

## Concerto for Classroom: Teaching with Classical Music and Opera as Historical Sources

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HISTORIANS have become increasingly adept at incorporating multiple forms of media into our classrooms. In addition to our traditional reliance on text, historians have become adept at using visual evidence like art, photography, and film to spark classroom discussion and bring history closer to students. Video especially holds little terror for the historian of today, who can pull up nearly *anything* on YouTube to illustrate a lecture or spark discussion. And yet historians who might be able to decipher the most abstruse symbolism of a medieval altarpiece or analyze the encoded political viewpoint of a seemingly innocuous Hollywood film will assiduously avoid classical music. Teachers might use a song to set the mood of a class or discuss the social impact of rock music on the 1960s generation gap, but how many historians actually discuss *the music*—the way in which composers and songwriters use rhythm, harmony, and melody to create art? Historians who can easily invoke Kant or Rousseau in a discussion of the Enlightenment will ignore Haydn or Mozart, just as historians who can properly discuss the place of Langston Hughes or Zora Neale Hurston in the Harlem Renaissance are likely to ignore the equally profound contributions of William

Grant Still or Florence Price to American culture. For all that AV equipment has invaded the classroom, if it weren't for dialogue and narration, most historians wouldn't need the audio components that our universities spend money on.

The reason for this is disarmingly simple. Of all the arts, music alone requires a specialist language to discuss it. Any dissection of the arts requires a technical vocabulary, but one can define "impressionism" or discuss how a film is edited in standard English. To describe a musical melody accurately—without resorting to maddeningly vague descriptors like "lush" or "driving"—requires knowledge of time signatures, chord structures, and harmonic values that are not normally the provenance of non-musicians. The matter only becomes more complex when we move away from popular music (where the lyrics provide a peg for a discussion to hang on) and into the realm of classical music. Textbooks may include passages about Beethoven's relevance to Romanticism in early nineteenth-century Europe or his opposition to Napoleon, but rarely is anything significant actually said about his music. Historical research has been reluctant to engage with classical music as part of its canon of evidence for this very reason, and so it perhaps is no surprise that discussion of music has been even slower to enter the history classroom.<sup>1</sup>

When instructors do turn to music as a teaching tool, it tends to be through popular forms of music—primarily rock, blues, and folk music. This is not surprising, given the accessibility of such genres, based on dance forms and frequently with lyrics that help buttress interpretation. Those genres link with crucial historical topics such as the experience of the Great Depression, race relations in the United States, or the countercultural revolutions of the 1960s. Many of the pedagogical studies on the use of music in non-music classes also tends to focus on U.S.-centric topics, presumably because both teachers and students are more familiar with and are more easily able to understand such native and popular music.<sup>2</sup> In addition, many discussions of using music in the history classroom are targeted towards secondary educators, although such articles still have useful methodological advice for collegiate instructors.<sup>3</sup> Teaching non-U.S. cultures is difficult enough, but adding foreign genres of artistic expression on top of that (especially in a world history class where one might have to cover centuries and continents in one class

meeting) can be a daunting task, leaving European and world history teachers somewhat adrift. As a historian whose research involves musical culture and whose classroom frequently incorporates music, I have some suggestions to help.

The purpose of this article is to give the history teacher who is interested in or passionate about music—but nervous about transforming that passion into a useful classroom lesson—some resources, tools, and ideas to begin incorporating music into their teaching. It will focus on what is arguably the most difficult musical genre to teach with: the European tradition of art music, including opera. Such music is often regarded as being far away from the world of contemporary popular music, and art music may be the genre students are least likely to casually listen to. However, it is an incredibly rich resource for classroom instruction, and the underlying principles can be applied to more popular forms of music or to non-Western musical traditions. The dramatic principles inherent in opera provide another way to combine audio and visual sources to drive student discussion. Music is yet another method of reaching students by engaging them with something they are likely to have opinions about and have at their fingertips (given the ubiquity of streaming services and unlimited smartphone storage); and since music is used to market goods, enforce informal social boundaries, and serve as a marker of identity, training students to think as critically about music as we train them to think about texts and visual media is a vital part of equipping them to live in the modern world.<sup>4</sup> Finally, classical music will be attractive to students who are interested in the arts and in musical performance who might otherwise find history a little remote. As historians and history teachers, we ignore the power and potential of music at our peril.

### **Resources and Technical Issues**

The first basic problem with teaching music in the classroom is language. It can be hard enough for musicians and musicologists who know how to describe music to do so for a non-specialist audience; how on earth is a non-musical historian supposed to cope? Mercifully, to teach music effectively in the history classroom does not require an advanced musicology degree. Having a basic grounding in musical principles and an acquaintance with musical vocabulary is

usually sufficient to communicate with an undergraduate audience. (Indeed, this may be one of those occasions where it can be difficult to teach subjects that one is an expert in, as my earliest attempts to explain “atonality” to a freshman survey class demonstrated.) So what resources might you need if you wish to bone up on the basics before wandering into the classroom? If your university has a music appreciation course as part of its curriculum, it can be worth checking out the textbook used by the Music Department. It will be written for a non-specialist audience and should explain all the basics you need to know; as a bonus, you might be able to pull examples from it should you need to demonstrate that your course is teaching “across the curriculum.”

