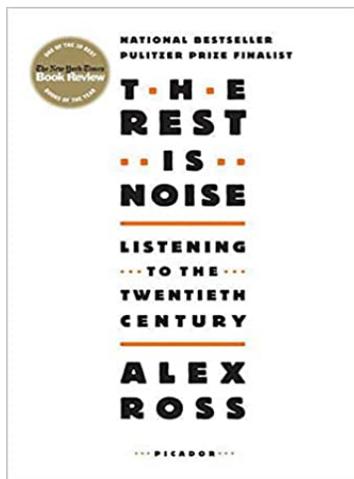


Course Outline

This is an introduction to one group of 20th and 21st century works (operas) that reflect new thinking by contemporary composers.



In 2007 Alex Ross, the music critique for The New Yorker, wrote the book ironically titled “*The Rest Is Noise*.” It’s a review of the 20th century intellectual development in all the arts. Yes. Some of what you will be hearing may be “noise” (it may depend on how you define these sounds.) But there will also be gorgeous melodies, toe-tapping, unforgettable rhythms, and unforgettable contemporary stories about important issues.

We will give you some samples and maybe motivate you to look further into some of the works we are using. Not all the works have been commercially recorded completely or filmed.

So: we will listen to or watch excerpts for all the works and discuss. The participants will consider how they think certain scenes should be staged.

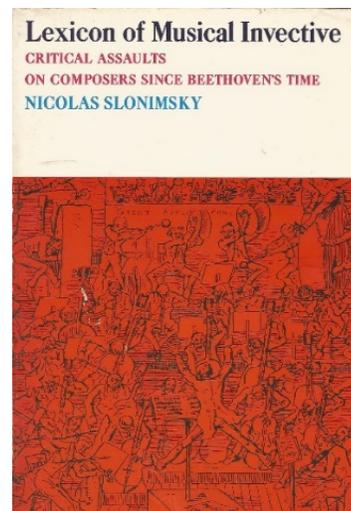
No one will be required to sing.

3 October 2022 Introduction and two examples

Excerpts from “*The Lexicon of Musical Inventive*”. These are reviews by contemporary critics upon hearing or seeing different works for the first time. These are often disparaging and insulting statements about music we have come to love and respect, including “*The Wedding March*” (“Here comes the bride”...) from “*Lohengrin*.” (WHAT?! Somebody hated it?!)

Participants will read the reviews and then guess what piece of music is being referred to.

The objective of this: Withhold judgement. Listen several times. Think what the music is trying to do.



Dead Man Walking



This work is based on the book by Sister Helen Prejean which describes her attempts to get Joseph de Rocher to confess that he murdered two teenagers. There was a film made of this book, as well.

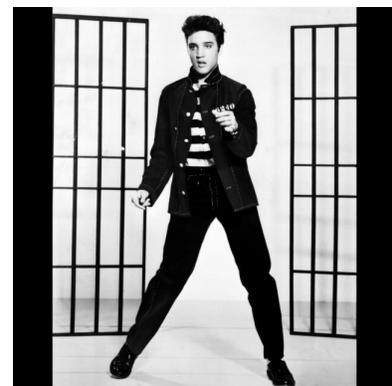
Jake Heggie is a composer who can write in every style. In "*Dead Man Walking*" he writes black-spiritual type music for Sisters Helen and Rose to sing with their pre-school class.

The Overture is built around the notes that compose the musical line whenever someone sings "Joseph de Rocher." (Those notes are varied throughout the opera.) This is called a "*leit motiv*." It is a well-known music device used in all forms of music and in films to identify people, emotions, places and time.

But MOST remarkable is another *leit motiv*: the role of the first two chords of "*Jail House Rock*." (Yes. Elvis.) These become the symbol of salvation. Joseph had told Sister Helen, he wanted to speak with her, but mocks her constantly. She doesn't give up.

But when she tells him she had seen Elvis as a child, they connect. "The King? You saw the King?" he asks. This finally leads to his admitting he killed the teenagers and thus an acknowledgement of his sin which leads theologically to his salvation.

A musical score for 'Jailhouse Rock'. The title 'Jailhouse Rock' is written in a large, stylized font. Below the title, it says 'Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller' and 'Arr: Raif Hweic'. The score is written for piano and includes a tempo marking of '♩ = 166'. The music is in 4/4 time and features a prominent bass line and a melodic line in the right hand.



