

The Real Work of Opera

QUESTION: *I'm really curious as to how you develop the concept of opera. Do they watch a videotape of an opera, do they listen to operas? What concepts do these students have?*

DAVID DIK: *The tough thing about watching an opera first is it probably drives you in a whole different direction. When my oldest son was two, I asked him what an opera was, and he covered his ears and ran out the door. Also we have a lot of teachers who say, "Can we have a tape of another production?" Well, we did that one year, and in this production there was a scene where a child was brought before a judge. And that next year, there were about 150 operas written, and out of the 150, 75 had a courtroom scene. So with that too, it's important to be able to say to the kids—and I really mean it—this is about what you want to write about. I'm the teacher, I'm part of this. Yeah, I'm going to build the box here. But it's your production.*

I think, though, there is a great way afterwards or in the process to say, "Well, here's an opera. Maybe it's something in Italian. But we're listening to it now because it tells us something about the character. So let's look at it, let's use the existing art to hone that in." What I think is fascinating is that when these companies go to productions, you might have a kid riveted in their seat, just looking at lights for three hours. Actually, that's what opera is supposed to be. The lighting itself is supposed to be a complete artform. And the strength of opera is that every artform is a complete form. The minute you say, "It's a weak script. We'll use some dry ice and start a strobe light," you're borrowing from another artform to compensate for the fact that that one piece is weak.

QUESTION: *How did you get the children to get comfortable singing rather than speaking?*

JOE PICANO: *With the job applications, they were able to apply in areas that they wanted. So we did get kids who could sing and applied for the singing part. The speakers applied for the speaking parts. There were some kids who were just absolutely adamant, "I am NOT going to sing." And those were, as David said, the children behind the scenes doing the electrical things—bringing the lights up and down on a particular scene. But at the end, because it was a team effort, we had a theme that they all sang. They all came out and they all crisscrossed their hands and everyone sang, and I have to say, maybe not completely in tune, but probably. And several of those students who had said, "No way, I'm not singing" are now in the high school choral programs. So the program really acts as a catalyst for pursuing music on a higher level.*

JOSIE KENNEDY, LYNN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: *In my program, I had five students who were the ones who wrote the songs. Three were really into it, and the other two were not so much involved. At first the three said, "They're not cooperating." I said, "Don't take it up with me. Go speak to the manager." The manager went over and talked to them and got them all to work in a very cooperative way. They finally all wrote the song together. A couple didn't give as much as the rest of them did, but they all got up and sang the song.*

COMMENT: *What I think is really compelling about this program is that it invites the kids into real work of producing an opera. It's not just about the composing or the acting, but it's about the stage itself, it's about the lights and the publicity.*

KENNEDY: *May I also add that after the children their parts, they are given a contract. And they sign the contract, just as many of their parents do for their jobs. The students also get their parents involved because the parent must also sign that paper, so that they know exactly what the child is doing.*



Some students take responsibility as part of the production crew.

Composition and Notation

QUESTION: *When they write the music down, do these kids already know some things about notation, or is this something you teach? Do you write the music down, or is it taught more by ear? Do you make up the melodies?*

PICANO: *In this particular course, I chose to make sure that the music students per se, instrumental kids, etc., who were in the music program, were not in the music end of it. They were doing the character analysis, etc. We took students and asked what they knew about music and took the ones who said “Nothing, don’t even know what a staff is.” Then we gave them basically a five-note scale, showed them where they were on a staff and told them to make a melody with these five notes, and then notate it. We were there coaching them, but it was their music. Because of the area we were in, we wound up with a lot of blues, to be hon-*

est with you. Anyway, none of the students knew anything about notation, rhythm, as far as writing it, but they did end up with basic knowledge. Remember, this is a program that went for a whole year. This is not something that we did in one week.

DIK: *I try really to go with the notation they know and build from it. If they don’t know anything, I go with a solid line, and fast notes might be clumped together. But I think it’s an important process for kids first to create their own notation. Then I think it’s the responsibility of the music teacher maybe later on in the curriculum, to say, “Remember that piece we wrote? Let’s go back now, and now that we’ve learned what the staff is, let’s start to plug it in.” But I’m a very strong believer in invented spelling. You know, if it’s the language that we’re worried about, many times it’s going to stop us from just coming up and creating ideas.*

QUESTION: *I’m interested in knowing everything concrete about how you got these kids to actually write music. Were there different instruments? Were they singing single, monophonic lines? Did they have rhythm to go with them? What kind of subjects were they interested in? Did somebody write the words and another the music to go with the words? Or did the same student write the words and the music?*

DIK: *The important general point to keep in mind about composing music for an opera is that when you’re provided with character and lyrics and purpose of the piece, it drives the questions to: Does this music work? Does this sound describe that? Does this rhythm work? So you’re creating a different vocabulary for coming up with it. And it also becomes about maybe at the beginning just using sounds—screeches versus thumps, you know—and building a vocabulary there. But again, what I found really helps is that you’ve got these guidelines of who this character is, what makes them tick. What are their good points? What are their not-so-good points? What is this interaction that is happening at this moment that the words alone do not say? That really is the guiding force in moving that music forward. ¶*