

# RE-DESIGNING CONTENT AND STRUCTURE IN MUSIC

CAROLYN WATSON  
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

## Background

The Spring 2021 course that I have designed as part of January Jumpstart is VOIC 900, which is a directed study that requires instructor consent. This course is typically associated with enrollment in the KU Opera Production and is one that I have not taught prior to this semester. In its current form, for Spring 2021, KU is staging a double bill of two chamber operas, as distinct from a larger mainstage production involving full cast and orchestra which we typically do. Covid-19 restrictions on number of enrollments, the additional aerosol danger associated with singing, as well as distancing requirements, all create a challenge for leading this course from a logistical standpoint. The course is designed as an in-person module.

The subject matter of these two selected opera works is also of a sensitive nature; one involves a woman who is dealing with the aftermath of sexual abuse, while the other chronicles the journey of a transgender teenager. I do not have a great deal of experience in dealing with or exploring stories such as these in a classroom setting, so this course is an experimental pursuit of teaching methods on sensitive subject matter as well as a performance of flexible pedagogy due to new classroom policies and procedures.

Additionally, since this project is on-going, this poster illustrates a mix of present and future goals for this course. Some components and performances have yet to transpire, so these will be reflected upon in future tense. However, since half the semester has already been completed, this poster also serves as a documentation of the teaching and learning occurring at the present time.

## Course Goals

- 1. To navigate sensitive subject matter:** I recognize that the subject matter with which I am dealing may potentially be triggering for some students, and I want to implement strategies that are founded in pedagogical research but also ones that have been successfully used here at KU by colleagues who have encountered similar scenarios.
- 2. To gain awareness of, and practice in, some alternative modes of course delivery:** This course redesign focuses largely on organizational structure. In this version of VOIC 900, a GTA leads the first and preparatory portion of the course, and I assume responsibility for the latter part of the semester, especially as the performance date approaches. This redesign attempts to structure the progression of content so that the transition is a seamless one.

## Implementation

The double-bill performance served as my main outlet for exploring sensitive subject matter with my students. We spend much of the semester preparing for our performances, so my main strategy for navigating sensitive content was to deliberately scaffold time for discussion on our topics—both impromptu and planned. This allowed for us to intentionally communicate about more than technical matters during rehearsal and to show students and our future audiences how these topics warrant attention and care. These discussions were often organic in nature, because the content served as a natural prompt for further commentary, moments of solidarity, and reflective feedback.

### Excerpted from KU School of Music Media Release:

“In addition to a long-overdue reckoning with structures of systemic racism, colleges throughout the nation are also grappling with an epidemic of sexual assault, harassment, and violence against women,” Watson said. “The two works selected explore this issue along with the discrimination and misogyny so often suffered by women and the LGBTQIA community more generally.”

Neal Long, a KU doctoral student in voice and co-director of the productions, said the project has provided invaluable experience for students, both in terms of challenging contemporary repertoire and social justice.

“The relationships we’ve fostered with the communities represented in the operas have been critical not only to the success of the project but also our own personal growth,” Long said.

One of those relationships is with co-director Lily DeSett, who assisted with the production of “As One.”

“Working on ‘As One’ has been the honor of a lifetime,” DeSett said. “I remember hearing about this opera back in a time when I was too scared to live my life authentically, as I am now, and it gave me hope. I’m so glad that I was able to be a part of the telling of this story, a story that needs to be heard.”



## Reflections

- 1. What worked/is working:** I was surprised, in the best possible way, by how organic the whole process has been, and indeed many of the concerns I had prior to teaching this class turned out to be unfounded.
- 2. How the inclusion of more sensitive content changed how I approached the class:** This, for me, has been one of the most positive aspects. Simply because these operas are so powerful, the students have connected with them with ease. Those involved exhibit a sense of pride in being able to help tell these stories. As a unique, pandemic-inspired, one-off, we will not repeat these performances. However, if and when I am in a situation whereby I need to navigate sensitive subject matter again, I feel much better equipped to do so as a result of this experience.
- 3. How the organizational structure of this course served as a help and hindrance:** We were limited in many ways by pandemic protocols with regard to ensemble size and rehearsal conditions; however, these two works were chosen in advance to fit the parameters so things ended up proceeding more smoothly than I anticipated.
- 4. The most important takeaways I have from this course design process:** Flexibility is key! My inexperience in dealing with this kind of subject matter previously necessitated a great deal of background reading and research, and as a result, my understanding of the issues involved really expanded during January Jumpstart. Because of this experience, I hope to be bolder and less afraid to tackle the unfamiliar!