

# Creating OPERA in Schools: Music as a Model for Integrated Learning

BY CARROLL RINEHART

The guided creation and presentation of opera programs in schools has become a valuable resource for schools that prioritize music and music-integrated learning as part of their mission for learning in and through the arts. These programs—championed by organizations such as the Metropolitan Opera Guild, the OMA project and several members of the Consortium’s Learning Laboratory School Network—now bring new opportunities and approaches for Music-in-Education research in schools. The inherently rich and complex nature of these programs are compatible with the RUBRICS CUBE methodology that focuses on the interrelationships among factors of music-integrated curriculum design, collaborative teaching, and teacher professional development. The collaboration among residency arts specialists, researchers, and music and classrooms teachers in opera projects promises to provide valuable occasions for the new forms of documentation and assessment of young students’ interdisciplinary, cognitive, and aesthetic experiences in public schools.

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The study, creation, and production of original opera in schools is by definition a highly integrated learning process, bringing together multiple arts domains as well as the humanities and sciences. Typically, more than one-half of the opera-making process is in the area of language arts aligned with social studies and history curriculum objectives, with special emphasis on the development of writing skills. Each ‘create and produce’ work is created from original stories written individually or collaboratively by students with guidance from artists and teachers. One kindergarten class opera dealt with social issues of inner city communities; a fourth grade opera was about a Native American adopted



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by an Anglo family; and a fifth grade opera was based on a social studies topic about Washington crossing the Delaware during the Revolutionary War.

Once the stories are written, students create their script or libretto, compose all melodies with their texts, and make choices of major or minor modalities, rhythmic accompaniment, and harmonies facilitated by the musical artist. Furthermore, they establish criteria for casting and make choices about who will play the individual parts. Students design and create sets (e.g., an invented spelling sandwich board was part of the set for the first kindergarten opera entitled “Something’s Fishy at the Restaurant”). After the production is presented and documented, the students write their own critiques, allowing time for reflection on all creative processes from the inception of the idea to the final critical reviews (see *JLTM* volume II pages 42-49 for examples of student documentation created in the Metropolitan Opera Guild’s Creating Original Opera in Schools program).

After having facilitated more than 1600 student-created works, I became aware that teachers and artists detected substantial student growth in language arts development subsequent to an opera residency. Although there are many factors that can contribute to academic achievement, the teaching artists began to wonder what parts of the opera process could contribute to academic growth indicated by improvement in standardized tests.

A doctoral student from the University of Arizona College of Education assisted us in forming researchable questions concerning the relationship between learning through the opera process and

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growth in academic achievement. After careful study and observation of the opera learning process, it was hypothesized that the presence of the following ten factors in the opera-making process correlate with high levels of academic achievement:

### **1. THE PRESENCE OF ONGOING CRITICAL AND CREATIVE DECISION MAKING PROCESSES**

First and foremost, the function, the form, and the forum for creating opera all contribute to a decision-making process that is meta-cognitively rich and highly motivating for all students involved.

The *function* of opera-making is to explore *why* the learner does something—how what is done is relevant to personal and/or social needs. Thus, the first decision is to establish a theme that can be explored through opera. The theme of a Native American adopted by an Anglo family functions as a way for a fourth grade class to explore social issues relevant to understanding contemporary issues such as immigration and respect for indigenous cultures.

The *form* of opera becomes the structure of the storytelling process as it evolves to meet the needs of the *function* of the opera. The creation of the libretto provides a condensed and highly focused telling of the story; setting text to music adds expressive nuance for each character, dialogue or narrative elements; the structure of the overture, recitative, ensemble singing, and transition music all function as devices for furthering and deepening the pace and emotional impact of unfolding events. Thus, the conventional forms of opera become understood as decision points for creating emotionally charged and media-rich story telling.

The *forum* is the process for reviewing the effectiveness of how the options exercised in *function* and *form* are valued—where feedback on effectiveness is shared. Function in terms of learner needs is essential to pro-activity and to the options chosen in the learning process. Form becomes the means to creative problem solving.

When function, form, and forum are clearly defined and are working coherently in the program, one observes that students take responsibility for rich and highly complex decision making. They exercise options, develop language that expresses the value of the options taken, and give preference to alternative solutions.

