

Acting for Singers (MMus/ DMA) 9504/9841 Fall 2026

Course Description

This course offers a practical exploration of acting in opera, examining how text, music, physicality, and dramatic action work together in performance. Through close observation, scene and aria preparation, and performance-based experimentation, students will develop tools for creating specific, truthful, and fully embodied characters while meeting the vocal and musical demands of the art form. Particular attention will be given to objectives and actions, relationships, active listening, dramatic discovery, stillness, and the ways in which the score shapes a performer's physical and psychological life.

Framework

For each excerpt, students should consider:

- What does the character want?
- From whom do they want it?
- Where does the action or tactic change?
- What is the performer doing—not merely feeling?
- Where do we see thought occur?
- How does the music affect the performer physically?
- What happens during orchestral passages or silence?
- When is the performer still, and why is that stillness active?
- Does the performer anticipate the music or appear to discover it?
- What remains truthful in close-up? What would still communicate in a large theatre?
- What choice would you want to test in your own work?

Rather than completing conventional written reviews, you will keep a concise **Viewing Notebook**, using the framework above to record key observations, questions, and choices you may wish to explore in your own work.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- identify a character's objective and translate it into clear, playable actions;
- recognize changes of thought, intention, tactic, and relationship within an operatic scene or aria;
- analyze how text, orchestration, silence, and musical structure shape dramatic behaviour;
- integrate physical, dramatic, vocal, and musical choices in the preparation and performance of operatic repertoire;
- use stillness, movement, gesture, and focus with intention;
- distinguish between anticipating a dramatic or musical event and experiencing it as a genuine discovery;
- adapt the scale and specificity of a performance for different theatrical and recorded contexts;

- observe and analyze the work of other performers without merely imitating their choices;
- respond constructively to direction and refine their work through experimentation, collaboration, and reflection; and
- articulate their developing artistic values and apply them to their own performance practice.

Weekly Viewing Plan

Week	Viewing focus	Suggested material	Connection to assignment
Oct. 8–9	What makes operatic acting believable?	Short contrasting performances of the same aria—one highly external and one psychologically specific	Students begin distinguishing emotion, intention and action
Oct. 15–16	The director in rehearsal	Excerpts from Jonathan Miller’s <i>Acting in Opera</i> , documenting his rehearsal of <i>La traviata</i>	Observe how playable adjustments change a performance
Oct. 22–23	Relationship and private thought	Jon Vickers and Heather Harper in the Act II confrontation from <i>Peter Grimes</i>	Track what changes because of the other person
Oct. 29–30	Text, thought and solitude	Vickers in “Now the Great Bear and Pleiades”	Identify thought changes, operative words and active stillness
Nov. 5–6	Music as dramatic event	The final Grimes sequence, followed by a contrasting singer or production	Examine how orchestration, repetition and silence affect behaviour
Nov. 12–13	Individual artistic language	Students nominate a performance that has influenced them and analyze one short excerpt	Articulate what they value—and what they want to incorporate without copying

Weekly Assignment

Each weekly assignment will have three connected parts:

1. **Watch:** Analyze a designated excerpt using that week's acting principle.
2. **Prepare:** Apply the same principle—not the performer's specific choices—to your own repertoire.
3. **Test:** Present your work in the Performance Laboratory with the pianist.

For example:

Watch Vickers in "Now the Great Bear and Pleiades." Identify three moments when a new thought enters, two places where the accompaniment alters his physical or psychological state, and one moment of active stillness. Then prepare your own aria, marking equivalent moments of discovery, musical interruption, and stillness.

Our weekly process will move through the following cycle:

observe – analyze – experiment – sing – adjust – reflect

The screen becomes another rehearsal room: a place to observe closely, ask practical questions, and discover possibilities for your own performance.

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment in this course will focus on each student's ability to apply acting principles to operatic performance. Vocal quality or technical vocal achievement will not be assessed except insofar as the student is able to integrate dramatic choices with the musical and vocal demands of their repertoire.