10 October 2022



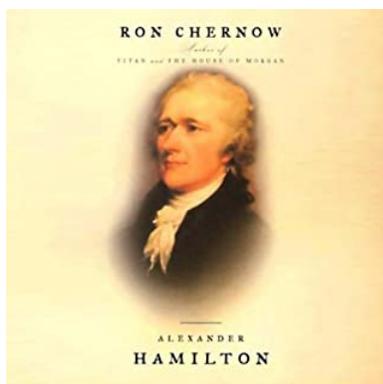
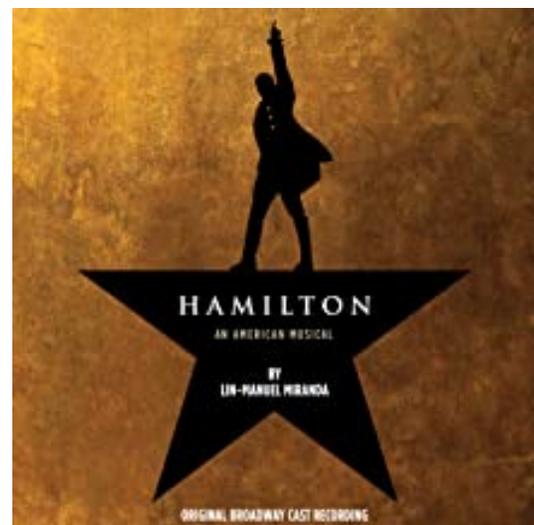
We'll begin with "**The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs.**" You may know the song from "*Sound of Music*": 'Doe, a deer, a female deer'? We will look at the melodies based on do-re-mi, and see how many ways the composer varies those notes and how the meaning of these notes changes as Steve Jobs develops his humanity.

We'll see how the composer builds **soundscapes**: environments of music and rhythms. Let the sounds swim over you.

Interestingly, his Buddhist mentor guides him through gorgeous melodies and soundscapes. It is also a humanely comic role.

In the end, we need to ask: "Has this work made the work and personality of Steve Jobs (a) clearer to you? (b) more puzzling? (c) has this work given you anything to think about?"

"Hamilton" – a 'through-composed' (that means no spoken dialogue) musical theatre piece uses rap, jazz, ballads. It portrays the life of Alexander Hamilton. It has not only "sound scapes" but "word scapes" - -torrents of verses and rhymes, fantastic rhythms. Beautiful melodies, as well.



It is based on the biography by Ron Chernow. The opening song, 4 and ½ minutes long, covers the first 90 pages of the book. That's rather amazing condensation! But the rapping-like lyrics also manage to convey many conflicting emotions being experienced by a variety of characters simultaneously.

Lin-Manuel Miranda creatively uses "sounds" to describe the Burr-Hamilton duel...as well as the flirtatious introduction of Hamilton to the Schuyler sisters.

17 October 2022

Two works founded on jazz and (sometimes) pop and full of gorgeous melodies (even if you think you don't know them, you may recognise them if you have ever spent much time in elevators.)

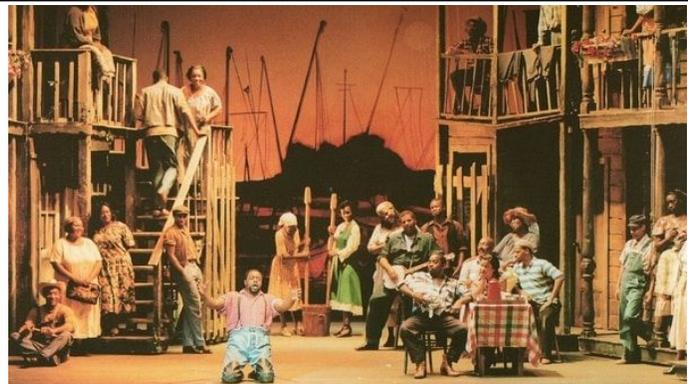
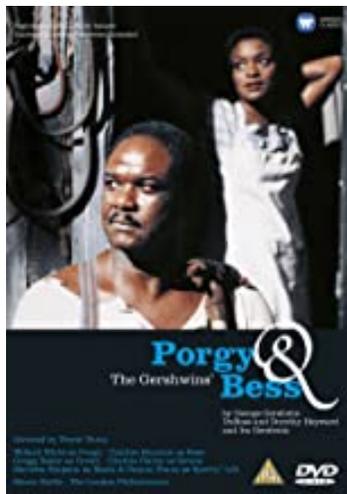
The first opened this year's season at The Metropolitan Opera in New York City.



It is based on a [2014 memoir](#) by the New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow; it's an account of his turbulent upbringing in rural Louisiana as he endures emotional confusion, longs for affection from his tough-love mother and tries to come to terms with the wounds of sexual molestation.

Blow's book recalls his earlier life from an adult perspective, while also conveying his experiences as if they're being lived in the moment.

