

Weekend Courses 2024-25

French Grand Opera, a magisterial genre

Start date: 11 July 2025 **End date:** 13 July 2025

Venue: Madingley Hall
Madingley
Cambridge
CB23 8AQ

Tutor: Dr Robert Letellier **Course Code:** 2425NRX055

Tutor biography

Robert Ignatius Letellier is a lecturer and author and has presented some 30 courses in music, literature and cultural history at ICE since 2002. Educated in Grahamstown, Salzburg, Rome and Jerusalem, he is a member of Trinity College (Cambridge), the Meyerbeer Institute Schloss Thurmau (University of Bayreuth), the Salzburg Centre for Research in the Early English Novel (University of Salzburg) and the Maryvale Institute (Birmingham) as well as a panel tutor at ICE.

Lectures given by Robert include copious audio-visual examples, utilising CD, DVD and PowerPoint. He encourages the exchange of ideas among the participants, with as much interaction and discussion as possible.

Robert's publications number over 100 items, including books and articles on the late-17th-, 18th- and early 19th-century novel (particularly the Gothic Novel and Sir Walter Scott), the Bible, and European culture. He has specialised in the Romantic opera, especially the work of Giacomo Meyerbeer (a four-volume English edition of his diaries, critical studies, and two analyses of the operas), the opera-comique and Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, Operetta, the Romantic Ballet and Ludwig Minkus. He has also worked with the BBC, the Royal Opera House, Naxos International and Marston Records, in the researching and preparation of productions.

Summary of content

This course examines the intellectual content and structural underpinning of French Grand Opera which flourished in Paris from 1828-1870. The genre of *tragédie lyrique* was renewed and relaunched by Auber with *La Muette de Portici* (1828) and Rossini with *Guillaume Tell* (1829). These operas considered the revolutionary struggle for national identity that was a growing issue of the age. The great operas that followed by Meyerbeer and Halévy considered the political situation in terms of religious freedom, the rise of Jewish emancipation and religious toleration in the spread of revolutionary ideals in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. *Robert le Diable* (1831), with a mythological theme conjured up the Catholic unity of the Middle Ages, *Les Huguenots* (1836), conversely, the bloody strife of the Reformation. *La Juive* (1835) considered the nature of religious freedom in terms of the Jews in Christian society, and *Le Prophète* (1849) the place of poor people, and religion as a ideology of social change—also in terms of Reformation scenario. Later Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867) would present the very issue of personal freedom and its relation to state religion. The decisive influence of Grand Opera on the development of the history of the operatic genre will also be assessed.

Aims

This course aims to:

- consider the role of French Grand Opera in the history of opera
- explore something of the thematic contrast and implications of this Romantic subject matter and changing musical styles
- examine this operatic repertoire in terms of the intellectual and cultural history of the 19th century, and the nature of the heritage of Grand Opera and the Paris Opéra

Course sessions

Friday

Please plan to arrive between 16:30 and 18:30. You can meet other course members in the Terrace Bar which opens at 18:15. Tea and coffee making facilities are available in the study bedrooms.

19:00	Dinner
20:30 – 22:00	A venerable tradition: the <i>tragédie lyrique</i> (Lully, Rameau, Gluck)
22:00	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

Saturday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
09:00 – 10:30	The Empire and Restoration: reinvention and innovation (Spontini, Rossini)
10:30	Coffee
11:00 – 12:30	Revolution and Patriotism: a new genre (Auber, Rossini)
13:00	Lunch
14:00 – 16:00	Free time
16:00	Tea
16:30 – 18:00	Faith and Freedom: aspirations to liberty (Meyerbeer, Halévy)
18:00 – 18:30	Free time
18:30	Dinner
20:00 – 21:30	Faith and Freedom: a plea for tolerance (Meyerbeer, Halévy)
21:30	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

Sunday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
09:00 – 10:30	Exploration and Empire: finding new worlds (Meyerbeer, Berlioz, Verdi)
10:30	Coffee
11:00 – 12:30	Conclusion: wider influences in the world of opera
12:45	Lunch

The course will disperse after lunch

Presentation of the course

No requirements are necessary. Some knowledge of opera and 19th-c French opera in particular would help to deepen appreciation. The course will be presented as lectures with musical and iconographical illustrations. There will be opportunity for discussion.

Learning outcomes

As a result of the course, you will gain a greater understanding of the subject and you should be able to:

- place opera in a wider historical context
- appreciate more of the influence of cultural currents
- grow in the knowledge of the operatic genre
- value the variety and depth of the composers of grand opera

Reading and resources list

There are no compulsory readings for this course.

However, you may find the below recommended reading list of interest to supplement your course.

The Grove Dictionary of Opera (Macmillan 1992)

The Oxford Dictionary of Opera (Oxford University Press 1992)

Barzun, Jacques, *Berlioz and the Romantic Century* 2 vols (Boston: Little Brown & Co 1950)

Budden, Julian, *The Operas of Verdi* 3 vols (Oxford University Press 1972, 1992)

Crosten, William L, *French Grand Opera: An Art and a Business* (New York 1948, 1972)

Fulcher, Jane, *The Nation's Image: French Grand Opera as Politicized Art* (Cambridge University Press 1987)

Jordan, Ruth, *Fromental Halévy: His Life, and Music, 1799-1862* (London: Kahn & Averill 1994)

Letellier, Robert, *Daniel-Francois Esprit Auber: The Man and His Music* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2010)

Letellier, Robert, *Giacomo Meyerbeer: A Reader* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2007)

Letellier, Robert, *An Introduction to the Dramatic Works of Giacomo Meyerbeer: Operas, Ballets, Cantatas, Plays* (Aldgate 2008, reprinted paperback Routledge 2016)

Letellier, Robert, *The Operas of Giacomo Meyerbeer* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 2006)

Letellier, Robert, *Political Concerns and Literary Topoi in French Grand Opera* (New York: Nova Science Publishers 2018)

Letellier, Robert, *Giacomo Meyerbeer: A Critical Life and Iconography* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2018)

Osborne, Charles, *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (Gollancz 1969)

Note: Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) students are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current ICE course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

(Information correct as of April 2024)