

EDUCATION AT THE MET

Curriculum Resource Guide for



THE METROPOLITAN OPERA GUILD
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NEW YORK, NY 10023-6593

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Creating Original Opera

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INTRODUCTION

For the past 15 years, over 250,000 students from the United States and Great Britain have formed their own production companies and created operas as part of the Creating Original Opera Program. In 1976, when JoAnn Menashe Forman, Metropolitan Opera Guild Education Director, worked with the Education Program at the Seattle Opera Association, a local school principal came to her and her colleague Bruce Taylor with what was then a novel request. He wanted them to somehow introduce his fifth grade students to opera as part of their general education. He maintained that his youngsters were not ready to go to, let alone sit through, a full production in the opera house—not just yet. The request challenged them since the thrust of the company's education program was to bring kids and their teachers to the opera house to experience live performances. After considerable thought and several meetings with the principal and teaching staff, it was proposed that the students should create their own opera. Initially, the reaction was one of skepticism and disbelief. Yet the school staff gradually became sufficiently curious to see whether their students could actually do what appeared to them to be the impossible.

In November 1976, a new opera company named "The Kids Do It All Company" debuted in Seattle. Patterned after a professional model, this company consisted of forty fifth graders with a production manager, stage manager, costume, set and lighting designers, carpenters, public relations staff, writers, composers, and performers. In only nine weeks, these ten- and eleven-year-old students had and written an original libretto; composed a score; designed and built costumes, sets, and lights; created and distributed publicity and press releases; and auditioned, rehearsed and performed the production. Opening night of "Aesop '77" was a huge success and several performances followed.

How did this night of nights for forty students, their parents and teachers happen? How was it possible for a group of elementary school students to generate and harness the energy and discipline needed to create and produce an original opera? What makes this particular approach so special to student-mounted productions and why has it flourished in so many schools? Why is this project relevant to elementary education?

First of all, the arts have always been an important part of the American heritage and contemporary culture, and thus a legitimate component of basic education. The arts belong in the classroom because of their intrinsic social value, as well as their conceptual and pragmatic connections across academic disciplines.

We want to create and nurture an atmosphere in which direct, first-hand involvement in the arts can take root and flourish. Opera is often alienating because it has no perceived relationship to students' experience. Yet when children put together original material about a subject of their own choosing and create their own productions from start to finish, they are better equipped to respond to, appreciate, and understand opera in a professional context. In addition, they reap other personal rewards along the way. We now have persuasive evidence that early exposure through sustained and supervised participation in the creative process enables a child to identify with the arts experience and gives the arts a familiar, personal meaning that will in all likelihood endure.

Two key words in our approach are *process* and *original*. By taking students through the process of creating something themselves, their mental and physical capabilities are fully challenged. Opera is used as a vehicle to find out what is important to young people, what affects them emotionally and what excites them. By forming their own company, not only do they take on the adult roles of their professional counterparts, they come to realize the importance of teamwork and their own responsibility in the learning process. Learning becomes meaningful and purposeful because we place children in situations in which they are motivated to take responsibility for their own learning.

Opera is a wonderful way to introduce young people to a wide variety of arts. In our approach, they get a chance to participate in and explore the multidisciplinary elements of the art form. They can investigate how voice, movement, drama, music and the visual arts can communicate individually and in combination. The project requires students to make use of knowledge and concepts from other curriculum areas such as social studies, science, physical education, mathematics and the language arts. They also apply analytical skills in the process of creating and mounting the production.

For example, the student-writers must read and write in order to perform their task. They must also determine appropriate subject matter, analyze its stage effectiveness and learn, in the process, the elements of a good story, plot and climax, plus the construction of an effective script. The student-carpenter uses mathematics when designing and building scale models and sets. Student-electricians require a knowledge of science in order to build footlights. Performing reinforces the use of language arts and movement as tools for communication. Participants in other aspects of the project develop vocabulary skills as they prepare publicity and write the libretto.

In the course of the project, each participant must analyze his or her task, execute it and evaluate the results. When students use the skills that enable them to harness theoretical knowledge, not only are their skills developed and knowledge increased, but their conception of learning can be radically altered. Learning means something. It is useful.

In addition to the development of skills essential for individual achievement and self-esteem, the project reinforces the value of cooperative effort. As the students engage in group decision-making and problem-solving with other members of the company, they begin to develop the communicative and interactive skills necessary to carry out various tasks. They also realize the degree to which the project is the result of a communal effort – one which would not be possible without the combined resources of the group – in which an individual has an important role to play. If the stage manager forgets her cues, or the lyricist doesn't finish his song, no one will fill the void to deliver the results.

Participation in this project is open to *all* students in the school. The audition or selection process focuses on potential rather than skill. It provides avenues for students who haven't had the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities, for gifted children to reach a higher level and for those with learning disabilities to exhibit their special talents.

This Curriculum Resource Guide for Creating Original Opera is the result of sixteen years of artist residencies in schools, ten years of teacher workshop series—reaching over two hundred elementary school teachers—and eight years of formal evaluation and documentation. After eight years of artist residencies, it became evident that we needed to train teachers to expand the program significantly and make it an integral part of the school curriculum. In 1983, as an outgrowth of the residency program, a teacher training program was established in New York City. Since then, the Creating Original Opera Teacher Workshop Series has been implemented on the state, regional, national, and international levels and continues to expand to this day.

Our work with teachers has been especially fulfilling. For those educators who have participated in this program, what we have accomplished is best summarized by such comments as, “I am without a doubt a better teacher, more sensitive to the needs and expectations of my students...”, “The Met program has provided me with the vehicle to integrate arts education into the curriculum and help children to become active participants in their education” and “I have found new ways to help students achieve greater self-confidence and self-assurance – life skills for their future.”

Partnership is key to this program—between the Metropolitan Opera Guild and the participating school and between the classroom and music teacher. As a team, the classroom and music teacher have opportunities to interact and to work towards mutual goals. Over time, through field testing and regular internal monitoring as well as independent evaluations, we have learned that this process provides teachers with a viable approach that enhances their teaching methods, invites them to take personal risks, sharpens their arts skills and expands their vision of children's capabilities. The Curriculum Resource Guide evolved because it became clear that the process needed to be written down, not only to serve as a resource during the workshops but also as an aid for teachers in the implementation process during the school year.

By forming their own company, the students in this program take ownership of their project—although they are guided and supported by advisors—and the challenge pushes them to use and extend their potential in order to make it a success. This is exciting—and the fruit of their efforts is immediately apparent in the production that comes together before their very eyes.

New York City, April 1992