MUS 195.10: The Power of Myth - Orpheum Revisited

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University of Montana - Missoula
The Power of Myth - Orpheum Revisited

Outline for a course on Austrian Literature 17th - 20th century for the University of Montana, Missoula, Vienna Experience programme, March - June 2006

General Aims:
To introduce students of various disciplines to ways of approaching the study of a literary text; acquaint students with basic text analysis and questions of aesthetic production and reception and to reflect on the interaction between composer and librettist.
To enquire into the force of myth and examine the question of archetypes.
To give an overview of the main trends of Austrian literature from 17th - 20th century within a historical and cultural context using operatic texts (libretti) as the starting point.
To give students tools for interpreting sung texts by virtue of an analysis of the cultural context from which they emerged and also by seeking the universal and timeless message contained within them.

Method
Given that a large proportion of the students are music majors and the groups as whole is a choir and that their interest in the sung text can be assumed, the starting point for the literature course shall be the libretto, i.e., a sung text. Students who are unfamiliar with working with literary texts may find a multimedial artform more accessible than a text alone.

We take the mythological figure of Orpheus and examine the symbolic power of the myth over the centuries and the way that each new work interprets the myth anew. The figure of Orpheus lends itself especially well to our analysis by virtue of his symbolic association with music and literature, yet at the same time, because the story of Orpheus revolves around the everlasting themes of eros and thanatos, love and death, man and woman, the dichotomy between heaven and hell and between desire and duty, it centres on the human condition and its message is universal and everlasting. The power of myth can be shown to retain a stronghold over the imagination of artists, musicians and writers over centuries and we also ask how we, the audience now, relate to it. The myth as an artform and its representation on stage will be examined.

Didactic approach

The teaching method comprises both lectures and classes/seminars. In the latter the students will work together on analysing and interpreting a literary text. Discussion is encouraged. All texts will be provided in English for the class. The original text will be available for comparison.

Assessment
Students will write one longer piece of work for assessment in the second half of the course. Assessment will be on work in class and the written piece of work on a text.
Course outline
the figure of Orpheus - representations in art. The students are asked to devise a story about the figures using both their knowledge and their imagination - how does the artist portray the figures, what can we see is happening. What can we imagine might happen? (guided discussion)
Orpheus is placed in the literary-historical concept of the Greek myth and the Roman poet's portrayal. Text interpretation and analysis of the poem. (group text analysis)
• Assignment: Write a short story of your own devising based on the story of Orpheus and Euridice.
The birth of opera -Jacopi Peri's and Monteverdi's Orpheus operas with musical excerpts (lecture)
• Assignment: Read Stiggio's text for Monteverdi's opera
The classical structure of the opera - Greek tragedy and Renaissance opera (lecture with Q/A)
Symbols and meaning - the universality of myth. A psycho-analytic approach to the story (lecture).
• Assignment: Written work on a chosen text (coursework assignment for assessment)
Theater in Vienna at the time of Maria Theresia (lecture)
• Assignment: Read Calzabigi's text for Gluck opera
Reform opera in Vienna: Gluck's Orfeo e Euridice (Group text analysis and discussion) with musical examples.
• Assignment: Read Schikaneder's text for The Magic Flute
Mozart and the Alterwiener Volkskomödie - The Magic Flute (Group interpretation and discussion) with musical examples.
Joseph Haydn: "L'anima del filosofo ossia Orfeo e Euridice. The theater and opera director Michael Schilhan, who directed this opera at the the 2005 Haydn Festival in Eisenstadt will talk to the group about this production. A visit to Eisenstadt is planned.
Poems set to music (Schubert, etc.)
• Assignment: drama production. The students form 4 groups, whereby each group devises a dramatic scene or scenes based on the story of Orpheus and Euridice.
Parody in Vienna in the middle of the 19th century: Offenbach's Orpheus in the Underworld.
The 20th century - Beat Furrer's opera Desire
Rainier Maria Rilke's Sonnet to Orpheus - a comparison with Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass
Drama production. The scenes are presented to the rest of the class. This exercise is intended largely as a challenge to the creativity of the students. The scenes may be serious or humorous.

It may be possible to perform parts of Offenbach's Orpheus in the Underworld.

In each case, we will look at the biographies of composer and text author and the cultural conditions under which they worked. It is also important to examine the figures and the reader or audience's reaction to them. The question of identification or detachment
is central to the aesthetics of reception. The students will be made aware of the mechanisms that the authors and composers use to influence their audience. A discussion of the form of music theater and its relevance today will also be evaluated in addition to the way in which Austrian literature has approached the question of myth, always remembering that it is also to come to grips with its own mythology (what Claudio Magris has called the "Habsburg myth"). It is hoped that they will also be able to approach the eternal questions of mankind through these facts: love and death, enslavement and freedom, flesh and spirit, man and woman, the conscious and the unconscious, despair and hope, mankind's relation to the god or God. Myths are the poet's ever powerful answer to these questions.

Academic Misconduct Policy
All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the university. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code, available for review online at www.umt.edu/SVA/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321.