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Kleine Harlequinade: Synthesizing a directing education
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ABSTRACT
As my undergraduate education in opera stage direction comes to a close, I have designed my own final project: It is my intent to research and direct an original production of Antonio Salieri’s short opera Kleine Harlequinade. The opera will be performed in English by UNI School of Music students, with fall scenic and costume production values. Salieri, though well known during his lifetime as a contemporary of Mozart, is rarely performed today. This research project will involve a complete analysis of the script and score, a literature review on the operas of Salieri, and the creation of a directing book for the opera including staging and set design. The dissemination of my research will primarily be at the public performances of the opera on March 6 and 7. At the conclusion of the project, I will prepare a short lecture on my findings.

KLEINE HARLEQUINADE
The intermezzo, in the 18th century, was a comic operatic interlude inserted between acts or scenes of an opera seria. These intermezzi could be substantial and complete works themselves, though they were shorter than the opera seria which enclosed them; typically they provided comic relief and dramatic contrast to the tone of the bigger opera around them, and often they used one or more of the stock characters from the opera or from the commedia dell’arte. Commedia is a form of popular comedy developed in Italy during the 16th and 18th centuries, with stock characters such as Brighella, Harlequin, and Columbine, in situations improvised from set plotlines.

Kleine Harlequinade is an intermezzo from the tragicomedy Axur, re d’Ormus by Antonio Salieri and librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte. The five-act opera was based on the livret Tarare by poet and priest Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais, and was commissioned for Joseph II’s opera buffa troupe. Da Ponte replaced Beaumarchais’s “fête européenne” with a much shorter commedia dell’arte scene for three characters. Salieri took advantage of the scene to compose what seems to have been his first extensive operatic cartoon.

ANTONIO SALIERI
Born on August 18, 1750, in Legnano, Republic of Venice, Italy, Antonio Salieri went on to create some of the most popular operas of the day, becoming a leading musical figure in Viennese, Parisian, and Italian circles. He later focused on religious compositions and was a court musical director as well as a sought-after teacher of other classical greats. Salieri died on May 7, 1825.

INTEGRATED DIRECTING PROCESS
Discovering Kleine Harlequinade took a little digging, but it was immediately clear to me that this would be the perfect piece to direct for a senior directing project due to its length and accessibility. I was also intrigued by the commedia dell’arte subject matter and the scarcity with which it’s performed today. Luckily for me, my instructors felt the same way and chose to feature the piece on our Spring Opera Showcase.

I decided to embrace the transient nature of the traveling commedia tradition by staging the intermezzo as a scene “stolen” by three vagabonds interrupting the scenes concert and taking over the space. This included their building their set and changing into costume during the action of the scene, and an audience of characters from throughout the rest of the opera scenes attending their play within a play. The three commedia stock characters featured in Harlequinade, namely Harlequin, Brighella, and Columbine, have distinct costumes and masks. With the help of designer Danielle Mason and UNI School of Music’s Experiential Learning Fund, we were able to create gorgeous, authentic period costumes. The rest of the set and props were scarce, consisting of a rope which was strung on the existing set and curtains “stolen” from the set itself.

Auditions and casting were, perhaps, the most informative aspect of the experience. I had the chance to cast three of our best singers, and they rose to the challenge handsomely. Together, we worked to create modernized versions of each of characters based on their well-established traditions, and developed a whole universe in which our production took place. The rehearsal process was particularly informative for me in that I had to develop a language to create this specific and stylized form of theatre in an operatic setting: something that is very scarcely done, due to the fact that opera and commedia dell’arte rarely meet.

OUTCOME
The developmental stage culminated in a “curtain talk” created in collaboration with the director of the scenes program and given each night at the performance’s start. This talk was a concise speech about my experience creating my production of Harlequinade, and thanking the many parties who made it possible. This was helpful to my development as a young director as curtain talks are a necessary aspect of the collegiate opera director’s profession.

Another necessary element of the director’s duties are program notes: a brief message from the director addressing the audience as well as a synopsis of the scene’s action. Creating these were beneficial both to my learning experience and directing portfolio.

Both performances went exceptionally well, and were met with widespread acclaim by audiences. Tuesday night was met with some last minute troubleshooting on my part when one of the hooks on the rope broke moments before the scene began, but my actors played it off seamlessly. My favorite review came from the six-year-old son of a voice instructor who purportedly “loved it.”

SUMMARY
Kleine Harlequinade has been my first major directing project, and nothing could have better informed my education. Handling the developmental and rehearsal stages in real time was different from my theoretical study in surprising ways, and incredibly rewarding. I was able to integrate what I’ve learned both with my directing mentor, and in my directing classes with the Department of Theatre.

I am both better prepared and affirmed in my choice to pursue a career as an open director as a direct result of this project, and would thereby consider it a success.

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QUESTIONS?
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