

OLLI BEREKELY, SPRING 2025: SYLLABUS

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA 2025: A SEASON PREVIEW

April 28-May 19, Mondays at 10:30am

Kip Cranna

San Francisco Opera's Dramaturg (Scholar in Residence) Emeritus Kip Cranna will give an in-depth exploration of the six operas to be presented by San Francisco Opera in the summer and fall of 2025, exploring historical background information and using video with subtitles to illustrate key musical and dramatic moments. The repertoire includes Puccini's ever popular *La Bohème* and Mozart's masterpiece *Idomeneo* (both presented in June 2025). The fall 2025 season features the world premiere of Huang Ruo and David Henry Hwang's *The Monkey King*, the 25th anniversary presentation of Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking*, a new production of Wagner's last opera *Parsifal*, and Verdi's perennial favorite *Rigoletto*. No previous opera background required, just the willingness to get the most out of a promising season of world-class opera.

COURSE OUTLINE

WEEK 1 (April 28): *La Bohème* and *Idomeneo*

Puccini's tuneful tearjerker *La Bohème* is arguably the most beloved opera in the repertoire, ideal for newcomers to the art form. But even for seasoned fans there is much to discuss in terms of the literary background and the real-life characters who inspired the touching story of tragic young love. And we'll look closely at Puccini's use of thematic motives to highlight his characters and their emotions.

Mozart's *Idomeneo*, one of his serious operas and his first operatic masterwork, explores the aftermath of the Trojan War and the dilemma of a king forced by the gods to sacrifice his own son. We'll examine how Mozart bends and stretches the structural limits of the *opera seria* form and look closely at his amazing gift for musical characterization.

WEEK 2 (May 5): *Rigoletto*

Verdi's court jester *Rigoletto* is a character based on a real person who served the king of France in the 1500's. We'll compare the operatic figure to his real-life counterpart and learn of Verdi's epic battles with censors to bring his opera to the stage. In a work crammed full of beautiful melodies, we'll look beyond the tunefulness to see how Verdi's mastery of form allows him to heighten the drama while enchanting our ears.

WEEK 3 (May 12): *Dead Man Walking*

The world premiere of composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking* at San Francisco Opera in the fall of 2000 was an artistic milestone. Twenty-five years later, after 80 productions in 13 countries, *Dead Man Walking* is the

most performed new opera of this century. Based on Sister Helen Prejean's engrossing memoir about her work as spiritual advisor to death row inmates, the opera never fails to draw audiences into its emotionally charged world of grief and retribution, guilt and redemption. After examining the opera in detail, including its production and cast, we will look at other operas by the San Francisco-based composer Jake Heggie to become familiar with his output and his impact on the modern opera scene.

WEEK 4 (May 19): *Parsifal* and *The Monkey King*

Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal* centers around an improbable hero whose destiny is to lead the Knights of the Holy Grail. For his final work, the iconoclastic poet/composer creates a meditation on compassion that bridges Eastern and Western spiritual traditions in a work not been seen in San Francisco in 25 years. We'll mark its return to the stage by taking a sneak peek at the striking new production. And we will delve into Arthurian legend, with its tales of the Holy Grail that Wagner drew upon to craft his story. We'll see how his exploration of Eastern philosophy shaped his thinking. Then we will dive into the music, exploring the use of *leitmotif*—musical signature tunes that unify and enhance the score.

Composer Huang Ruo and librettist David Henry Hwang's new action-hero opera *The Monkey King* (猴王悟空) leaps onto the War Memorial Opera House stage in November in a highly anticipated world premiere. The opera is based on the opening chapter of *Journey to the West*, a novel from the Ming dynasty (published 1592) widely considered one of China's greatest literary classics. It follows the ambitious young monkey born from a stone who becomes the ruler of the monkeys and challenges the gods of the seas and heavens in a bid for immortality. The story has been interpreted in film, television, animation, and video games. The production (performed in English and Chinese) will unite the disciplines of opera, dance, puppetry and stagecraft. We'll get an early look at the show and become familiar with the sound world of acclaimed composer Huang Ruo.

Kip Cranna: Biography (kcranna@gmail.com)

Clifford "Kip" Cranna, Dramaturg (Scholar in Residence) Emeritus of San Francisco Opera, served the Company for over 40 years, 30 of them as Director of Music Administration, whose duties included coordinating the commissions and co-commissions of new operas. As Dramaturg he was involved in educational and community outreach projects and musicological support to the staff. He holds a PhD in musicology from Stanford University. He has taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and is on the faculty of Stanford Continuing Studies, the Fromm Institute at the University of San Francisco and OLLI Dominican and San Francisco State as well as UC Berkeley. He was a 2008 recipient of the San Francisco Opera Medal, the Company's highest honor.

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