

Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

Johanna Shapiro, PhD
Feature Editor

Editor's Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

Teaching Humanities Through Opera: Leading Medical Students to Reflective Attitudes

Pablo González Blasco, MD, PhD; Graziela Moreto, MD; Marcelo R. Levites, MD

Humanities are useful resources for helping medical students develop themselves as human beings. There is a growing concern about the human dimension of future physicians and how it can be taught or reinforced in the educational environment. Emerging technology tends to monopolize students' attention and learning efforts, often at the expense of other important aspects of medicine. In addition, medical students are, in general, young people who are learning to be physicians at the same time that they are developing their adult personas. Medical educators must recognize this and provide ways for students to reflect on general subjects related to culture and the humanities from the medical perspective. The humanities have become a collabora-

tive methodology in medical education often used in family medicine departments.

In Brazil, there is no family medicine context in the undergraduate curriculum, and departments of family medicine are absent from medical schools, as well as formal teaching of humanities. SOBRAMFA—Brazilian Society of Family Medicine—is composed a handful of family physicians but involves more than 100 students interested in this specialty. Through ongoing medical education courses, SOBRAMFA promotes several scenarios to teach interested students how to develop the patient-centered approach and humanistic doctoring.¹

Experiences related to arts, literature, and even cinema are included in the literature. However, music—and specifically opera—references by and large are missing from the medical bibliography.

This project is an extracurricular experience that has been headed by

SOBRAMFA for 6 years, with students coming from six different medical schools in São Paulo, Brazil. The project can be portrayed in three acts like an opera performance.

First Act, First Scene *Preparing for the opera, describing the scenario*

The project consisted of attending 15 opera performances (Table 1) in two theatres in the city of São Paulo. Forty students participated in the project, none of whom had attended opera previously. Before attending, students received an initial explanation of the libretto and highlights of the opera. This helped prepare students for the performance and facilitated a receptive and informed learning environment. This groundwork was laid by reviewing movie scenes dealing with opera, as well as watching brief clips of some operas themselves.

(Fam Med 2005;37(1):18-20.)

From SOBRAMFA (Brazilian Society of Family Medicine), São Paulo, Brazil.

First Act, Second Scene

Using movie clips involving opera to facilitate understanding

Since most of the students were not familiar with opera, the first step was to introduce them to the context. Using movie scenes involving opera music was useful to remove fears about attending an opera performance and perhaps getting nothing from it.

As an example, several scenes can be put together, as described below, and shown to the students before attending the play.

Pretty Woman

(Time counting: 1:24:11–1:26:35)

This is a particularly useful scene, since the protagonist, a working-class young woman, has never attended opera before and is afraid of not understanding it because it is in Italian. The students identify with the movie character and understand how it is possible to admire and react with emotion to opera, despite the singing and language differences.

The Shawshank Redemption

(Time counting: 1:07:00–1:09:46)

An opera song is broadcast into the prison yard. “I don’t know what the Italian ladies sang that day, and I don’t mind. All I can say is that it was so beautiful, like a dream, and all the prisoners, for some minutes, felt free” (a speech by one of the prisoners, played by Morgan Freeman).

Philadelphia

(Time counting: 1:21:04–1:25:31)

This is probably one of the best “opera lectures” performed in the cinema. Tom Hanks, a corporate lawyer dying of AIDS, explains Maria Callas’ aria from “Andrea Chenier” to Denzel Washington, the lawyer who is somewhat reluctantly defending him in a job discrimination suit. As Hanks translates the lyrics, points out the music and instruments, and invites Denzel Washington to feel the pain in the

Table 1

The Opera List

- Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Il Trovatore*, *Macbeth*, *Don Carlo*
- Donizetti’s *L’Elisir D’Amore*, *Lucia de Lamermoor*, *Don Pasquale*
- Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*
- Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, *The Magic Flute*, *Le Nozze de Figaro* (*Figaro’s Wedding*)
- Carlos Gomes’ *Il Guarani*
- Gounod’s *Romeu and Juliet*

singer’s voice, the speech becomes a moving explanation of the purest meaning of opera.

