What Opera Can Do For History:

*Nixon in China* in History and on Stage

The 1972 trip to China by U.S. President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger, which ended more than two decades of mutual isolation between the U.S. and China, is remembered in popular history as “the week that changed the world.” The Shanghai Communique, signed by Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, expressed U.S. recognition of the governing authority of the Chinese Communist Party for the first time since the 1949 establishment of the People’s Republic of China. If all of the principals had the sense that they were making history, none of them likely foresaw that these events and their public and private utterances would soon become the raw material for an opera.

John Adam’s now widely acclaimed 1987 opera, *Nixon in China*, was composed less than fifteen years after Nixon and Kissinger’s dramatic trip to China in 1972. It was produced just nine years after the 1978 normalization of U.S.-China relations.

What happens when contemporary historical events become opera? Although operatic personalities and dramas are typically larger than life, until recently (with a few exceptions during the French revolutionary era) operas mostly avoided contemporary politics and drew instead upon myths, legends, and popular fiction and drama. Adams’s opera (and his later operas, *Death of Klinghoffer* and *Doctor Atomic*) departed from these conventions to highlight, and rework, epic events of recent living memory. On the 40-year anniversary of the Shanghai Communique, and in conjunction with the March 2012 production by the Eugene Opera of *Nixon in China*, this class invites students to think about both the history and the opera, and how the two tell different and intersecting stories about one of the defining events of modern world history.

This special class is organized in the context of a unique collaboration between the University of Oregon and Eugene Opera. This makes possible an unusual series of public events, related to the class, that highlight the historical and aesthetic understanding of the opera, and the past, present and future of US-China relations. Students should plan to attend as many of these events as possible, but definitely attend those that are marked with two asterisks** in this syllabus. Please take care to arrange your schedules accordingly.
Requirements: Assiduous reading, listening, watching, and active participation in discussion, at related events, and in interviews with guest speakers. Two short papers and one longer, interpretive/research paper. You will make a presentation on your final paper in the last class (week 10). The interpretive/research paper assignment involves the selection of one scene from the opera (you must choose one scene), articulation of a question that involves historical, literary, and/or musical interpretation (ideally connecting two of these elements), and thoughtful research and interpretation of your materials. All paper topics should be discussed with me in advance.

**A note on course materials:** Required readings are available at the bookstore or on Blackboard, as noted on the syllabus. In addition you will need to purchase a copy of the CD set: John Adams, *Nixon in China*, with Libretto by Alice Goodman. In Eugene it is available only at CD World, it can also be ordered online.

**SCHEDULE OF CLASSES, ASSIGNMENTS AND SPECIAL EVENTS**
*(assignments discussed on dates noted—come prepared for active discussion)*:

**Week 1 (January 11): Introduction: A Historical Encounter and its Life in Opera**

**Week 2 (January 18): History and Historical Narratives**

The following readings—a popular, U.S.-focused history and an internationally oriented history (with essays by Chinese scholars—provide varied perspectives, points of emphasis, and storylines. How might you characterize their different modes of recounting events? Their different interpretations?

Read:  

View: Act 1, Scene 1

**Week 3 (January 25): The People are the Heroes Now: Mao, Chinese Revolutionary Ideology and Visuality**

Read:  
• Maurice Meisner: *Mao ’s China and After* pp. 291-412. [Bookstore]  
• Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*  
(read sections on Red Detachment of Women) [Blackboard]

Questions for discussion:  
How does Meisner’s account of China and Mao differ from that of McMillan?  
What happens with culture (old and new) during the Cultural Revolution?

View: Act I, Scene 2
Week 4 (February 1): Nixon and Kissinger: Ideas and Personalities

       [Bookstore]
  [Blackboard].

Questions for and discussion:
How does Nixon describe his role? Kissinger’s role? China?
How does Kissinger imagine/describe China?
How does Kissinger’s portrait of China differ from other accounts?
How does Kissinger’s account of the events differ from other accounts?
How does Kissinger’s accounts of key personalities differ from other accounts?

View: Act I, Scene 3

Week 5 (February 8): Thinking About Opera, History, and Ideas, and Meeting a Composer

Each of the following books engages a different approach to the interpretation of opera. How would you describe each author’s approach to the relations of opera and history, or the relation of music and ideas?

          [Bookstore]

View: Act II, Scene 1

Week 6 (February 15): Imagining, composing, and beginning to analyze opera

• Timothy Johnson, John Adams’s *Nixon in China: Musical Analysis, Historical and Political Perspectives* (UO library edition is online), introduction.

Assignment: choose a scene and read Alice Goodman’s libretto carefully, and listen to the music. For paper #1: Identify the scene you chose and describe concisely in two to three pages with as much precision as possible (approximately one paragraph each):

1) how the libretto portrays individuals, culture and psychology
2) where the libretto connects to the history  
3) where the libretto departs from history  
4) how content is conveyed through music (optional at this point)  

View: Act II, scene 2  

**February 19, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Pape Hall, 3pm. Exhibit: “Nixon in China, Scenes from History and Stage,” Opening Reception  

**Week 7 February 22: Listening Again to the Music/ Singing the Part**  

**Guest appearances of Eugene Opera General Director, Mark Beudert and Music Director, Andrew Bisantz**  

**Readings:**  
• Timothy Johnson, John Adams’s *Nixon in China: Musical Analysis, Historical and Political Perspectives* (UO library edition is online), Selection TBA.  
• Find online music reviews of original 1987 *Nixon in China* production, the Vancouver 2007 production and the 2011 Metropolitan Opera production.  

**Assignment:** Turn in a one-page précis of your final paper that 1) identifies your topic and question and 2) identifies your sources and methodology.  

Prepare questions for discussion with guest artists Mark Beudert and Andrew Bisantz  

**View:** Act III  

**Week 8 (February 29) Gender, Culture, and Politics**  

Topics for discussion:  
Pat Nixon and U.S Cold War Domesticity  
Jiang Qing and Revolutionary Heroines: Women in the Cultural Revolution  

**Readings:**  
• Roxane Witke, *Comrade Chiang-Ch‘ing* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1977), pp. 1-42; 335-478  

Short Paper #2 Review Act II. In 2-3 pages compare the opera’s portraits of Jiang Qing and Pat Nixon. What is the effect of Act 2?

Roxane Witke, “Jiang Qing (Madame Mao) on Stage” Thursday, March 1, Knight Library Browsing Room, noon.

**Week 9 (March 7): Ted Foss: “Hidden Histories: The Libretto for Nixon in China”**
4pm, Knight Library Browsing Room
Come to class with written interview questions for this week’s guest speakers, with questions for Peter Sellars on a separate page.

Assignment for discussion with Foss: Select a scene from the opera. Review historical accounts/sources for the scene and consider what is or is not included. How does the opera present/interpret history? What is the effect of the representation in opera? Does the opera alter your understanding of the history?

**March 8: “Nixon in China Then and Now, An Afternoon with Theater Director Peter Sellars.”** 4:30pm Beall Hall, School of Music

**Attend March 11 Keynote talk by Amb. Nicholas Platt:**
“Reflections on the Nixon-Kissinger Visit and the Past and Future of US-China Relations” (Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Pape Hall)

**March 12 panel: The Shanghai Communiqué and 40 years of US-China Relations**
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, 4pm.

**Week 10 (March 14) Class presentations**

Come to class prepared to briefly introduce your final project and your tentative conclusions. Your final papers are due a week after this class discussion.

*Attend Nixon in China (performance) March 16 or 18 (student discounts available!)

FINAL PAPER DUE MARCH 20, noon, under my office door (353 McK).