

Workshop Abstract: Annual Symposium on Music Research, Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University, March 25, 2022

Doing Meaningful Musicology with Canonic Opera

There are no easy answers to the many questions raised by the standard operatic repertoire. Perhaps that is why even scholars, practitioners, and seminar instructors who acknowledge problematic issues of gender, race, empire, and class can fall into extremes: avoiding the difficult conversations by focusing primarily on the beautiful music as a sort of guilty pleasure (as Catherine Clément famously lamented in her seminal book *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*), or supporting either the censorship of problematic originals or their outright ban from performance and curricula.

Whether in performance, as scholarly subjects, or as objects of study in the college classroom, the challenges presented by these works are substantial but they are not insurmountable. And facing up to them has its own rewards: deeper engagement permits a more nuanced and meaningful conversation. Of course, such work is not easy. That is why we hear practitioners and scholars talk about their approach in terms that evoke tough physical labor: the desire to “tackle,” “wrestle” and “grapple” with it.

This workshop will offer students some tools with which to productively confront the repertoire. We will focus on three of the most performed and maligned operas: *Don Giovanni*, *Carmen*, and *Madama Butterfly*. In response to readings, symposia, and productions, we will dig into the social and political issues that they engage, and we will consider best practices going forward. From a practical standpoint, we will also consider sample syllabi and a pedagogy poster session about courses in which Prof. Coppola does this kind of work.

Building on materials and questions that students will be able to access in advance of the workshop, we will frame our thinking around whether and why a work should be retired, whether and why it should continue to be presented relatively closely to the original or with broader changes, and whether the latter two paths need to be mutually exclusive. Preformed focus groups (one for each of the three operas) will develop and workshop strategies that may range from minor to large-scale interpretive interventions, all supported with evidence gleaned from contemporary and historical context, the music, libretto, and production history.