

# An Experiment with Pre-Class Opera Lessons

## *A Productive Use of the Moments Prior to a Lecture*

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What typically happens in those minutes prior to the beginning of a lecture? In forty years of university teaching, I have found it is what I call “idle chit-chat” although the word “idle” is not meant to disparage. I think having the students get to know one another – perhaps discuss the material – perhaps agree to form study groups – perhaps just get more comfortable with the university experience - can actually be quite productive. Nevertheless, suppose that a lecturer is confronted with total silence?

Such was my case in the Fall semester, 2014 of a sophomore level mathematics class for computer science majors at the University of Texas at Austin. There was simply pre-class silence. I warned the students: “If you do not engage in idle chit-chat, I will force you to listen to something I choose to fill the time.” On the second warning I was more explicit: “... and it will be opera.” Still silence; so the next class was preceded by The “Flower Duet” from Delibes' *Lakmé*. I thought it was something so sweet that it would get their attention and they might say, “This could be OK”. We were blessed by the fact that there was no class using the lecture room prior to us and thus it was easy for me to set up the opera presentations as well as the mathematics lectures to follow. I was very careful to start the opera early enough each class so that the lectures actually began at the appointed times. I also made it clear to the students that attendance for the opera was totally optional.

Similar to the *Lakmé* “Flower Duet”, the next three pieces were selected just to get them hooked: the male duet from *The Pearl Fishers*, “Song to the Moon” from Dvorak's *Rusalka*, and “Nessun Dorma” from *Turandot*. That meant two duets and two solos - two female and two male. (I have appended the entire list of presentations.)

The only indication I had of interest was student attendance. It seemed that very few students were arriving in the midst of the opera or right before class. That indicated interest, but I wanted something more precise. I decided to do an anonymous poll. Here is what I presented: Should there be opera prior to the start of our class?

Yes, I came to the university seeking to broaden myself and I find a few minutes of opera an enriching part of my day.

No, throughout my entire life I have sought to convince people that I was raised in a barn. I would prefer to listen to fingernails scraped on the blackboard than that noise. Please turn it off and allow us to engage in mindless chit-chat about our favorite reality shows.

A political reporter friend has described this as a “push poll”, meaning that the questions were phrased to elicit particular answers. Yes, I had a bit of fun with that, but, knowing my students, I doubt that this had much effect on anyone's vote. Out of a class of 80, there were 47 responses and only two students (4%) voted “No”. I was quite surprised and pleased. I ought to do a follow up poll but my students have too much on their minds at this moment to get their attention.

Generally, the video opera segments were less than five minutes: I deliberately chose fairly short segments. (The last two were longer.) If I was able I chose videos from an opera production (rather than a concert) with English subtitles. I also

I view the university experience as being potentially the most enriching four years of my students' lives. There should be so much more to attending a university than what is found in lectures and textbooks. This was my way of expanding my students' cultivation. I will consider it a success if, years from now, when a former student is thinking about dominant eigenvectors and their relation to Google's PageRank algorithm, the student says "Yes, I remember that. It was the day we saw the horses on stage for *Aida*."

1. "The Flower Duet" from Delibes' *Lakmé*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf42IP\\_\\_ipw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf42IP__ipw)
2. "Au fond du Temple Saint" from Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2MwnHpLV48>
3. "Song to the Moon" From Dvorak's *Rusalka*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtBPD95zBYE>
4. "Nessun Dorma" from Puccini's *Turandot*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTFUM4Uh\\_6Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTFUM4Uh_6Y)
5. "Bess, You Is My Woman Now" from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apiq3VN2Ra8>
6. "O soave fanciulla" from Puccini's *La Bohème*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l\\_4YKzBtbpc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_4YKzBtbpc)
7. "Bridal Chorus" from Wagner's *Lobengrin*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ap17Su6yX9w> 3:11 – 8:22
8. "O zittre nicht, mein lieber Sohn" from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YK3JjXfLGc> list=PLfqIlgPqnU19vrtFdKfDS7uAxGNvTLxWZe 18:00 – 22:45
9. "O mio babbino caro" from Puccini's Gianni *Schicchi*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GVdbuCwy38>
10. "Vesti la giubba" from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfGKDP9NBkk>
11. "Soave sia il vento" from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzHcNr\\_ChHE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzHcNr_ChHE)
12. "Anvil Chorus" from Verdi's *Il Traviatore*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZN01\\_pAxro](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZN01_pAxro)
13. "Polonaise" from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Um3wUL-pxw>
14. "Un bel di" from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhGZMPMJuTg> 1:00 – 1:04
15. "Sempre Libera" from Verdi's *La Traviata*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34G03334G04>