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Original Opera in Middle School

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ORIGINAL OPERA IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Anita Bland describes the positive benefits of an opera program for middle school students.

BY ANITA BLAND

As I begin to write about the significance of opera in the education of middle school children, I wonder exactly what I can tell music educators that will be of importance and interest. I am a middle school classroom teacher without musical training.

On the other hand, I know that everyone who works with children at this age knows both their frustrations and vulnerability. Much of the primary school enthusiasm for learning has somewhat dulled. Often these children have learning difficulties or have learning styles that do not match their needs. The seriousness and importance of higher education takes a back seat to the importance of being twelve years old in today's society.

I also know that the Creating Original Opera program, developed by the Metropolitan Opera Guild education department, is a phenomenal tool for teaching children academic and life skills, but what can I tell music teachers about this program? Certainly music teachers all see that the arts, in particular music, seem to be avenues of learning that apply to all learners, including at-risk students. You are

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aware that somehow the arts can bridge the gaps and tie all the educational forums together for these students.

It finally dawned on me that I was someone who could see with unbiased eyes the magnitude of educational progress within this process. Who better than a nonmusician would see the overwhelming benefits and assets of a music program from the perspective of someone on the "outside looking in"?

Creating Original Opera has been creating educational wonders in New York City, Newark, New Jersey, and cities around the nation since its inception a decade ago. Children in grades K–8 have participated. My students were in grades 5–8, from an inner-city environment, and were labeled as at-risk, basic-skill students. They latched onto what might be considered by skeptics an unlikely vehicle of educational success—opera.

Even those educators who are firmly committed to the fine arts and their impact as highly successful educational tools would suppose that introducing opera to at-risk children, who have little exposure in their environment to anything more than the haunting beat of rappers, would be very unlikely to succeed. I am ecstatic to report that those educators would be entirely mistaken.

The children in our program took the unique musical arena of opera and soared to heights that no one dreamed them capable of attaining in fields as diverse as language arts, science, math, history, reading, literature, art, and, of course, music. Creating Original Opera should be titled "creating the whole child—and enjoying every moment of the experience along the way."

Beginning the Project

The project at my school was immediately accepted with open arms by children who knew little about opera. Perhaps this ignorance was truly bliss, for the children brought no prejudices about opera to the project. A poster asked children to sign up for different departments for the production. Naturally, most of the names appeared under actors and actresses—roles that are the dreams of many young children.

We called a general meeting with all the children who wanted to participate. Explanations of the technical and creative job specifications were given, and soon the children began to consider possibilities other than acting. Suddenly, the production manager began to generate interest. Wouldn't it be great to build the lights and scenery or be in the public relations department and advertise the project? Then there was the opportunity to write the opera and create the music—to become a composer and lyricist. Children of all personality types felt the excitement. What happened next was what teachers only dream about: The children started finding niches that carried on throughout the day and eventually throughout their lives.

General meetings continued, and the production manager took over the task of delegating duties and keeping everyone abreast of the activities. A call board was displayed in the cafete-

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ria, and what had once been a large group of irresponsible children turned into a cadre of focused and motivated middle school young adults. The students were now functioning as directed, responsible people. No one missed a day of school, and work on the project often extended beyond the school day. Opera began one hour before the start of school, and each child would be waiting at the door faithfully. If students were late, it usually was because they had to help with a younger sibling or run an errand; they took the responsibility of calling the production manager first thing in the morning to report their tardiness. Little excuses were accepted—but very few were made.

Those children who were chronically late (there have been four in six years at my school) were dismissed from the company. Each of those children approached the advisers after the performance and asked if they could try again next year and promised improved behavior. These students were truly disappointed that they had not monitored and adjusted them-

selves. All children in the school were very proud of the opera company, and the company has become an integral part of the educational system. Each September, the principal's opening remarks to students include a statement about joining the school opera company.

Developing a Story

Each year after the company had formed and named itself (past names included the Halfway to Wisdom Opera Company, the Young Minds of Today Opera Company, and the Opportunity Knocks Opera Company), the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly began. Students anonymously wrote three things that most concerned them and that they thought about the most. They came up with topics including absentee parents, alcoholism, the inability to read, jealousy and envy, war, homelessness, and a missing child.

These are thought-provoking areas of deep concern normally considered beyond the expressive realm of middle school children, but the students dealt



File photo

with many of these concerns in their librettos. Through developmental language arts skills, the writers began to evolve characters and relationships as well as the setting, mood, tone, and purpose or point of view. Then the lyricists, musicians, and scenery and costuming crew were introduced to the process. They were given each page of dialogue and began developing the scenario. All the pieces were falling methodically into place.

The opera project crossed lines of traditionally distinct subject areas with an effectiveness that I had never expected. The children were in complete control of the process and were achieving worthwhile goals. As musicians, they discussed feeling, tone, mood, and the application of music to heighten the senses. In reading, they developed an understanding of character analysis and motive (these same concepts had totally baffled the children when they had appeared on a standardized test given prior to the project). Rising action to the climax, falling action, and denouement were mapped out for the opera. The musical moments fell into place at each turning point in the script. The entire process brought a reality to the reading and language arts skills that are expected and necessary for every child.

