Teaching Concept and Grading Criteria

Music Dramatic Performance

for Master's Students
at the

Opera Department of the
University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna

4 Semesters

Instructor: Markus Kupferblum, Senior Lecturer

Preamble and Objectives

In our music drama classes, we explore glory and misery, diversity and simplicity, light and shadow, discourse and indulgence, power and powerlessness, self-determination and foreign control, affirmation and contradiction, valuation, devaluation and overvaluation, vanity and bliss, ability and will, illusion and reality, the admirable and the questionable, dream and reality, scenarios of choice, suffering and happiness, mutual understanding and alienation—and the craft of being a singer.

The goal of ensemble classes is to teach students the craft of performing a role credibly and truthfully. They are encouraged to draw on personal experience and imagination.
Students should be able to perform diverse situations in ensemble work with empathy, sensuality, and emotional depth; to adopt fitting attitudes toward others; to escalate conflicts; and to respond appropriately to their partners within the context of their roles.

The goal of role study is to understand and express the emotional arcs of a character truthfully and convincingly, and to make the roles their own.
Students should be able to independently work on a role to a certain extent, develop their stances, and recognize the inherent conflicts of a situation.

The goal of scene study is to portray dramatic and literary conflicts in all their complexity authentically.
Students will be prepared for the professional reality of opera—whether in subsidized houses or independent ensembles, with a wide range of working conditions and expectations.

Basic Exercises

Each class begins with group exercises on coordination, impulse exchange, concentration, and group complicity.
These exercises form the essential foundation for constructive dramatic work and are a key element of stagecraft.

In the first block, we begin with acting exercises and improvisations.
These exercises serve as a good entry point—they help build group cohesion and allow me to assess the individual levels of the students so I can address their needs directly and guide them purposefully.

1. Neutral Mask

In the first block, we work with the *Neutral Mask*.
This mask, which covers the entire face, forces students to use their whole body to express themselves—without speech or facial expressions—subtly and with variety. The mask's magnifying effect allows even small changes in posture or body rhythm to convey different emotions.
This work demands physical precision and provides a solid foundation for using the body as an expressive instrument.
Students also come to understand the power of allegorical expression, which transcends subjectivity.

Using the neutral mask, we explore rhythms, elements, animals, and emotional states—all without speech.
We then proceed to dialog-based work while maintaining a strong focus on precise physical expression.

Through this work, we learn to develop a "precise thought" that leads us through a situation, helping us understand what is truly happening to the character.
What stance does the character adopt? What emotions does this create? How are these communicated to the audience?
The neutral mask reveals these thoughts—or their absence—with clarity.

Literature:

- *Paroles sur le mime*, Étienne Decroux

- "Neutral Mask" in *The Moving Body*, Jacques Lecoq

- *Reflections on the Theatre*, Jean-Louis Barrault

Film:

- Marcel Marceau

- Étienne Decroux

- *Ivan the Terrible*, Sergei Eisenstein

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2. Melodrama

In the second block, we turn to *melodrama*.
After the precise and minimal movements of the neutral mask, melodrama brings emotional and physical liberation: here, it is grand emotion and gesture that lead us through the scene.
Uncompromising expression, without any emotional relativism, and the joy in despair and ecstasy naturally lead to singing.
The body acts to its extremes—this is the foundation of the *bel canto* tradition.

The "precise thought" we learned through the neutral mask remains central here—it gives the character's emotion direction, creating dramatic situations that the audience can understand.
Emotion is never the goal itself—it becomes meaningful only when it arises from a clear stance within a conflict.
Only when the audience understands an emotion can it empathize with the character.

Literature:

- Maurice Maeterlinck

- *Carmen*, Mérimée

- *La Dame aux Camélias*, Alexandre Dumas

Operas:

- *La Traviata* (Verdi)

- *La Bohème*, *Tosca* (Puccini)

- *La Sonnambula*, *Norma* (Bellini)

- *Samson et Dalila* (Saint-Saëns)

- *King Arthur* (Purcell)

Film:

- *E la nave va* (Fellini)

- *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Carné)

- *Dancer in the Dark* (von Trier)

- *La Strada* (Fellini)

- *A Summer's Tale* (Bergman)

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3. Balinese Masks

In the third block, we use *Bondres* masks from the Balinese tradition—masks with grotesque facial features—to further stimulate the passion of the characters. The Balinese masks act like a catalyst, provoking from us the most unexpected and radical gestures, postures, and sounds, thereby amplifying and intensifying the expressiveness of our character and guiding it into clear, readable forms.

We attempt to use these masks to portray the contradictions within different characters. While in melodrama it was the great, clear emotions that carried us through a scene, here it is the ambivalence of an attitude and the evaluation of a conflict, character, or situation that compel us to portray human beings who doubt, who are torn and contradictory, and who become complex and alive precisely because they do not feel in a linear way as in melodrama. A seemingly wild and archaic being can suddenly be tender and fragile, while a graceful figure might develop superhuman strength if the situation demands it. The masks encourage us to uncover the contradictions within our character and to surprise at the right moment.

Literature:

Acting Theory:

- *An Actor Prepares*, Konstantin Stanislavski

- *Acting in Film*, Michael Caine

- *True and False*, David Mamet

- *Viewpoints*, Anne Bogart

- *The Beauty of Helena*, Markus Kupferblum

Plays:

- Anton Chekhov

- William Shakespeare

- Samuel Beckett

- *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo

Film:

- Ingmar Bergman

- John Cassavetes

- Jim Jarmusch

- Wim Wenders

- Rainer Werner Fassbinder

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4. Tragedy

In the fourth block, we turn our attention to Greek tragedy.
It is the dramatic foundation of the *opera seria*. All works of this genre are based on this art form and adhere to its rules.