In his score, the composer, Terrance Blanchard, deftly blends elements of jazz, blues, hints of big band and gospel into a compositional voice dominated by lushly chromatic and modal harmonic writing, spiked with jagged rhythms and tart dissonance. He is a trumpeter best known for his scores for Spike Lee films. The librettist, Kasi Lemmons, is a writer, director and actress who with "Fire" becomes the first Black librettist of a work performed by the Met in its history.

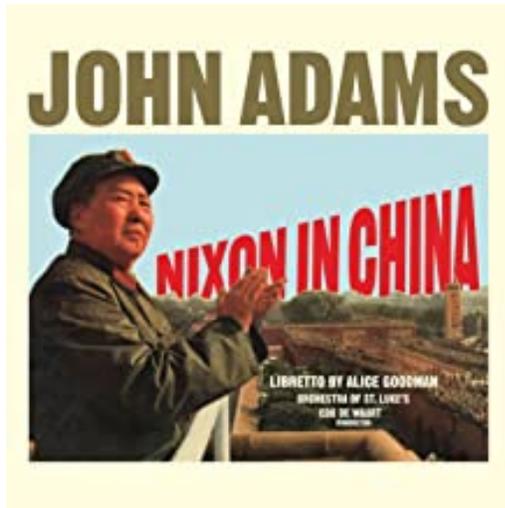


George Gershwin wrote "Porgy and Bess" as a "musical" to be performed in New York City on Broadway. But it was too long, maybe too complicated for such a venue. Some of the most "modern" convention breaking European composers saw the chord structures as complicated as theirs. (Alex Ross reports on this in his book "The Rest is Noise.") We'll use "Porgy" to review the concepts of leitmotif and musical memory: how motifs are (supposed to) remind the listener/viewer of other memories a character OR "we" might be thinking about. Plus: lots of rhythm.

You already know a lot of the music: "Summertime" "Bess You Is My Woman, Now" "It Ain't Necessarily So." You may not know "A Woman is a Sometime Thing" "My Man's Gone Now" "Oh, Lord, I'm on My Way."

31 October 2022

John Adams' style of writing is called "minimalist." Minimal music is unembellished and emphasizes the beauty in simplicity. Composers of this style most often use classical instruments or natural components such as rain and wind. They sometimes use digital filters over their sound effects, which can create an electronic feel.



John Adams' uses frequent repetition of chords and sounds – but in the orchestra accompaniments as well as the choruses of his operas. In "Nixon" some of the solos – like Madame Mao's coloratura aria "I am the Wife of Mao Tze Dun" are seriously repetitive.

But there are lyrical moments, the private reflections especially of Pat Nixon and of the philosophically inclined Chou En-lai – whose final aria asks: "How much of what we did was good?" while contemplating the dew on the grass and lonely old age.

One of the great 20th century *coup de théâtre* is in the First Act when after the chorus sings louder and louder, the presidential plane arrives and Nixon gives his famous victory salute.

The other famously odd moment is the Act Two ballet in which Henry Kissinger is depicted as the evil land-owner.



And Richard Nixon, complex, ambiguous, soon to be brought down by Watergate, has his own, all-American memories: "I found the smell of burgers on the grill made grown men cry."

Why did John Adams write Nixon in China?

In 1983, theater and opera director Peter Sellars suggested that John Adams write an opera about Nixon's 1972 visit to China. Sellars was intrigued by Nixon's decision to make the visit, seeing it as both "a ridiculously cynical election ploy ... and a historical breakthrough".

Doctor Atomic

Doctor Atomic concerns **the final hours leading up to the Trinity Test: the first atomic bomb explosion at the Alamogordo test site in New Mexico in July of 1945**. It focuses on the physicist and Manhattan Project director, Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the brilliant physicist who oversaw the Manhattan Project, the government project to develop atomic weaponry. It explores Oppenheimer's reluctance to continue the tests.

Humour comes through the United States generals who rail at the inclement weather and have tantrums aimed at the weather men who refuse to "cooperate" with the government by predicting storms which could delay the tests.



We'll watch parts of "The Making of Dr Atomic" that describe how Adams and Peter Sellers, the librettist and director, developed the opera from diaries and other reports too.

Batter My Heart - Aria from Dr. Atomic

W6
Animato (triplet 1/8 of m.770 = new 1/16)

829
832
836
842

OPPENHEIMER

Bat-ter my heart, ... three per-son'd God, ... for,
you ... As yet but knock, ... breathe, ... knock, ... breathe, ...

We'll concentrate on the Act One aria: *Batter my heart (Holy Sonnet 14)*. Oppenheimer was reading this Sonnet up until the test of the first bomb. He was even thinking of cancelling it.

You'll see from the score his minimalist writings