

2013

MUOP 356/856: Intermediate/Advanced Opera Techniques—A Peer Review of Teaching Project Benchmark Portfolio

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COURSE PORTFOLIO
BY
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MUOP 356/856
INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED OPERA TECHNIQUES
SCHOOL OF MUSIC
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA – LINCOLN
SPRING 2013

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A scene from C. W. von Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* in final rehearsal

PORTFOLIO OBJECTIVES

I began the investigation of this course and subsequent course portfolio with the following objectives in mind:

1. To solidify and articulate the skills I intend students enrolled in this course to achieve by the end of the semester;
2. To think creatively about the presentation of course material to most effectively engage and empower students' success; and
3. To assess the effectiveness of the course activities in achieving course goals stated in the syllabus.

I am also excited to explore the options available for different methods of content delivery in this course, particularly the application of recorded performance for assessment. In the private studio, my students are required to listen to professional performances as much as possible (live and recorded) in order to understand the professional standard to which they must aspire. It makes sense, then, that students in this performance-based class should do the same. I look forward to incorporating our new library resource Opera in Video, an online repository for professional operatic performance, as well as the Metropolitan LIVE in HD broadcasts (at the Ross Theater) and field trips to see Opera Omaha productions, to meet this goal. I am interested to learn the impact that watching, hearing and assessing professional performances will have on my students' final performance project.

Given that I am in a tenure-earning position, the course portfolio will certainly become part of my tenure file. It is most important to me, however, that I find the most effective – and efficient – ways to communicate this material to my students, as it will impact both their collegiate and professional careers.

This portfolio will be an overview of the course, for each element of the course is a cumulative application of the material taught before it. Attention will be paid to the effectiveness and creativity of each assignment in order to achieve the desired outcome. I hope to identify areas that are currently weak or missing in the progression of the course, as well as develop ways to use the allotted course time most effectively to allow the students opportunities to apply the material presented.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

My investigation focused on MUOP 356/856, Intermediate/Advanced Opera Performance. Since this is cross-listed course, students enrolled in this class are typically music majors at the undergraduate and graduate level (MM and DMA). Students may or may not have any experience on the music theater stage, nor have they had training in how to prepare a new role from casting to completed performance. This course is an elective in the School of Music, but relates directly to the performance expectations anticipated in the Bachelor of Music, Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance degrees. This course serves as a preparatory – but not prerequisite – experience for students aspiring to principal roles in the main stage opera season. It also introduces students to standard practices in the professional music field.

COURSE GOALS

The course goals, as stated in the syllabus, include:

1. To understand and practice professional behavior in the preparation and rehearsal period leading up to a performance;
2. To discover and apply research techniques in the preparation of an operatic role;
3. To understand and apply the process employed in preparing a role of the operatic stage;
4. To use their acquired knowledge to present a dramatically authentic and musically effective portrayal of an operatic character; and
5. To use recorded and live tools in conjunction with the knowledge gained in this course to assess the dramatic and musical effectiveness of an operatic performance.