Here, we explore the radical and unwavering stances of the protagonists in a tragedy, which are manifested through strong vertical and horizontal axes. The authority of an unrelenting physical posture determines the fate of our character. The goal is not to convince the antagonist, but rather the chorus, which switches sides depending on the strength of the argument.

Consequently, choral work takes center stage.
From the chorus—an independent organism—emerges a *koryphaios* who must confidently lead the chorus and confront the *koryphaios* of another chorus. Each chorus supports its own *koryphaios* and defends their viewpoint.

The experiences gained from the absoluteness of melodrama provide the foundation for succeeding as a *koryphaios*: on the one hand, leading one's own chorus with a clear thought; on the other, physically mastering the confrontation with the opposing *koryphaios* with poise and fearlessness.

Literature:

- *Eating the Gods*, Jan Kott

- Works by Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes

Operas:

- *Lucio Silla*, *Idomeneo*, *La Clemenza di Tito* – Mozart

- *Platée* – Rameau

- *Orfeo*, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* – Monteverdi

- *La Didone abbandonata* – Peri

- *Elektra* – Richard Strauss

Film:

- *Mighty Aphrodite*, Woody Allen

- *The Persians*, Ulrich Rasche

- *Les Atrides*, Ariane Mnouchkine

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5. Commedia dell'Arte

In the fifth block, we deal with the Commedia dell'Arte.
Engaging with this tradition is indispensable to us for many reasons. The *commedia* is not only the foundation of the *opera buffa*, which functions in a politically charged and dramaturgically consistent way, but also a playful exploration of its characters that provides us with a reliable craft—developed over 350 years on the streets—which continues to drive the success of television series, operas, plays, and even comic strips.

These characters are archetypal and follow a fixed hierarchical structure. Once we understand this, it becomes easier to deduce their behavior in given situations and challenge the existing hierarchies.

Performing *commedia* demands everything we've learned so far: precision in body and thought, quick shifts in focus and rhythm, the grandeur and absoluteness of expression, and at times, the tiniest of movements with the *commedia* masks; the joy of confrontation, choral behavior, the profound complexity of the protagonists' passions, and the defense of one's own stance.

If we master the play of the powerless on the chessboard of the powerful, we bring the figures of the *commedia* into the present and return urgency and relevance to opera—granting it socio-political significance once more.

Literature:

- *The Birth of Curiosity from the Spirit of Revolution*, Markus Kupferblum

Comics:

- *Asterix*

- *Donald Duck*

- *Garfield*

Plays:

- *The Marriage of Figaro*, Beaumarchais

- Molière

- Johann Nestroy

- Ferdinand Raimund

- Shakespeare

- Carlo Goldoni

Operas:

- *Don Pasquale, L'elisir d'amore* – Donizetti

- *The Magic Flute, Così fan tutte, The Abduction from the Seraglio, La finta giardiniera* – Mozart

- *Il mondo della luna* – Haydn

- *La serva padrona, Livietta e Tracollo* – Pergolesi

- *The Barber of Seville, La Cenerentola, Zelmira, L'italiana in Algeri, Il viaggio a Reims, Il turco in Italia* – Rossini

- *Ariadne auf Naxos* – Richard Strauss

Film:

- *Molière*, Ariane Mnouchkine

- *Captain Fracasse*

- Louis de Funès

- *Columbo*

- *The Simpsons*

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6. Portrayal of the Human Being

In the sixth block, we explore the tradition of the clown in order to discover one's own vulnerability and personal imagination as a valid and most precious means of expression—something one can always draw upon when the opportunity arises. This work demands craft, courage, and maturity. It is as comic as it is tragic.

Its aim is not only to recognize the failure and fragility of a character as something valuable—thereby revealing their humanity and encouraging the audience to take risks themselves—but also to expand one's expressive capabilities through unrestrained imagination, because the performer has overcome the fear of breaking taboos, disappointing expectations, or being "embarrassing."

Ultimately, this is the only way to become a distinctive and unique "portrayer of humanity."

Literature:

- *The Philosophy of the Clown*, Markus Kupferblum

- *Il faut appeler un Clown un Clown*, Pierre Étaix

- *Le secrets de Clowns*, Paul-André Sagel

- *School of the Smile*, Groucho Marx

Film:

- Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy

- The Marx Brothers

- Grock

- Charlie Chaplin

- Buster Keaton

- *Funny Bones*, Jerry Lewis

- *Medea*, Pier Paolo Pasolini

Grading Criteria

Student evaluation is composed as follows:

Class Participation: 70%

The grade for class participation is based on the following factors:

1. **Attendance:**
    Each student must attend all class sessions.
    If a student is absent more than three times per semester without a valid excuse approved by the head of the institute, they will receive a grade of "Fail."
    If a student arrives more than 15 minutes late, they will be considered "absent" for that session.
    If a student is late (up to 15 minutes) more than three times per semester, their final grade will be reduced by one grade level.
    It is the student's responsibility to make up for missed content and be fully prepared for the following session.

2. **Participation in Class:**
    Students are expected to actively engage in class, complete exercises willingly and with commitment, and participate in the reflection process afterward.
    Initiative is particularly positively evaluated.
    Students are also expected to observe their peers during their work and provide constructive feedback.
    The use of mobile phones is strictly prohibited.

Filming or taking photographs during class is only permitted with explicit permission.

Final Examination: 20%

At the end of each semester, an oral final examination will be held, which accounts for 20% of the final grade.
This exam covers the material taught during the semester.
Assigned literature and film references may also be included in the exam.

Written Reflection: 10%

In the final session of the semester, a written reflection of at least one A4 page, Helvetica 12pt, must be submitted.
This personal reflection should subjectively evaluate the course content and instruction in relation to the student's own artistic development.