Failing that, one of the best introductions to music for a lay audience was written by one of the greatest American composers. Aaron Copland’s *What to Listen for in Music* was first published in 1939 and has remained in print ever since. It is written in the clean and simple manner associated with his most popular compositions like *Appalachian Spring* or *Rodeo*.<sup>5</sup> The first half of the book is probably the most useful for those looking to be able discuss music, as it breaks down the four basic elements of music—rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone color—and explains each in clear, non-technical prose. And while the book focuses on art music, Copland refuses to condescend to jazz and popular music: “There is no reason why you should not use the jazz band as a way of practicing how mentally to disconnect separate musical elements. When the band is at its best, it will set you problems aplenty.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it can be a useful guide for those who want to discuss music of whatever kind in the classroom. A second excellent resource for those looking for models and vocabulary in discussing music for a non-generalist audience are the episodes of the 1950s television program *Omnibus*, hosted by Leonard Bernstein. In addition to being one of America’s greatest conductors and composers, Bernstein had a flair for generalist musical education. Although these programs date from the dawn of television, they are still excellent generalist approaches to topics like “The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach,” “Introduction to Modern Music,” and “What Makes Opera Grand?” These and the other *Omnibus* episodes have been released on DVD (and Bernstein published the scripts), making them another valuable resource for those looking for models on how to discuss music.<sup>7</sup>

If you have a music collection, finding the audio examples to use in class will probably be quick and painless. For those who still cherish the compact disc, I do advise converting the individual tracks you want into computerized MP3 files; these tend to be more convenient to use in smart classrooms, and you won't have to worry about loading and unloading multiple discs during a class session. For those who don't have the music they want in a personal collection, many schools (especially those with large music programs) may subscribe to services such as the Naxos Music Library, which has millions of recordings that can be streamed in class.<sup>8</sup> Check with your library to see what services they might have. And of course there is YouTube, which will probably have several versions of any piece of music you could possibly imagine. Some videos will feature concert performances with orchestras playing, while others might have a synchronized score for the more musically inclined to follow along with. If you are uncomfortable pulling a video up in class, it is possible to convert YouTube videos into MP3 files—with the legal disclaimer that you should obey all copyright and licensing laws before doing so.<sup>9</sup>

If you are using multiple clips in a class, there are numerous ways to organize them. It may seem counterintuitive, but PowerPoint is a surprisingly good tool for organizing multiple audio files—especially if you plan on using music in conjunction with art or photographs. Once a musical track is stored on your computer as an audio file (MP3 works best, but PowerPoint can also deal with Windows Media Player files and MIDI files), it can be added to your PowerPoint presentation by going to the “Insert” ribbon and clicking on “Audio.” Once a musical file is uploaded to your presentation, you have several options to help you work with it. PowerPoint allows the user to trim audio tracks down to just the portions needed and program fade-ins and fade-outs that can hide rough edits. The audio track can also be bookmarked, allowing you to jump to various points within the same track. You can choose to start the music track either automatically as you change slides or manually in case you need to discuss an image or material on the slide before playing the music. Prior to loading your completed PowerPoint to a USB drive or a classroom computer, I also recommend clicking on the “File” ribbon and selecting “Optimize Media Capacity.” This removes trimmed and cropped audio-visual elements, compresses the file size, and generally reduces potential

problems with playing the presentation on another computer. Reduces—but may not solve. As always when using audio-visual elements, have a back-up plan in place so that when the computer inevitably malfunctions or misbehaves, you can still run a class session. Then you're ready to start teaching with musical sources.

### **Contextualizing Music with Art**

One of the easiest ways to get students involved with classical music is to contextualize it in the classroom with art. Students (and professors) tend to be more comfortable with the analysis of visual sources, and those sources can help to provide context for the more unfamiliar terrain of music. This is especially helpful in general education classrooms, where teachers will be working with students of widely varying skill levels and interests. Both music and art can then be used to reinforce ideas from textual primary sources as well, creating a rich environment that can help to immerse students into the atmosphere of a historical period, thus creating a sense of “historical empathy” that will better allow students to understand the era in question, as these cultural artifacts can then be used to help further explain social and political movements that were active at the time.<sup>10</sup> The music and art can help students connect the more logical analysis of a formal text in a visceral manner that reinforces those lessons.