Second Act—Attending the Play

The following points came from the discussion following the play, as well as the insights the students give on further appraisal.

Being There as a Group

Students emphasized that attending the operas as a group led to an atmosphere uniquely conducive to reflection and sharing. They stressed that this experience was absolutely different than reading a book, even different than watching a film, both of which can easily be done individually with follow-up group discussion. Opera is a total experience of immediacy, and the most important thing is “being there” as a group engaged in the context.

Pure Characters

Students further pointed out that the opera characters are “pure and clean,” in contrast to those commonly portrayed in the movies, who are closer to real life. The opera characters are shaped to exhibit archetypal temperaments, so virtues, passions, and deficiencies show up sharply and are well defined. The power of opera, therefore, doesn’t depend on the unexpected attitudes of the characters, as they are already known, but on the way they are presented through a particular dramatic play. Students realized that in daily life they do not have the opportu-

nity to deal with such larger-than-life characters, so the opera performance brings into focus new knowledge about human behavior and exposes them to the broad universe of human experience.

Performance Accesses the Affective Domain

Students commented that the union of music, language, and drama created a unique impression, directly touching their emotions. During the operatic performance, students noted that they were also able to cope with their emotional responses, since they had more time to process feelings compared to the movies, where the emotional impact comes in faster sequences.

Opera Works, Even in Italian

The impact of the singers’ acting compelled students to focus on the performers’ interpretation more than on the script subtitles, which were shown on the screen simultaneously. In the opinion of the students, it was the characters’ live presence that most deeply affected them, and the libretto moved to the background.

Third Act—Discussion Group. Grand Finale in an Italian Restaurant

After attending the opera performance, discussions were held among the students and teachers, even relatives who joined the group. In São Paulo, it is easy to find an Italian restaurant open at night after an opera performance. It proved

to be a proper environment to start the open discussion and hear the students' comments and reflections.

This experience promoted reflections among the students about their own perceptions and the emotions they felt, and this reflective attitude persisted over time. Students noticed that opera has what they call a "delayed effect," with new issues emerging long after the actual attendance at the performance had occurred. For this reason it is difficult to appraise opera learning projects exclusively through the discussions immediately following the event. Follow-up evaluation is important, since additional insights may emerge as a result of students' ongoing reflective process. Particular passages coming from opera continued to be useful to students in terms of evoking attitudes about daily behavior and values (love, compassion, jealousy, forgiveness, revenge, comprehension) as well as stimulating self-examination and

disclosure of emotional responses, which in turn promote new reflections. In life, the most important attitudes, values, and actions are taught through role modeling and example, a process that acts directly on the learner's emotions.² Since feelings exist before concepts, the affective path is a critical shortcut to the rational process of learning.^{3,4} The students' involvement with the opera performances also acted like a catalyst to encourage their interest in understanding the human dimension of being a doctor.

Conclusions

This analysis is based on student discussions and reflects their own perceptions. Overall, these findings suggest that although opera is not a familiar art form in the Brazilian culture, the students had highly positive responses to the project and were eager for a follow-up experience. When introduced in a didactic way, opera can be a new educa-

tional method for teaching humanities. Studying opera plays and attending opera performances directly influence students' affective domain and emotions. Exposure to opera leads students to be reflective and emotionally open, which in turn helps promote empathic attitudes, enriches professional values, and develops students as well-rounded human beings.

Corresponding Author: Address correspondence to Dr Blasco, SOBRAMFA, Rua das Camélias, 637, 04048-061, Sao Paulo, Brazil. 55-011-50843542. Fax: 551-155-897678. pgblasco@uol.com.br.

REFERENCES

1. Blasco PG. Literature and movies for medical students. *Fam Med* 2001;33(6):426-8.
2. Ruiz Retegui A. *Pulchrum*. Madrid: Rialp, 1999.
3. Ferres J. *Educar en una cultura del espectáculo*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2000.
4. Blasco PG. *Medicina de família e cinema: recursos humanísticos na educação médica*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 2002.