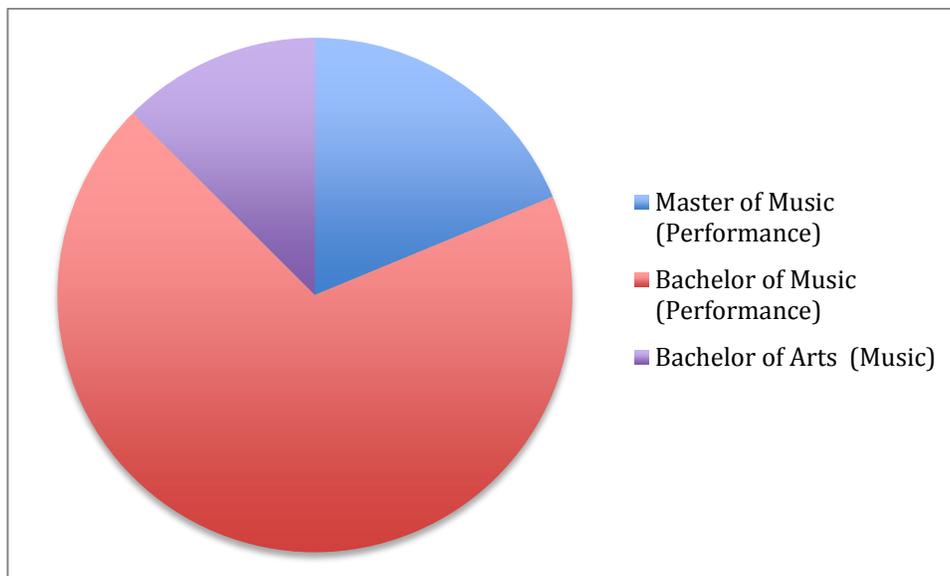
These goals follow an organic and systematic path from the assignment of each student's role to the completion and assessment of the final public performance. Students will be expected to follow this procedure – often, to a large extent, independently – in the professional world when cast in an operatic role for performance. By applying this process to a single operatic scene, the students will have time to think critically about each individual task at hand, and eventually apply the process to a larger and more complete role in a full opera.

CONTEXT

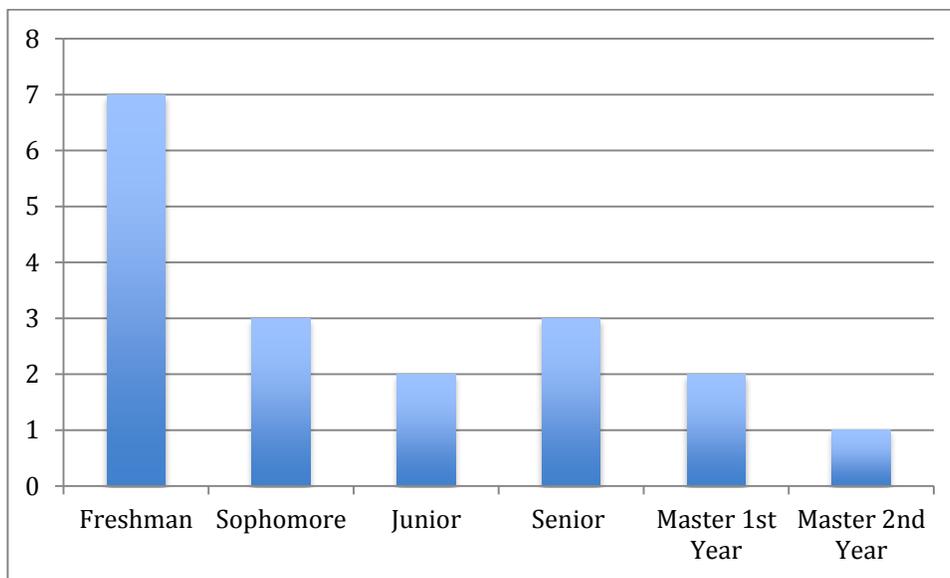
This course is both an introductory course and an advanced course in many ways. It is expected that students (as music majors) possess the skill to learn music independently and accurately translate foreign languages using library and online resources. Most students who major in music have had some experience in a stage role. The purpose of this course in the larger curriculum is to begin the transition from student to professional in terms of preparation and execution of an operatic role. It addresses issues that arise in the accurate execution of the musical score while developing the dramatic content in a specific physical way. Many course participants go on to win principal roles in university productions. Some earn contracts in summer or young artist opera programs. By the end of the course, students have a better understanding of the work involved in performing professionally and can better assess the likelihood of their success in the profession.