One place where I find this method works particularly effectively is in a class session titled “The Age of Anxiety,” which explores the cultural shocks and aftershocks of World War I. In both my general education world history class and my upper-division Modern Europe class, this is used to explore the sense of cultural dislocation brought on by the physical and social destruction of the Great War; in later classes, these ideas will be used to help explain the rise of global communism and fascism. While this period is relatively rich in photographic and filmed material that communicates the level of misery and destruction caused by the war, many students can be blasé about such images—perhaps desensitized by the amount of such imagery we have been forced to view in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But abstract art and modernist music still have some power to shock, as most students' experience of art is representational and traditional. In that sense, an artistic approach to the social and

political upheavals of the post-WWI era can provide the historical empathy needed to provide insight into how Europeans might have felt and reacted in the aftermath of the war.<sup>11</sup>

The first part of this lesson involves comparing Cubist paintings with excerpts from Igor Stravinsky's 1913 ballet score *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*). This starts by examining artworks like Georges Braque's *Woman with a Guitar* (1913) and Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907) to discuss how Cubism moved away from representational art to focus on the underlying structure of the artistic subject, as Cubist artists made images out of geometric shapes to represent the subject rather than reproduce the curves and lines that exist in nature.<sup>12</sup> This introduces students to the idea of abstraction. As the instructor, I then suggest that Stravinsky's rhythmic experimentation is doing something similar—reducing music to its underlying forms. The evidence for this argument is “Glorification of the Chosen One” from Part II of *The Rite of Spring*. (Depending on the amount of class time you have, this can be followed with “Evocation of the Ancestors,” which provides some musical contrast while making the same point.) Students can usually quickly pick up on the violent shifts in tempo and dynamics that mark the work, along with the fact that Stravinsky rarely uses a consistent rhythm; all of this is unsettling, and quite different from most students' experience of music, as modern pop music tends to be very consistent in terms of rhythm, dynamics, and tempo. It is even more useful to accompany the music with images from the original production, which feature primitivist costumes and show the dancers in awkward poses that suggest the provocations of Vaslav Nijinski's original choreography—which famously so enraged the opening night audience that the premiere turned into a near riot.<sup>13</sup> All of this can develop into a discussion of European fears about modernity even before the outbreak of World War I swept the old certainties away.

This class then continues with a discussion of the art of the interwar period, focusing on the Surrealist movement, especially Salvador Dalí's paintings such as *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), otherwise known as “that melting clock poster,” and Otto Dix's portraits of the horrors of post-war life like *The Skat Players* (1920), which features veterans who have been turned into automatons, all of their body parts blown off in the war having been replaced with prostheses. The class can discuss how Surrealism's attempt to probe the subconscious

came out of a war that hardly seemed logical or rational to its combatants. This leads to the compositions of Arnold Schoenberg, whose atonal music, while deeply logical in its construction, is so untethered to Western musical norms that it seemed irrational to many. (Schoenberg's music may take more instructor explanation than Stravinsky's does—at minimum, you probably will have to explain the concept of atonalism or serialism to the students—but this also demonstrates how unsettled post-war European culture was.) The selection worth pulling out here is the Theme and Variation I sections from his *Variations for Orchestra* (1928). The Theme is about as clear an example of an atonal twelve-tone row as exists (short of playing an example on the piano), and Variation I sounds quite different, albeit with the same basic underlying pattern. One thing that students will frequently say after hearing the *Variations* is that it sounds like music from a horror movie. Schoenberg's music, by moving away from Western norms of tonality, often creates a sense of unease and discomfort in most listeners. And many classic Hollywood horror scores use these techniques for that very reason. (Indeed, there is a reason many of the classic horror movies were turned out during the Great Depression—as a way of sublimating people's fears.) If students can intuit that imaginary horror of watching a movie into an understanding that many people felt such dread was becoming a cultural norm, another layer of historical empathy has been added.

In addition to art, textual primary sources can be a further way of contextualizing the music, which adds yet another layer of interpretation. For upper-division classes, I use much the same structure described here (which is my go-to lesson for survey courses), but add in more material. In this case, selections from Sigmund Freud's *Civilizations and Its Discontents* (1930) pair nicely with modernist music, especially the sections that deal with death drive and man's instinctual aggression.<sup>14</sup> *The Rite of Spring* (especially "Glorification of the Chosen One") can sound quite militaristic, and given that Freud himself cites the Great War as an example of man's aggression helps to tie the cultural expressions of the 1920s to the intense destruction of the war itself. Thus, the modernist art and music of the early twentieth century becomes an ideal matrix through which to examine the cultural fears of Europeans in the wake of World War I, and this can then be used as more

evidence in later class sessions as to why Europeans would turn to radical political solutions like communism and fascism. This use of a diversity of cultural sources is an excellent way to communicate a zeitgeist that can otherwise seem abstract to modern students.

### **Opera and Nationalism**

Although it might not seem immediately apparent, opera can be an excellent way to teach about social and cultural topics. While there is a certain amount of cultural resistance to opera in the United States, the combination of music, drama, and spectacle make it likely to engage interest in a way that orchestral music might not. Purely from an anecdotal perspective, I've found that moaning and groaning students are more open to engaging with opera when told they are not required to *like* an operatic excerpt; they only have to analyze it the way they would any other primary source. (And a few even do come to enjoy it!) With advent of subtitled DVDs, it is easy to play clips and have students understand exactly what is happening onstage. The key to making opera excerpts work in the classroom is to contextualize them the way one would do with any other audio-visual clip: explaining elements within the clip that might not be immediately obvious to students and working through how an intended audience would have received the work.

