contains some of his most gorgeous music. Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* is based upon the Roman poets Ovid and Virgil. Virgil’s *Aeneid* was the basis of Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* with its fabulous closing lament and chorus. Why not pick an opera later than Britten’s *The Turn of the Screw*? John Adams’ recent *Dr. Atomic* draws upon a number of libretto sources, including John Donne. The British composer Thomas Adès has recently written an opera on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Samuel Barber based *Vanessa* upon a story by the Danish author Isak Dinesen. The American composer Leonard Bernstein based his *Candide* upon Voltaire---Cunegonde sings a spectacular coloratura aria, “Glitter and be gay.” Robert Ward based his opera *The Crucible* upon Arthur Miller’s play; it deals with the Salem witch trials. Giuseppe Verdi’s operas rule the stage: *Rigoletto* is based upon a play by Victor Hugo---this choice would involve you in operatic censorship and some of opera’s greatest music. Is there a more dramatic ending to any opera? Why not explore the works of an 18-20th-century composer not on this list? There are hundreds of them. You might wish to consider a work by Giacomo Puccini, one of the world’s most beloved opera composers. Some famous composers struggled with opera, producing just one example each---Beethoven with no fewer than 3 versions of *Fidelio* and Claude Debussy with *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Igor Stravinsky, with the collaboration of W. H. Auden, drew upon prints by William Hogarth for *The Rake’s Progress*. There are many other operas besides the few I’ve cited, and I encourage you to find your own.

You must find a CD or DVD of your opera and pick two selections for the class to hear. I will not allow you to play it on your laptop: laptop speaker sound is too tinny, and the images too small for the entire class to enjoy. I will be happy to advise you about choices. If you have not studied the language in which your opera is written, you must consult with me about proper pronunciation well before your scheduled presentation. I’ll be giving you instructions about pronunciation through the semester, but you will, of course, want to pronounce the specific foreign words of your presentation correctly, especially since I take off a letter grade for consistent mangling of the language.

The goals for this course: you will no longer be passive opera listeners and will have discovered music you will love for a lifetime. You will know the basic terms with
which opera is defined. You will have listened to a diverse assortment of operas. You will learn to wonder why a particular opera was created, to discover where you can go for information and background, and to pose the sorts of analytical questions that require detailed examination.

OUTLINE OF CLASSES
The basic terminology of music and of opera (2 classes)

The operas below date from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, and come from Germany, Austria, France, England, and Russia. The questions I ask below are intended to be leading ones, and there are many more that can be posed about each.

The lure of the exotic “Other”: Prosper Merimée, Carmen, and Georges Bizet, Carmen
A shocking novella is transplanted to a Parisian opera stage patronized by the proper middle class. What accommodations had to be made?

An Irishman’s French play becomes a German opera: Oscar Wilde, Salome and Richard Strauss, Salome
Why were Decadent artists and writers so fascinated with Salome? What are her literary antecedents? How did Wilde interpret her? Why did Strauss interpret her so differently?

Turning an early 19th-century dramatic fragment into an Expressionistic masterpiece: Georg Büchner, Woyzeck, and Alban Berg, Wozzeck
What attracted Berg to a much older, incomplete play? Why would this fragment attract the artistic generation of the 1920s? How would Berg organize the disparate scenes into a coherent libretto?

From politically-charged French comedy to Italian musical hi-jinks: Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Le barbier de Seville, and Gioacchino Rossini, Il barbiere di Siviglia
Beethoven loved this opera! What did Rossini do with a libretto that had already been set to much acclaim by another composer (Giovanni Paisiello)?

From politically-charged French comedy to Italian opera buffa in Austria: Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Le mariage de Figaro, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Le nozze di Figaro, K.492
No mystery that the daring librettist Lorenzo da Ponte and Mozart would want to stage this politically explosive play. What did they have to do to it to bring it to the imperial stage? How do Beaumarchais’ characters differ from Da Ponte’s and Mozart’s (the Countess would be the focus of this question)?

Missing the Ironic Tone: Alexander Pushkin, Eugene Onegin, and Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Eugene Onegin
What aspects of Romanticism do you find in these two works? Why would Tchaikovsky choose Pushkin’s poem and what about his own life would have driven his treatment of it?

**Shakespeare on the opera stage:** William Shakespeare, *Othello*, and Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello*

What boldness! The librettist omits most of an entire act. Why? Verdi turned to Shakespeare for the last two operas of his long and prolific operatic career. How faithful were he and his librettist to their literary source?

**Why would you put ghosts who never speak in an opera?:** Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, and Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*

On the face of it, this novella poses near-insuperable problems. Two major characters are children, and the two ghosts never say a word in James’s novella, which can be interpreted as either a psychological drama or as a genuine ghost story. How did Britten and his librettist decide to deal with these challenges, and what drew Britten to this story in the first place?