ENROLLMENT & DEMOGRAPHICS

This course is comprised of undergraduate (15) and graduate-level (3) students. All students are music majors. The specific degree breakdown is illustrated below:



Further, the students can be broken into the following class standings:



TEACHING METHODS/COURSE MATERIALS/COURSE ACTIVITIES

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The cross listing of this course presents some unique challenges to developing appropriate and effective teaching methods and materials. First, the level of performance experience among the students enrolled in the course varies greatly, as does the level of life and musical experience brought to the course. This complicates the selection of scenes for class preparation, and one must consider not only vocal and physical types, but the complexity of the music and drama required of each student according to their abilities. Second, this class requires several skills that the student must bring with them from other course work, including understanding and applying the International Phonetic Alphabet (a skill introduced in a separate but required course taken simultaneously by freshmen), the ability to quickly and accurately learn a musical score (and often, the ability to play the piano in order to learn their part), the ability to work independently and creatively, and the confidence to take direction and courageously apply it to singing and stage movement. Third, the time in which we have to work is limited, and is often unevenly distributed among students once we reach the staging portion of the course due to the level of complexity in individual scenes. Because the final project is a public performance, I must ensure that the product is worthy of public consumption, which often requires that I spend more time with scenes that are struggling, at the expense of those scenes in better condition.

METHODS, MATERIALS & ACTIVITIES

Since MUOP 356/856, Intermediate/Advanced Opera Performance is designed as both a research and a performance course, teaching methods must address both skill sets. The first half of the course is primarily research-based with approximately half of each class period in lecture or discussion format. Topics include research methods in primary source material, translating and pronouncing foreign languages, developing a character profile, and discovering subtext. This information is essential for course participants to understand professional practices and allows students to practice these skills in an academic environment. Student learning is assessed by research and reflective assignments associated with assigned roles submitted in writing, including:

Language Translation & Transcription

Students were expected to submit a word-for-word translation of all scenes in a foreign language as well as correct pronunciation transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (a recognized system used by professional singers around the world). Students performing in English were required to submit a rewrite of their scene in contemporary English, as they might interact today. All students were also asked to submit written subtext for the entirety of their assigned scene.

Character Research & Development

In order to demonstrate their understanding of the operatic plot and context, students provided a concise written character sketch. From this sketch, students were asked to script and perform a one-minute, first person character “introduction” in the style of an

online dating video. They were then asked to conceptualize their character's opinion of the scene in which they were performing and to provide a performance commentary in the style of a reality TV "confessional" video, again, "in character".

Performance Skills

The second half of each class period dealt with performance goals for the course. Students experienced a variety of improvisatory activities, both individually and in groups. They were asked to interact in a prescribed way, or to clearly communicate an idea to their peers without the use of the English language. These activities achieved several stated and unstated goals: first, to build a repertoire of gesture and vocal color on which students may draw in the preparation of their characters; to establish an environment of welcome experimentation in the course; and finally, to build confidence in broad and specific choices in character development.

The staging portion of the semester was much more performance-oriented. Students were expected to have learned the music and text for their scene independently, and then attend musical and language coaching as well as staging classes. The work prepared in the first half of the course was designed to have a direct impact on the students' success in the second half of the course. Coaching activities involved refinement of pronunciation, idiomatic phrasing, and musical choices, as well as learning to work together as an ensemble to effectively portray the dramatic material. Staging classes required students to compile all of the research and coaching work to "become" the character onstage as an active member of the drama.

Homework

Activities assigned outside of class related directly to the in-class activities listed above. Many of these are submitted in writing for assessment purposes. Students translated foreign languages independently with the help of dictionaries and other translations resources, which is an expected professional practice. Students are also required to develop a character sketch for each role they sing in class which requires an understanding of the historical and social context in which the opera is set (also a professional expectation). Students were asked to watch three performances of the same aria and to apply the research and theatrical techniques studied in class to assess which of the performances was most successful and why. Toward the end of the staging period, students videotaped their scene rehearsal and met with the instructor individually to evaluate their progress and application of course content.

These activities follow a systematic path from the assignment of each student's role to the completion and assessment of the final public performance. Students will be expected to follow this procedure – often, independently – in the professional world when cast in an operatic role for performance. By applying this process to a single operatic scene, the students will have time to think critically about each individual task at hand, and eventually apply the process to a larger and more complete role in a full opera.