Though many Americans still persist with the stereotype that opera is the province of wealthy and stuffy elites (thank you, Groucho Marx and *A Night at the Opera*), European opera of the nineteenth century was often popular entertainment. Opera houses generally had aristocratic patrons, but audiences came from a larger swath of society. French opera houses had a solid bourgeois audience base, while Italian opera houses of the period stretched as far as artisans, although the popular classes were more like to attend comic operas than tragedies during the first half of the century.<sup>15</sup> Opera was one of the early forms of modern consumer culture that was marketed to an audience of mixed social classes. Furthermore, opera clearly represented social, political, and intellectual concerns of the day, even when disguised as historical romances set in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> It is safe to say that opera in the nineteenth century was representative of the views of people across several social classes, not just the aristocrats who built Europe's opera

houses. Remote and effete was not how Europeans in the nineteenth century experienced opera, and this makes it a valuable primary source for the history classroom.

As with any source, teachers will need to be prepared to contextualize the more problematic aspects of these works, especially depictions of race and gender. In most operas composed before the late twentieth century, the portrayal of non-European and non-Caucasian peoples tends to fall on a spectrum from embarrassingly exotic to downright offensive. The character of Monostatos in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 1791 opera *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*) is perhaps the quintessential example. The libretto describes him as a "Moor" and he spends much of his stage time menacing Pamina, the innocent heroine. And as if the specter of a Black man menacing a Caucasian woman wouldn't have established his villainous character firmly enough for a late eighteenth-century audience, Monostatos was also given these unfortunate lines to sing: "Because a Black is ugly, / Have I, then, been given no heart?"<sup>17</sup> However, teachers should be hesitant to dismiss *The Magic Flute* from the classroom, given its potential richness of as a source for getting at a popular understanding of Enlightenment philosophy and social theory. Indeed, since Monostatos seems to have been modeled after a Nigerian that Mozart may have met at a Viennese Freemason lodge, *The Magic Flute* might well be a tool for teaching about the complex history of race in Europe, provided the character is properly contextualized.<sup>18</sup>

In most modern productions of *The Magic Flute*, producers try to avoid the question of race altogether by finding ways to costume or portray Monostatos that eliminate the racial element, usually reducing the character to some sort of cartoon in the process. When choosing a filmed version of an opera to show your class, keep in mind that many modern opera productions—especially those originating in Europe—may update or change the setting and time period of the opera, make alterations to characters, and add other layers of interpretation to the staging; be sure to preview DVDs or streaming performances before using them in class. Previewing is also a good idea to make sure you aren't showing your classes anything you wouldn't want to explain to your dean, as I did once with a hurriedly borrowed library copy of *Aida* that featured topless dancers. Operas that feature non-European characters such as *Otello*

(1887), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), or *Turandot* (1926) should be checked for blackface, yellowface, and other retrograde cultural stereotyping. While opera has embraced color-blind casting, vestiges of older practices are sometimes difficult to shake: it took until 2015 for the Metropolitan Opera to abolish blackface makeup for *Otello*, and most productions of *Turandot* still employ embarrassing levels of Chinoiserie that match Giacomo Puccini's overripe score, which has been characterized as "a dumpster fire of misogyny and racism."<sup>19</sup>

But when contextualized properly, opera is an extremely useful vehicle for discussing any number of cultural and social issues in their historical context—and perhaps nowhere more clearly than in a discussion of nationalism. The composer Giuseppe Verdi was an integral part of the culture of the *Risorgimento*, the movement to unify Italy into a single nation-state that built upon the idea of a shared Italian past and culture, and many of Verdi's works embrace nationalist themes and tropes. In my survey courses, I use the chorus "Va, pensiero" from Act III of *Nabucco* (1842) to illustrate how ideas of nationalism permeate nineteenth-century culture. The class begins with a discussion of what nationalism is based on excerpts from Ernest Renan's "What is a Nation?" (1882), leading towards the idea that a nation is an identity built around a common past and a common goal for the future (usually after going through the list of things that do not constitute a nation, like language and religion).<sup>20</sup> This is then followed by a brief lecture outlining the historical situation in Italy in the nineteenth century that introduces students to the *Risorgimento* and outlines the multiple factors that were hindering Italian unification; then I introduce Verdi and the idea that opera was one of the most important cultural factors on which Italian unification could be built—and was recognized as such in the nineteenth century.

And thus to *Nabucco*. The plot is inspired by the biblical story of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who is struck down with madness as punishment for blasphemy. The chorus "Va, pensiero" is sung by a group of exiled Hebrew slaves who are mourning their exile and longing for their homeland:

Fly, thought, on wings of gold;  
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,  
where soft and mild, the sweet airs  
of our native land smell fragrant!