Developing the Music

The children became eager to read literature and hear opera music. They understood the connection between works such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story* and saw how that link related to the work they were doing. Their musical interests were no longer limited to rap. Their new understanding gave them a new appreciation and thirst for music and musical development in all forms.

This led to unique and unquenchable interest in "real" opera. Most of these children came from somewhat impoverished backgrounds, yet they managed to bring in ticket and transportation money for an opportunity to see the operatic version of such works as *The Secret Garden* and *Don Pasquale* (attendance was subsidized by associates of the Creating Original Opera project of the Metropolitan Opera).



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Before attending a professional opera, the children hungrily read and discussed the opera's story in both book and libretto form. When the stage version did not match the book verbatim, the children expressed disapproval or fascination in the discrepancy. At the opera, the children watched in pure amazement. Their curiosity was enlivened with each scene and every note. How did the light crew manage to create those effects, and how could they learn to do the same once they returned to school? How did that set move? What was the musical instrument that was used to create the aural image of the bird? How did the music enhance the mood?

The students had no musical background, but after attending a performance, they were ready and enthusiastic. They were introduced to rudimentary rhythm instruments and a chimeograph (a set of metal pipes that

are sounded with a mallet). The children decided that music was important and that they could express mood, purpose, and setting by using their sense of hearing, even with homemade instruments. They realized that the music would really tell their story better than words alone. They learned to use the voice as a musical instrument. They learned to place it carefully with vocal exercises and breathing and projection.

The students learned that merely telling the song was not enough; they had to "show" the audience its purpose. Inflection would result from understanding the lyrics and the feelings that had to be portrayed. Their concern changed from nervously "singing" a song to demonstratively showing the audience what they were feeling in the story at that moment. The subtext came across intensely in the music: The children became their opera.

The students were able to read the libretto and decide on the moments where each type of music was needed to heighten the emotion and where a written word, no matter how well acted, could never deliver the desired impact. They understood how an aria could reveal the inner, perhaps otherwise hidden, feelings of a character and how the bantering of a recitative could demonstrate the conflict between characters.

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Music composition appeared to be the most difficult area for us to tackle. Again, this proved to be a false fear. With a staff drawn on a blackboard, children mapped musical feelings, at first with a straight line that was elongated to show a slow pace or broken into short lines to show more rapid notes. With these lines on the staff and with lyrics added, pitches became mountains and valleys. They expressed feelings much like an electrocardiogram graphic sheet expresses heart rate. The children tried to describe some of the mood and feeling. They knew, seemingly inherently, where emphasis was needed.

The music teacher introduced notes on the “line” that they had drawn. Major and minor scales were listened to, and it was the children who decided which scale demonstrated the sound they needed for the

mood of a particular section. From a simple chimeograph, correlation was made from staff to note to sound. Side instruments, such as recorders, finger cymbals, xylophones, sand blocks, and rhythm sticks, were introduced. Sound effects were engineered by the children—beans in a plastic milk container became a storm, and crashing tin cans signified the emptiness of being homeless. Composition became a natural form of expression.

Completion and Performance

Given constant encouragement, these young teens soared to an unbelievable level of understanding and achievement. Learning had taken a turn for the better—it was work, but it was fun! Music had made learning a pleasure. Now the children were teaching, creating, and discovering, not because teachers wanted them to, but because they wanted to. Teachers were the resource, but the children were their own source of motivation. Music was everywhere. Now the children wanted to know fractions so scores could be written properly. Etymology was important because music scores demanded the understanding of words such as *pianissimo* or *forte*.

Language arts, boring to many middle-level students, became exciting because now these children wanted to write outstanding, thought-provoking lyrics that would be as significant as their remarkable melodies. They searched eagerly for symbolism, metaphors, similes, and vivid, meaningful imagery. They had to convey a great part of their story in the lyrics.

“Colorless rainbow, all that I see. Songs with no rhythms reaching for me”—these were their words for an emotionally wrenching aria sung by a homeless child. The students also wrote a whimsical recitative between a baby sister and her two disgruntled brothers. The opera reached its climax when the homeless boy was secretly discovered by a peer. A duet emphasized both individual characters and how they were subconsciously responding to their feelings about the homeless situation. Tears rolled down the cheeks of many at the evening performance when these two boys sang this duet, in canon, with emo-

tion that brought the impact of the story to life.

The children did all the work themselves, with the teachers serving only as resources. The children really wanted to learn, and they learned in a rewarding and exciting way that they had never experienced before. A project like Creating Original Opera allowed everyone to feel successful. Everyone found a niche and learned to work cooperatively with purpose and unity toward the end result.

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As I sat in the audience and watched the children carry off their performance, I knew it belonged to them. This would be something that they would never forget—it would carry over to many other things that they would do in their lives. They each executed their responsibilities with pride and perfection regardless of the situation. Each year that my school has done this project, I have watched what many people would have thought impossible. I remember a dyslexic child who learned the script and several songs and stood on stage in a lead role.

Now it is time for more classroom teachers to discover the magic of opera and the wonders it holds for their students. As an educator on the outside looking in, I ask that you please help make this possible. ■