Course Materials

Course materials vary greatly depending on the requirements of the assigned scene. All students are required to locate and read the original source material for their scene. This may be a novel, a poem, documentation of a historical event, or something else entirely. Many of these original sources are written in a language other than English, requiring the use of reliable translation resources. All students participate in acting exercises collected from a variety of acting method books. Students are also required to watch professional performances of their scenes from a variety of online and library video resources. All PowerPoint lectures are posted on Blackboard for student reference.

RATIONALE FOR SELECTION OF METHODS

This course condenses a 9-12 month process into a 16-week academic course. It is my goal to deliver the most comprehensive, but efficient, presentation of the material possible. I designed a progression of skill sets that allow the class to successfully present a live public performance during the last week of classes. Many of the methods presented in the course are common practice in the professional operatic world, and some are new applications of pop-culture phenomena that helped students relate their characters to “real” people.

ILLUSTRATION OF CHANGES FROM PREVIOUS YEARS

Commonly known as Opera Scenes, this course has heretofore been a performance-only class where students learn one scene from an opera and perform it in a concert of scenes at the end of the semester. While a useful experience in the training of aspiring opera singers, I felt that some significant preparatory tools were not being delivered to students in a constructive way. In 2012, I redesigned the Intermediate and Advanced Opera Techniques courses to incorporate the process of preparing a role from start to finish in order to better acquaint students with professional practices. Students were required to read source material for their scene and complete a written character sketch. They were asked to submit handwritten word-for-word translations of texts in foreign languages, as well as write subtext for scenes in all languages.

In 2013, I added additional academic components to the first six weeks of the course where students learn how to research source material, prepare a character sketch, improvise based on their character’s traits, and converse a foreign language scene in English, all before music and staging rehearsals begin. I also added basic acting techniques, primarily in the form of guided group improvisation activities to each class session, as well as a comparative exercise where students assessed multiple professional performances of the same scene.

THE COURSE IN THE BROADER CURRICULUM

Intermediate/Advanced Opera Techniques is an elective course in the School of Music. Enrollment is limited to students majoring in a degree with voice emphasis and participants must audition to participate. Only students with a demonstrable healthy vocal technique and physical confidence possess the requisite skills to successfully complete the course requirements. Students not cast in a given year are encouraged to continue their voice studio work and audition for placement in a subsequent semester.

While an elective course, MUOP 356/856 fulfills an essential part of a singer's training: the understanding of how to learn a role from initial casting to final performance. There is no other course in the curriculum that specifically addresses this skill set for vocal performance majors. The catalog description reads as follows:

Techniques of recitative, aria, and ensemble preparation. Opera performance training through the coordination of singing, movement, and emotional expression. (UNL Undergraduate Bulletin 2012-2013)

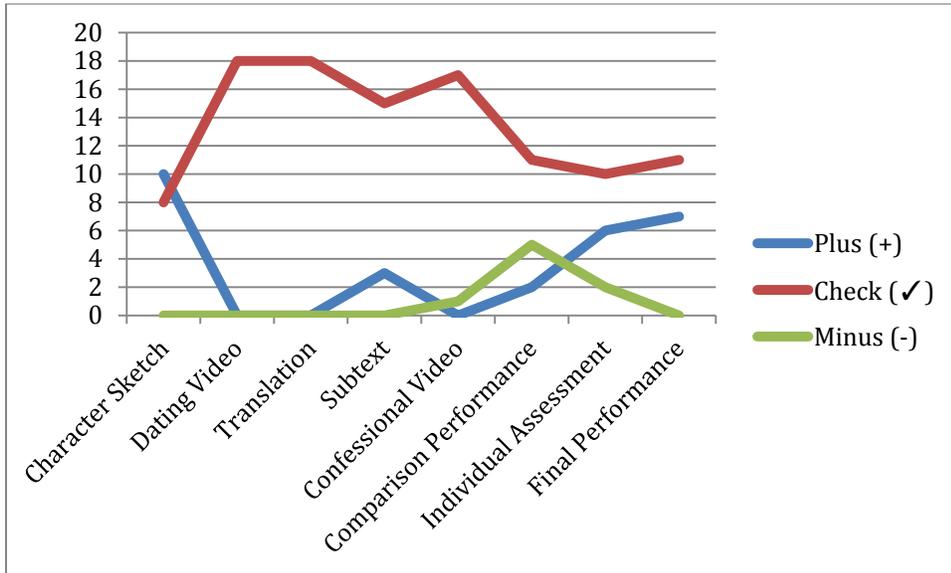
All of these skills are fundamental to the preparation and execution of a main stage operatic role. The School of Music produces a minimum of two main stage (fully sung, costumed and staged) productions each year. In order for those performances to be successful, it is assumed that students understand how to prepare a role for public performance. In addition, UNL students often audition for professional stage opportunities in the region and around the world where this knowledge is also presupposed.