...

Oh, my country so lovely and lost!  
 Oh, remembrance so dear and so fraught with despair!  
 Golden harp of the prophetic seers,  
 why dost thou hang mute upon the willow?  
 Rekindle in our bosom's memories  
 and speak of times gone by!<sup>21</sup>

The reliance upon a past history to bind a group of people together is the main idea of this chorus, and students can usually point to the specific references to a shared past in the lyrics. The music of the chorus is slow, hushed, and solemn; students frequently pick up on the idea that the music reflects the communal loss and suffering in the lyrics. The chorus concludes with the prayer, “Lord imbue us / with fortitude to bear our sufferings!” which can be related back to Renan’s idea of a common goal—the Hebrews are looking towards the future. After this analysis, I contextualize the chorus by pointing out that *Nabucco* premiered at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, which in 1843 was under the control of the Austrian Empire. Italians in Milan would have understood the parallel between the Babylonian conquerors and the Austrian occupiers of northern Italy. Add to this a long tradition of the chorus serving as representatives of the Italian people, and the weight of nationalism in the chorus becomes quite evident.<sup>22</sup>

“Va, pensiero” also opens my discussion of Italian nationalism in some of my upper-division European history classes, but with more advanced students, I add a second Verdi selection for discussion: Act I, Scene 2 of *Simon Boccanegra*, often called the “Council Chamber Scene.” Set in fourteenth-century Genoa, this sequence can be used to show how nationalists imagine and interpret their past in light of the present. Verdi wrote the Council Chamber Scene for an 1881 revival of the opera, which had originally premiered and flopped in 1857; it thus can be seen as a comment on the *Risorgimento* and the way those ideals were understood in post-unification Italy. Before watching the scene, students have heard a lecture on the *Risorgimento* and read Giuseppe Mazzini’s “Duties of Man” (1860), which stresses how nationalism will benefit the working class by uniting Italy across the numerous divides of social hierarchy. Given that the scene itself features both an evocation of Italy’s history and an onstage riot by the plebians of Genoa, these ideas are the key to unlocking the meaning of Verdi’s music for the students.

The Council Chamber Scene opens with the Doge of Genoa (Simon Boccanegra) meeting with his twenty-four councilors (twelve each for the plebeians and the patricians), his Maritime Consuls, and other government officials. After accepting tribute from the King of Tartary, the Doge asks his councilors to vote on the following proposition:

The same voice that thundered a prophecy  
of glory and then of death on Rienzi  
now thunders on Genoa. Here is a message  
from Petrarch, the hermit of Sorga;  
he pleads for peace with Venice...<sup>23</sup>

Here, Verdi encompasses two facets of Renaissance history that were idealized by Italian patriots during the *Risorgimento*: the political career of Cola di Rienzo (or Rienzi) and the literary career of Francesco Petrarca (or Petrarch). Rienzi was lauded by those advocating Italian unification in the nineteenth century as someone who attempted to do much the same thing in the fourteenth century. Although Petrarch is cast by the Doge as a diplomat, this is interrupted by a reminder of Petrarch's literary heritage, "Let the singer of the blonde / Avignonese look after his rhymes!" In less than a minute, Verdi is able to invoke the *Risorgimento* tradition of looking to the glorious moments of Italy's past—especially the Renaissance—as a model for the present. While this portion of the scene may require some direct explanation for the students, it does help to set up the stakes for what follows.

This opening is immediately followed by a tumult outside the council chamber, which is then invaded by a plebian mob bent on revenge for the abduction of Amelia Grimaldi (an act they believe was carried out by a patrician politician). The Doge and Amelia calm the crowd, the former with a short arietta calling for peace and unity:

Plebeians! Patricians!  
Heirs to a fierce history,  
...  
here brother turns against brother  
and you tear at each other's heart.  
...  
I weep for the deceptive  
gaiety of your flowers,  
and I cry "Peace!",  
I cry "Love!"

The last few lines launch a massive ensemble of reconciliation. In discussion, students are usually able to link this back to Mazzini's "Duties of Man" and its call for class unification and the idea that nationalism is the way to overcome societal strife.<sup>24</sup> Some students may draw parallels between the conflict in the opera and the conflict that had just concluded during the process of unification. And really attentive students will note the way Verdi reflects this in his music. The music denouncing the plebian and patrician infighting is highly dramatic: the Doge sings a descending vocal line punctuated by loud and violent brass chords. But when he calls for peace and love, the brass is replaced by a smooth string line; the Doge's vocal line becomes legato and slowly rises in tone, projecting a sense of calm and authority. The fact that this music continues into the following ensemble helps to suggest that Italians will eventually follow the path of peace and unity. The whole scene itself is quite colorful and exciting, but it makes the point that great artists can embed ideas in their work without necessarily making them overt or didactic.