### **2. STUDENT OWNERSHIP AND PRO-ACTIVITY IN THE LEARNING PROCESS**

Throughout opera-making decision processes, students can be observed increasingly taking ownership and responsibility for the courses of action initiated. Transferring responsibility for decision making from the teacher or artist to the student results in an empowerment of individuals as learners. Students fully engaged in the opera process almost without exception can be observed initiating actions, exercising individual choices and options, requesting use of materials, and claiming responsibility for the results (a feeling of pride, a sense of “I did it!”).

### **3. OPERA MAKING AS AUTHENTIC, LEARNER-CENTERED PROJECTS**

In the *Music! Words! Opera!* program teachers discover that the opera-making learning process is authentic to children’s view of multiple media storytelling. Stripped of prejudice that opera is ‘high art’ and therefore inaccessible, students find that the tasks they engage in are relevant to their understanding of life, and that storytelling through opera is similar to tales told through words and music in contemporary media, such as film, animation, or television. Indeed, musical theater/animation classics such as “Beauty and the Beast” or “The Lion King” are examples of opera as far as children are concerned.

When the project is authentic to the opera-making process, students show an interest in the tasks, connect them to personal experience, and demonstrate a willingness and desire to contribute to the process. And when opera processes are guided skillfully to be within the scope of ability of the young learner, there is a reasonable expectation that artistic success and personal and social well-being for all students involved may carry over to problem-solving tasks elsewhere in the school curriculum.

### **4. THE EMPHASIS ON POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT AS LEARNERS**

Many students discover that they feel valued by others and have a sense of personal worth as a learner while participating in the *Music! Words! Opera!* program.

Improved self-concept as a learner through opera appears to many teachers as a precursor for increasing the willingness and the ability to take risks in other forms of creative problem-solving. Thus, it is not unusual for teachers to report that students who were previously recalcitrant and reluctant learners demonstrate and express in the *Music! Words! Opera!* program a sense of joy and positive engagement which then carries over into future classroom activities. Children who have successful experiences in opera-making want to be a part of what is going on elsewhere in the classroom; they volunteer and actively want to engage others in the excitement of learning.

### 5. THE IMPORTANCE OF FOSTERING TRUST AND TAKING RISKS IN LEARNING

Trust in oneself and others and the ability to take risks are essential to collaborative creative process. Thus, opera learning is most successful when students feel comfortable with themselves, with others, and with a process in which one is free to experiment, to try out ideas and processes. Additionally, successful opera learning processes promote openness to guided collaborative learning experiences that promote social sensitivity and responsibility that in turn promote a willingness to explore options, volunteer responses, and become unafraid to experiment in front of others.

### 6. THE EMPHASIS ON INTERDEPENDENCE OF LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Leadership and community building is the result of sensitivity and responsibility to others in the context of the collaborative, yet differentiated opera-making processes. Teachers report that when students make decisions in a consensual creative process, they learn to demonstrate awareness of the needs of others through supportive rather than through aggressive or confrontational behavior. Students wait patiently for their turns, and listen to and become helpful to others. They take on leadership roles when others do not and tend to be inclusive rather than exclusive of others in their roles as performer, director, composer, set designer, librettist, etc. As students learn and reflect on different aspects of group process learning, they are more likely to consider multiple and alternative perspectives in other areas of the curriculum, such as test-taking or problem-solving strategies in math, social studies, science, or language arts.

### 7. A STRONG FOCUS ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CREATIVE PROCESS

Students in *Music! Words! Opera!* are also affected by the extraordinary energy generated by the creation, participation, and understanding of an aesthetic experience. The energy generated in response to studying or experiencing opera becomes a basis for decision-making in the process of creating and producing opera. While students are immersed in the process of creation, they are also engaging in aesthetic experience in terms of the expressive form and content of the opera in progress or in final form.

Teachers report that students show excitement at inventing, experiencing and critiquing their opera work; in so doing they are responding to their work through their increasing appreciation and knowledge of aesthetic form. Consequently, students are better able to transfer their aesthetic sensibilities to their unique and personally satisfying expression or experience of mathematical or social paradigms, or discovery of meaning in science, history, language, visual or performing arts.