At the same time, this course is an introduction and a progression of a current course of study. This course combines and applies the skills learned in Diction, Applied Voice and Musicianship courses while presuming no or little stage training. This course may be taken multiple times as students grow in their knowledge, confidence and understanding of the operatic art. It fills a collective need in the Vocal Performance major that is not met by any other single course in the curriculum.

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT LEARNING

Performance evaluation in the arts is subjective by nature and requires an assessment system that acknowledges creativity and individual progress. For this course I adopted a Plus-Check-Minus assessment procedure for all assignments and performances. Students that completed the requirements of each assignment as stated received a "Check" (✓). Students that did not meet the requirements of the assignment received a "Minus" (-). Students who delivered assignments with great insight or creativity received a "Plus" (+) for their work. I expected that the majority of students would achieve "Check" level work, and the data below supports that hypothesis.

Student Assignment Achievement Based on Plus-Check-Minus Assessment System:



ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ASSIGNMENTS & STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The first assignment of the semester was the written character sketch; I expect most students had some experience with this type of assignment from previous academic endeavors. The assignment involved a degree of research that was likely very comfortable for the majority of students. Ten students achieved a “Plus” assessment for this work. I anticipate this is due in part to the familiarity of this type of assignment.

The Dating Video was the first opportunity to see the students as actors and to assess their ability to synthesize what they had discovered in the character research into a live representation of the character. I required that students script the presentation so they would have time to think about how to best present their character in the allotted time. Performances were competent, but not extraordinary. All students effectively completed the work but seemed timid in making courageous choices about their characters within the context of the scene. The two examples here illustrate a [freshman](#) who is shy about making strong choices as the character, and a [graduate student](#) who is bolder in extending the character beyond a single attribute.

The Confessional Videos revealed the same performance level as the Dating Videos. Students were asked to provide commentary on their scene as if it had just happened in the style of reality television. Students competently completed the assignments, but none were of an exceptional level. A sophomore who is taking the course for a second time, as seen [here](#) gave one of the better performances.

The subtext assignment again revealed mostly competent performances with three “Plus” level submissions. The challenge of this assignment is to decide how the character really feels beneath the words he is saying, and to respond to the other participants in the scene

even when not speaking. Not surprisingly, 2/3 of the students who achieved a “Plus” on this assignment also earned a “Plus” rating on their final performances.

The Individual Assessment assignments revealed a significant reason for the uniformly average level of performance in the video assignments. When the students were forced to watch themselves in the rehearsals of their scenes, many reflected that they didn’t realize how their bodies were communicating to the audience. Subsequently, the number of “Plus” level reflections in the written reflection assignments increased to 6/18 (Appendix 2). The scene represented [here](#) is performed by two of the more exceptional students in class. However, upon viewing their performances, each student made dramatic strides in communicating the dramatic intent in the 5-7 days leading up to the public performance.

The students were also required to view three different performances of the same operatic scene from the online resource Opera in Video and reflect on the choices made in the interpretation of the featured aria. This activity, combined with the Individual Assessment activity, allowed the students to understand the importance of broad, purposeful and specific physical choices in their own performances, which led to 7/18 “Plus” performances in the final public concert. The remaining 11 students performed at a competent level.