### **Music, Imperialism, and Orientalism**

Opera and classical music are also excellent tools for teaching European imperialism, especially the fraught question of how Europeans viewed and represented non-Europeans; a large subsection of European art music in the nineteenth century was built around depicting foreign landscapes and soundscapes musically. Classical music offers an ideal way to talk about European depictions of "otherness" and provides a valuable alternative to the ubiquitous Pears' Soap advertisements that pop up in discussions of European imperialism. (Not that there's anything wrong with using Pears' Soap ads; I do myself with great frequency.) Because music is more abstract than text or visual art, it can be a good way to ease into potentially difficult conversations about race, stereotyping, and cultural appropriation; classical music can feel just distant enough that it won't raise the hackles of certain students. And it is quite easy to pivot to broader discussions about what we can do when confronting outmoded ideas that continue to have influence in today's society.

When discussing the relationship between art music and imperialism in a class, I find it helpful to begin with a brief overview of the concept of Orientalism following from Edward

Said's *Orientalism* (1978), since much of the musical language that Europeans used to depict other cultures is Orientalist. It may be worth reminding students that this definition is not how Europeans themselves understood the term in the nineteenth century, where it was applied to people who were experts in Eastern cultures. Instead, Said's redefinition of the term emphasized the ways in which cultural stereotyping is used to justify economic and political interference in other countries, which is still useful in an artistic context, since European imperialism was at least in part the impetus for Orientalist music and art.<sup>25</sup> I find it best to lay out theoretical ideas like this rather quickly (unless conducting an advanced seminar) and then circle back to them once the class has covered some concrete examples of how such ideas actually work. Therefore, I transition very quickly to a discussion of Orientalist music.

This boils down to a quick four-point definition of what Orientalist music sounds like:

1. Chromatic melodies that tend to repeat.
2. Strong rhythmic impulse, even at slower tempos.
3. Use of high woodwind instruments, such as piccolos and oboes.
4. Use of non-standard percussion instruments: triangles, castanets, and gongs especially.

With the exception of the first point, all of this is easy for non-musicians to comprehend. The only real musical stumbling block is explaining the term "chromatic" to non-musicians. Pointing out that a chromatic scale is what happens when you play both the white and black keys on a piano in order seems to help; but, ultimately, the easiest way to make the point is to play a piece of Orientalist music with a sinuous chromatic melodic line. I like to use the orchestral "Dance of the Priestesses of Dagon" from Camille Saint-Saëns' opera *Samson et Dalila* (1877), a slow and seductive melody that illustrates each of the four points clearly. It is also worthwhile pointing out to students at this juncture that the geographic regions covered by Orientalism are quite varied. While most music meeting these criteria seems "Middle Eastern," it has also been used to depict North Africa, India, and Southeast Asia—as well as Spain and Latin America, regions we typically think of as belonging to the West. This helps to make the point that Orientalism is not about accurate depictions, but rather stereotypical depictions of cultures.<sup>26</sup>

The clearest example of the way in which Orientalist music can be used as an imperialist device is Act II, Scene 1 of Verdi's *Aïda* (1871), which shifts back and forth between Orientalist and non-Orientalist music. The scene features Amneris, the daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh, awaiting the return of her fiancé Radamès while surrounded by her slaves. (To help set the scene, the stage directions state that "Moorish slave boys dance and wave feather fans.") The slaves sing a chorus celebrating Radamès' victory over the Ethiopians:

Now wreath of triumph glorious  
The victor's brow shall crown,  
And love o'er him victorious  
Shall smooth his warlike form.<sup>27</sup>

The music for the slaves' chorus is built around a highly rhythmic pattern that sounds more like chant than a song, with plenty of exotic percussion such as triangles. By contrast, Amneris' interjections, sung as asides ("Come, love, with rapture fill me, / To joy my heart restore!") replace the percussion with a lush backing of strings, while the mezzo-soprano sings an arcing vocal line that contrasts with the more limited vocal range of the slaves' chorus. This scene is then followed by a short ballet sequence that reverts to Orientalist music heavy on the rhythmic element. Each time the Orientalist music plays in this scene, it is to accompany the singing and dancing of slaves—not the Egyptian Amneris, who is the stand-in for Europeans in this opera.

There is a gender dynamic at play here that should not be ignored. Orientalism was heavily gendered, portraying a feminine and seductive East as a foil against which a masculine and rational West could measure itself. Edward Said himself noted that this scene from *Aïda* was a perfect example of the Orientalism "in which sensuality and cruelty are inevitably associated."<sup>28</sup> This feminized sensuality is usually destroyed at the climax of tragic nineteenth-century European operas, especially when the lead female character is represented by Orientalist tropes—not only *Aïda*, but figures like the title characters of *Madama Butterfly* and *Carmen*. Critics like Catherine Clément and Susan McClary have argued that much of opera—indeed, much of the art music in the European tradition—has been built upon sexualized violence in which men (or tropes associated with masculinity) have suppressed female characters and feminized voices.<sup>29</sup> Although in *Aïda*, the message is slightly muddled by making Amneris the agent of vengeance, she is clearly associated with the male figures of power

in the opera (the King of Egypt and the High Priest) and her lower, mezzo-soprano vocal range marks her off clearly from the more traditionally feminine soprano Aïda.