Students will receive ongoing feedback throughout the course. Evaluation will emphasize preparation, specificity, experimentation, responsiveness to direction, integration of feedback, and growth over the six-week period.

Assessment Breakdown

- **Preparation, Participation and Professional Practice — 15%**
Preparation of assigned repertoire and viewing material; active and constructive participation; collaboration; concentration; willingness to experiment; and professional rehearsal practices.
- **Attendance and Punctuality — 10%**
Because this is an intensive, collaborative, and performance-based course, regular attendance and punctuality are essential. Students will be assessed on their consistent presence and readiness to begin work at the scheduled class time.

Absences related to illness, approved academic accommodation, or exceptional personal circumstances will be addressed in accordance with Western University policies and will not be assessed in the same manner as unexplained absences. When possible, students should notify the instructor in advance of an absence or late arrival.

- **Viewing Notebook — 20%**
Concise weekly observations demonstrating the student's ability to identify objectives, actions, relationships, changes of thought or tactic, active stillness, and the dramatic influence of the music. Entries will be assessed for specificity and practical application rather than length or academic writing style.
- **Weekly Performance Laboratory — 35%**
Application of each week's acting principle to the student's own repertoire. Assessment will consider clarity of objective and action, responsiveness to the music and text, active listening, physical specificity, willingness to test new choices, and the student's ability to incorporate direction.
- **Final Integrated Performance and Reflection — 20%**
A culminating presentation of an operatic excerpt, accompanied by a brief oral or written reflection. Students will demonstrate how their choices have developed through observation, experimentation, feedback, and rehearsal.

Performance Criteria

Across the Performance Laboratory and final presentation, students will be assessed on their ability to:

- pursue a clear objective through specific, playable actions;
- communicate changes of thought, tactic, and relationship;
- integrate text, music, physicality, and dramatic intention;
- remain responsive to scene partners, orchestral passages, and silence;
- use movement, gesture, focus, and stillness purposefully;
- receive and apply direction;
- make and sustain independent artistic choices; and
- demonstrate growth through experimentation and reflection.

Suggested Reading

No reading is required for this course. However, the following books may support your studio work and deepen your understanding of acting technique:

- *Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus* by Marina Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd-Williams
- *Acting in Opera: A, B, C* by George Shea
- *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by Melissa Bruder et al.

Enrolment Restrictions: Enrollment in this course is restricted to students in the MMus and DMA streams.

Methods of Evaluation: Below is the grading scale for all programs in the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Note that final grades must be numeric. A: 80 – 100% B: 70 – 79% C: 60 – 69% F: 00 – 59%

Statement on Academic Offences: Scholastic offences are taken seriously, and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_offences.pdf

Statement on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence: Western is committed to reducing incidents of gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) and providing compassionate support to anyone who is going through or has gone through these traumatic events. If you are experiencing or have experienced GBSV (either recently or in the past), you will find information about support services for survivors, including emergency contacts on the Wellness and Wellbeing website:

<https://www.uwo.ca/health/gbsv/index.html>

To connect with a case manager or set up an appointment, please contact support@uwo.ca

Health and Wellness Services: Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health Support for a complete list of options about how to obtain help:

<https://www.uwo.ca/health/mental-health/index.html>.

Accessible Education Western (AEW): Western is committed to achieving barrier-free accessibility for all its members, including graduate students. As part of this commitment, Western provides a variety of services devoted to promoting, advocating, and accommodating persons with disabilities in their respective graduate program

Graduate students with disabilities (for example, chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, mobility impairments) are strongly encouraged to register with Accessible Education (AE), a confidential service designed to support graduate and undergraduate students through their academic program. With the appropriate documentation, the student will work with both AE and their graduate programs (normally their Graduate Chair and/or Course instructor) to ensure that appropriate academic accommodations to program requirements are arranged. These accommodations include individual counselling, alternative formatted literature, accessible campus transportation, learning strategy instruction, writing exams and assistive technology instruction.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI): the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools/software/apps is unacceptable in this course.