It was clear that while students performed at different levels of expertise across the semester’s activities, each student improved in their opera performance skills. Strides were particularly significant in the areas of subtext and intent when not singing, as evidenced in the final performance video, available here in [Part I](#) and [Part II](#).

STUDENT RESPONSES

I was also interested to learn which assignments the students felt most affected their growth and final performances. Each student was asked to complete a Keep-Stop-Start survey about the assignments that I consider flexible in the course. Activities such as character research, translation and subtext are professional expectations and are not negotiable (see Appendix 3).

PLANNED CHANGES TO THE COURSE

The changes I plan to make for the Spring 2014 course are primarily minor adjustments to existing activities with a few exceptions.

Several students have indicated a desire for a more strongly collaborative process between actors within each scene. While the preparatory work such as translation and source material research must be done individually, it is possible to create collaborative experiences in the subtext activity as well as later improvisatory activities. I also plan to assign rehearsal time for scenes outside of class with a focus on musical ensemble work and language familiarity.

Time is also an issue in a course like this one, as I try to incorporate the information that must be presented in a lecture format while trying to provide adequate rehearsal time for music, language and staging. To better make use of face-to-face class time, I plan to adjust the following:

- Students will record dating video and confessional video outside of class and upload to Blackboard for distribution and assessment, saving 2 hours of class time.
- Incorporate music and language rehearsals earlier in the semester while continuing to work on character development.
- Add an additional personal video assessment assignment earlier in the rehearsal process for the students to evaluate in a email response.

Given the success of the individual assessments, it will be beneficial for students to not only see their performances, but also to receive feedback from an audience. To accomplish this need, I will add two activities: First, I will adapt an existing improvisation exercise (“gibberish”) to incorporate scene content and require students to perform it for class response. Second, I will incorporate a class period reserved for students to perform their scenes for one another prior to the dress rehearsal with an email response component.



A scene from Joseph Haydn's *Orfeo ed Euridice* in rehearsal (Marjorie Huntley as Eurydice and Cody Meyer as Orfeo).

SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT (1/2 PAGE)

In summary, I believe the course in its current state is effective; students indicate that they believe the same. The methodical process that students apply over the course of the semester can, at times, feel tedious but allows participants to delve deeply into the research and thought processes associated with portraying an authentic and complete character. Future application of these techniques will accelerate or decelerate for each student depending on the complexity of the role and the skill of the singer/actor, but will be useful all the same.

Weaknesses to be addressed in subsequent semesters are primarily in the area of efficiency of content delivery. I plan to adapt video assignments to be submitted via Blackboard, saving class time, as well as some of the reflective responses. Class time may also affect the number of scenes that are cast in subsequent semesters to allow for more rehearsal time.



A scene from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* in final rehearsal.

APPENDICES

1. SYLLABUS
2. WRITTEN SELF-ASSESSMENT EXAMPLES
3. RESPONSES TO THE KEEP-START-STOP SURVEY

APPENDIX 1 – COURSE SYLLABUS

University of Nebraska – Lincoln School of Music Spring 2013

COURSE INFORMATION

MUOP 356/856
Intermediate/Advanced Opera Techniques
2 Credit Hours
TR 12:30-1:20*
WMB 130

CONTACT INFORMATION

Dr. Jamie Reimer
WMB229
(402) 472-2497
jreimer2@unl.edu
Office hours by appointment

* Additional rehearsals may take place outside of the scheduled class time.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of the semester, the student will:

1. Understand the basic process for researching an operatic role
2. Explore and apply techniques for helping an operatic character come to life
3. Perform one scene from the opera repertoire for a live audience

COMMUNICATION

A majority of communication will take place via email and Blackboard. Plan to check your email daily and respond promptly with requested information. Occasional communication will arrive via text message, particularly if the situation is urgent. It is recommended, however, that students use email as the primary form of communication regarding lessons.

Students will also need to check the opera rehearsal board (next to Dr. Shomos' office) for announcements.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Students are required to obtain a copy of the scene to which they are assigned. Scores are available on reserve in the library.