### 8. THE ENGAGEMENT OF MULTIPLE FORMS OF INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

While creating opera, children appear to be doing much more than learning to combine art forms or to apply academic content to music or vice versa. As highly differentiated materials, skills, concepts and experiences are related and brought into the opera-making process, the forms of integrative learning become greater than the sum of their parts. The use of intuitive knowledge in one area unlocks meaning in another, providing a basis for multiple and comparative modes for learning and highly synthesized forms of knowing and understanding.

Teachers report that *Music! Words! Opera!* students use knowledge, expression and creative processes in one curricular area for the understanding of knowledge, expression and creative process in another area. Thus, by the composite nature of opera's processes, interdisciplinary cognition becomes apparent to educators and teaching artists by the increased sophistication of the integrative nature of artistic process learning.

### 9. LEARNING THAT ENGAGES A PLURALITY OF 'INTELLIGENCES'

In the opera-making process, students are challenged to learn, employ, and combine a multitude of discrete cognitive skills in order to create a story, compose a libretto, set the text to music, critique performance, and engage in many, many other peripheral activities such as set design, costumes, and publicity. Practitioners

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MUSIC'S ROLE IN INTEGRATED  
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THE MOST IMPORTANT STEP TOWARD  
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understand that artistic process in opera — storytelling, speaking, singing, composing, movement, etc.—draws on a plurality of 'intelligences' as defined by, but not limited to, Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (i.e., using linguistic, musical, body-kinesthetic, visual-spatial, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal skills).

Thus, opera functions as a sensory-rich, multiple media learning environment that results in long-term, highly detailed memory and reflective understanding of the elements of the creative learning process, the aesthetic impact of culminating opera performance events, and the critical judgments concerning the meaning of the opera itself and its connections to various aspects of the school curriculum from personal, class, and community perspectives.

#### **10. UNDERSTANDING THE CONTRIBUTION OF ARTISTIC PROCESS TO COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

Teachers, artists, and researchers report that during opera residencies students show an increased propensity to acquire and express meaning through a particular combination of processes indigenous to, but not limited to, artistic process.

Through the design, composition, and performance aspects of opera-making, students learn to see and hear with increased acuity, use inquiry methods to find and analyze problems, invent and improvise ways to discover and express solutions to problems, demonstrate interpretive understanding of new knowledge through performance, and reflect on the meaning-making and learning that occurred throughout an entire experience.

Thus, more traditional measures of cognitive development such as attention, discrimination, building memory, pattern recognition,

perception of figure-ground relationships, closure, association, etc. can all be integrated through the basic auditory, visual, and motor processing that occurs in opera residencies. Because of the highly dense and simultaneous manner of learning and experience in opera, it is believed that these cognitive processes can later be unpacked in application to problem solving in other areas of study in schools, including other arts or academic subjects or in terms of social and personal development.

Although participation in the OMA program, like many other arts-integration projects in the US, can be linked with academic success on standardized tests, I believe the research agenda should now be focused on the relationship between specific components of creating opera programs that predict academic achievement. Although observers of the process of creating opera in the OMA program comment on the empowerment of the individual through the "create and produce" activities of the opera program, there is little systemic assessment data collected that can be used as statistical evidence of specific music or music-integrated learning.

After 1,600 residencies I can describe first hand that individual students have been positively affected by their participation in creating opera residencies. The more important question is *why* these outcomes have occurred. From my point of view, a focused research agenda on music's role in integrated learning through opera is now the most important step toward understanding the underlying components of interdisciplinary learning that may be uniquely present in opera-making programs in schools. The challenge to the Music-in-Education National Consortium and its Research Center will be to investigate the hypothesized ten factors of opera-making offered here, find outcome variables that indicate the quality of each factor, and test the potency of these factors in relation to their impact on learning in other areas of the curriculum—as indicated by assessments of academic achievement more authentic than the paper and pencil, multiple choice or short answer tests that have been used so far.

It is thus my fond hope that when classroom teachers in the future describe how the opera process has positively affected the learning and study habits of their students, researchers will be able to place with confidence these anecdotes into the context of rigorously determined statistical evidence indicating the relative effectiveness of the ten factors of opera-making on music-integrated learning. ¶

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