The use of *Aïda* as an example of Orientalism is extremely pertinent because it demonstrates just how much of Orientalism and otherness was constructed by Europeans and not based in an objective sense of geography or culture. After all, neither Aïda nor Amneris was “European” even in nineteenth-century terms, but there is a clear distinction between Aïda as the outsider and Amneris as the daughter of the pharaoh. The whole point of this scene—indeed, the whole point of the entire second act—is to emphasize the subjugation of the Nubians to the Egyptians. Amneris repeatedly emphasizes that Nubian princess Aïda is her slave. Verdi hammers home the message in the following scene of the opera, the famous “Triumphal Scene” that follows the confrontation between Amneris and Aïda. To the strains of a brassy march (probably the most famous music that Verdi composed; your students will recognize it, even if they are unaware of its origin), the remnants of the Nubian army are paraded before the Egyptian pharaoh and Amneris to emphasize Egyptian power over the barbarian other, although as Catherine Clément has noted, Aïda’s supplicatory stance throughout the opera and resignation to death in the final act finds more echoes in the Christian faith of the opera’s authors.<sup>30</sup> The historical context that cements an imperialist interpretation of *Aïda* is the fact that the libretto developed from a short story by the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette. Mariette thought that his story might be the basis for an opera to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal, although the canal was in operation by the time Verdi first saw the story.<sup>31</sup> Given that *Aïda* is based on a story by a French Orientalist and associated (at least in the popular imagination) with one of the key imperialist projects of the nineteenth century, it is not too much of a stretch to place an Orientalist reading on the work to see how it aligns with the goals of European imperialism.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

The tradition of European art music might not seem like the most obvious place to go looking for sources of evidence to discuss social and political change in the history classroom. And it is impossible to deny that using classical music as a historical source may require

more preparation and explication than do other non-textual sources such as photographs or films. (I say “seems” because in my experience, few historians stop to consider how factors like shot composition and framing can change the interpretation and meaning of a visual source. Authorial intent and intervention doesn’t apply only to textual sources.) But using music in the classroom brings rewards that far outweigh the challenges. It can be yet another inroad to history to attract students with diverse interests beyond the social sciences. And far from being a dead tradition, European art music was created within and reflects a web of politics, social class, race, gender, and modernity that is certainly not a million miles away from our own web of such forces today.

But perhaps most importantly, by showing students how to use art music as a historical source and requiring them to think about musical context beyond their basic emotional responses to the music, we as instructors help them to develop a context for thinking about the music and culture that they consume on a daily basis. Teaching students that art and culture is not ideologically neutral is a valuable lesson, especially in this day and age when (perhaps unfortunately) so much of our identity is built around the culture we consume. Students are intelligent enough to understand direct references to politics in lyrics, but may miss the substrata that can be mined by placing music in broader historical and socio-political contexts. Having students learn historical facts and analysis is an important part of what we do in the classroom; however, equally if not more important are the skills they learn in the history classroom that they can apply elsewhere in their lives. By learning how to analyze and use classical music as a historical source, students will learn to analyze and decode the culture that is a part of their everyday lives for the messages it sends and the power it holds. Whether or not they remember the historical significance of *The Rite of Spring* or *Aïda* past the final exam is almost irrelevant if they can use those skills to make ethical and informed choices about the music and culture they consume in their daily lives.

## Notes

1. On the methodological problems and potentials of combining music and history, see the essays in Jeffrey H. Jackson and Stanley C. Pelkey eds., *Music and History: Bridging the Disciplines* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); and Celia Applegate, *The Necessity of Music: Variations on a German Theme* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

2. Such studies include Theo Cateforis, "Sources and Storytelling: Teaching the History of Rock Through Its Primary Documents," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 2009): 20-58; Chris Stone, "Blood at the Root: 'Strange Fruit' as Historical Document and Pedagogical Tool," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 2 (January 2004): 54-56; Donna M. Binkiewicz, "Tunes of the Times: Historical Songs as Pedagogy for Recent US History," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 4 (August 2006): 515-520.

3. See Anthony M. Pellegrino, "Employing Music in the History Classroom: Four Models," *The Social Studies* 104, no. 5 (2013): 217-226; Scott Allsop, "'We Didn't Start the Fire': Using 1980s Popular Music to Explore Historical Significance by Stealth," *Teaching History: The Secondary Education Journal of the Historical Association* 137 (December 2009): 52-59; Julie Anne Taylor, "From the Stage to the Classroom: The Performing Arts and Social Studies," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 2 (February 2008): 235-248.

4. Such sociological implications of music are discussed in Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

5. *What to Listen for in Music* has been reissued frequently as a mass market paperback, usually with new introductions and commentary by luminaries like critic Frank Rich and conductor Leonard Slatkin in each new iteration. For this essay, I have consulted Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: Mentor, 1999).

6. Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, 80.

7. *The Archive of American Television Presents Leonard Bernstein: Omnibus*, originally aired 1954-1958 (E1 Entertainment, 2010, DVD); the scripts are reprinted in Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (1959; Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2004), although the number of printed score examples may be off-putting to those who do not read music. More information about these shows can be found at <<https://www.leonardbernstein.com/about/educator/omnibus>>.

8. See <<https://www.naxosmusiclibrary.com>>.

9. See Lance Whitney, "How to Convert YouTube Videos to MP3 Files," *PC Mag*, October 19, 2021, <<https://www.pcmag.com/how-to/how-to-convert-youtube-videos-to-mp3-files>>.

10. Pellegrino, "Employing Music in the History Classroom," 218.

11. Much of this lesson draws on Modris Eksteins' classic *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (1989; Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2000).

12. Much of my discussion of art is drawn from Paul Johnson, *Art: A New History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), which is written with focus on placing

art in its historical context and spends a great deal of time on non-Western art; on Cubism, see 655-665.

13. Although in popular memory it was the music of *The Rite of Spring* that caused the insurrection of the Parisian *haute monde*, Eksteins and most other credible historians make the point that it was the dancing and the costumes that provoked the audience; orchestral concerts of the score later the same season were greeted warmly by Parisian audiences.

14. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), esp. 68-70.

15. James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 244-245; John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 40-46.

16. Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Paul Robinson, *Opera and Ideas: From Mozart to Strauss* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

17. English translation from the libretto for *Die Zauberflöte* available online at <[https://www.aria-database.com/translations/magic\\_flute.txt](https://www.aria-database.com/translations/magic_flute.txt)>.

18. See Alyssa Howards, "Beyond the Glockenspiel: Teaching Race and Gender in Mozart's *Zauberflöte*," *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 1-13.

19. The trenchant analysis of *Turandot* is by Patrick Clement James, "Turandon't," *Parterre Box* (blog), October 13, 2017, <<https://www.parterre.com/2017/10/13/turandont-2/>>, which also addresses the glitteringly tacky Franco Zeffirelli production used by the Metropolitan Opera since 1987; see also Braktkton Booker, "Metropolitan Opera to Drop Use of Blackface-Style Makeup in *Otello*," *NPR.org*, August 4, 2015, <<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/08/04/429366961/metropolitan-opera-to-drop-use-of-blackface-style-makeup-in-otello>>.

20. Ernest Renan's "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" is available in many primary source readers and online; I use the version edited for James M. Brophy, et al., eds., *Perspectives from the Past: Primary Sources in Western Civilizations, Volume 2*, third ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 524-529; on the *Risorgimento* more generally, see Krystyna von Henneberg and Albert Russell Ascoli, "Nationalism and the Uses of Risorgimento Culture" in their edited volume, *Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Berg, 2001), 1-26.

21. English translation from the liner notes to Giuseppe Verdi, *Nabucco*, cond. Giuseppe Sinopoli (Deutsche Grammophon: 1983, CD).

22. Philip Gossett, "Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in *Risorgimento* Opera," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2, no. 1 (March 1990): 41-64. On the ways in which Verdi's music is more generally political, see Robinson, *Opera and Ideas*, 155-162; and on his link with *Risorgimento* ideals, see Mary Ann Smart, "Liberty On (and Off) the Barricades: Verdi's Risorgimento Fantasies," in *Making and*

*Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg, esp. 105-107.

23. English translation from the liner notes to Giuseppe Verdi, *Simon Boccanegra*, cond. Claudio Abbado (Deutsche Grammophon: 1977, CD).

24. As with Renan, I use the version of Mazzini's "Duties of Man" in James M. Brophy, et al., eds., *Perspectives from the Past: Primary Sources in Western Civilizations, Volume 2*, third ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 518-522, but this source is available from a variety of outlets.

25. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

26. The best work on musical Orientalism has been done by Ralph Locke. See his *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2009); "A Broader View of Musical Exoticism," *The Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 477-521; "Reflections on Orientalism in Opera and Musical Theater," *The Opera Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 48-64; and "Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3, no. 3 (November 1991): 261-302.

27. English translation from the liner notes to Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida*, cond. Georg Solti (London Records: 1987, CD); for a free English-only version, see OperaGlass <[http://opera.stanford.edu/Verdi/Aida/libretto\\_e.html](http://opera.stanford.edu/Verdi/Aida/libretto_e.html)>.

28. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 121.

29. The foundational works of feminist music criticism include Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); and Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), esp. Chapter 3, "Sexual Politics in Classical Music," 53-79; see also Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

30. Clément, *Opera*, 116-117.

31. On the origins of the *Aida* libretto, see Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (1969; New York: Da Capo, 1977), 372-373, which debunks the long-held idea that Verdi was commissioned to compose *Aida* to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal.

32. See also Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 111-132.