Students may choose to purchase the source materials used in class; however, all materials are available online or may be borrowed from the library.

GRADING PROCEDURES

Students will be evaluated on the following criteria: class attendance, assignment completion, role preparation (music, text and staging), and performance & progress.

Class attendance & participation	30%
Assignments & preparation	30%
Performance & progress	40%

COURSE CALENDAR

January 8	Course overview and distribution of syllabus
January 10	Character research/development techniques
January 15	Source material due/Character sketches due/Video date #1
January 17	Acting the action: physicalization of the character
January 22	Discovering subtext
January 24	Comparison reflections due / translation due/Video date #2
January 29	Subtext due/Communicating in a foreign language
January 31	IPA due (all scenes)/Catch-up day
February 5	Introduction to recitative
February 7-14	Language coaching (pronunciation/idiomatic delivery)
February 19-26	Musical rehearsal
February 28	TBA
March 5	MEMORIZATION deadline /Staging begins
March 7-14	Staging
March 18-22	Spring Break – no classes
March 26-April 4	Staging
April 9-11	Video self-assessments (by appointment)/Staging
April 16	TBA (Dr. Reimer out of town)
April 18	Run through
April 22	Run through
April 23	Dress Rehearsal, 3:30 pm WMB 130
April 24	PERFORMANCE, 4:00 pm (3:30 call)/STRIKE immediately following
April 25	Personal assessment and course evaluation

This schedule may be amended. Students will be notified of any changes in writing.

APPENDIX 2 – SELF-ASSESSMENT RESPONSES

MUOP356/856 INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT DUE TUESDAY, APRIL 23 AT 12:00 PM

Please evaluate your performance based on the following criteria. Use the scale listed below each question to provide a narrative description below each.

Mastery of music and language: High Medium Low

I felt like I had the music completely memorized but not necessarily all the way internalized, better understanding of the text could be desired

Clear communication of dramatic intent: High Medium Low

I feel the audience would understand but not truly feel my emotion throughout the scene

Strength of character choices: High Medium Low

The choices I made were sometimes strong but not often strong enough - I need to make stronger choices as a rule.

Physical representation of character: High Medium Low

I felt while watching that I was not elegant enough for Eurycleia's character

What one thing would you most like to improve or change prior to the performance? Why? How will you do this?

I would like to lengthen almost all of my movements, make them more elegant. I will do this by visualizing the energy coming out of the tips of my fingers.

APPENDIX - SELF-ASSESSMENT RESPONSES

Belinda-Dido & Reneas

MUDP356/856 INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT
Due TUESDAY, APRIL 23 AT 12:00 PM

Please evaluate your performance based on the following criteria. Use the scale listed below each question to provide a narrative description below each.

Mastery of music and language:

High

Medium

Low

it feel very comfortable with notes, rhythms, entrances, and diction in this scene. it can do more with dynamics and inflections in the speech-like parts

Clear communication of dramatic intent:

High

Medium

Low

it seemed, as you say, "stapled to the floor". it need to move when it feel like it should move - especially when interacting with Dido.

Strength of character choices:

High

Medium

Low

it made a few good character choices, and it had plenty of good instincts, but it looked like it was "stuck a lot of time. my arms were floppy and the communicating" it did with them was largely ineffective.

Physical representation of character:

High

Medium

Low

a lot of the same problems as above apply to this. my character should be bubbly - not awkward and shy.

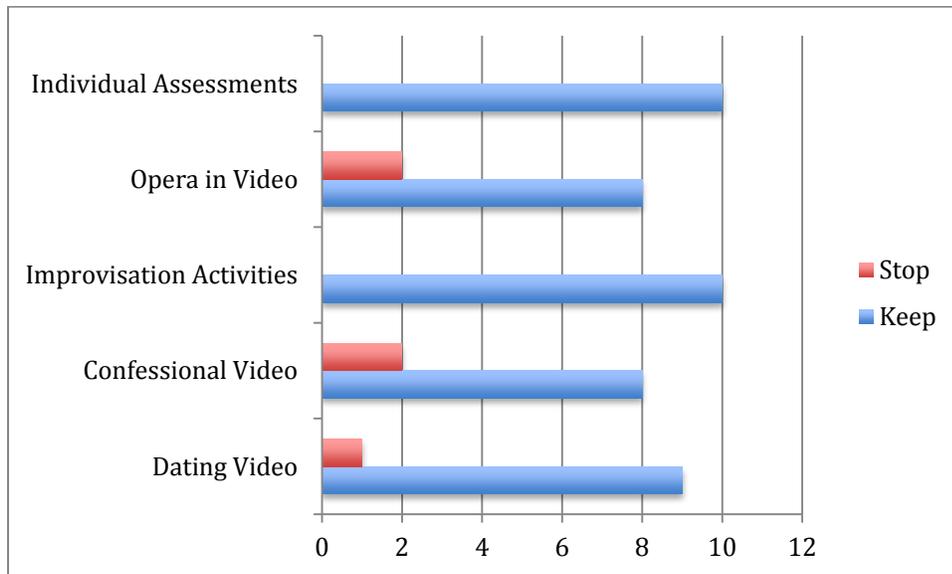
What one thing would you most like to improve or change prior to the performance? Why? How will you do this?

it want to make clear, more effective, and generally bigger physical choices. This will read better than using only facial expressions and gestures from the elbow-down.

APPENDIX 3 – SELECTED STUDENT RESPONSES TO KEEP-START-STOP SURVEY

Students were asked to indicate which elements of the course they thought were useful and enhanced their learning (Keep), those that were less useful and not helpful to their learning (Stop) and elements they would like to see added to future presentations of the course (Start).

Students Responses Based on a Keep-Stop-Start Survey:



“Keep” comments that were particularly useful included:

- The Opera in Video assignment gives the opportunity for “a more focused level of criticism and teaches us how to take or leave ideas of interpretation.”
- The Dating and Survivor videos “allow the students to put a modern spin on their character... makes understanding the character traits and flaws more palatable as the character is viewed in a more contemporary light.”
- The Dating Video “forced me to delve deeper into the character research process which I have never done before.”
- About the Survivor Video: “I loved having to be creative with my thoughts as a small role because it helped create a larger picture for my character.”
- The One-on-One Assessments were “a great opportunity to talk to the director... and forces you to think about aspects that you might not have addressed previously.”
- The Improvisation Activities “helped me become much more comfortable with the idea of making my own dramatic choices on stage and being confident (and unashamed) of those decisions.”
- The Gibberish (Improvisation Activity) “was especially useful, as many scenes were in foreign languages that the audience is unlikely to understand, but the emotions, purposes for actions, and meaning behind the words needed to be clearly demonstrated by the students in the scene.”

- Putting the (One-on-One Assessment) videos on Blackboard “was very helpful as one had the option of revisiting sections of the scene that were weaker in order to improve them by the final performance.”

“Start” suggestions were typically enhancements or adjustments to the assignments stated above, and included:

- Taking more video footage of rehearsals and requiring multiple email-based reflections from students over the course of the semester.
- Revising the Opera in Video assignment to feature performances of each student’s assigned scene, rather than one uniform scene for the entire class.
- Incorporating improvisation activities into the rehearsal process so students can explore situations as their assigned characters.
- Film and present videos in class, rather than performing them live.

“Stop” comments that were useful and insightful included:

- Improvisation Activities were “helpful, (but) made me uncomfortable (which I realize is the point).”

Response: I need to find a way to continue to create a safe space for exploration by all students even though some will still feel less comfortable having to experiment in front of classmates due to their personalities.

- The Dating Video was “very fun, but... since my character was not motivated by romantic thoughts or feelings, it was especially difficult to connect with this assignment.”

Response: While the title of this assignment is “Dating Video,” the intent of the exercise is to develop and present an introduction to the character in a public way. I need to clarify the parameters of the exercise when it is presented.