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Engaging elementary aged children with opera

Can elementary aged children become engaged with opera? An examination of the research about opera written for an audience of children reveals that the use of opera as an art form for the education of children is a recent phenomenon. Prior to the 1950's, children were not expected to participate as observers of opera, and children were not used as actors in opera (Reel, 1981). Recent studies about opera attendance and choice of opera as a genre reveal that those who attend the opera are more likely to attend if they have been exposed to opera experiences at an early age (Cherbo & Peters, 1995; Peterson & Sherkat, 1995). Familiarity is one issue related to attendance preference of arts events indicating a need to attend live opera in order to understand the genre of opera (Bergonzi & Smith, 1996). Other research highlights the need for children to participate in performing, hearing and observing genres of music in order to improve their skills in analysis, evaluation and perceptions (Hewitt, 1993; Persky, Sandene & Askew, 1997; Sims, 1992). Research about participation in the arts as a child and preference for opera have indicated that children should be provided experiences to view live performances in order to become adult patrons and audience members. A study by Clary (1979) reinforces the idea of using early performance experiences to expose students to a variety of genres and encourage later participation.

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of pre-designed instructional material had upon students' affective attitude towards music as a genre. The opera program at a midsized university started a touring program highlighting operas written for children to enhance performance opportunities for undergraduate and graduate vocal students. The opera director had prior experience directing children's operas. He believed that "performance of operas arranged specifically for children is an excellent way to prepare college students for a career as opera professionals while reaching out to the community." The music education department saw an additional opportunity to provide valuable curriculum development experiences for their music teacher education students, and to explore the teachers' perceptions of elementary and middle school-aged children's attitudes toward opera. University opera students, a community children's chorus, the university music education department and local public school districts were

involved in this collaborative project. Pre-performance instructional materials were supplied to the classroom teachers at local elementary and middle schools. Instructions with possible implementation ideas for instruction in a variety of curriculum areas were included in the resource packets.

PREPARATION

Project discussions began approximately six months before the scheduled performances. *Jack in the Beanstalk* was selected as the story that was put to music by an area composer, Denise Page Caraher. In the fall semester, undergraduate music majors from a Secondary General Music Education class developed instructional materials, including lesson plans, to present general information about opera and interdisciplinary strategies for the academic areas of English, Social Studies, Music, Art, and Physical Education (movement activities). The development of instructional materials was supervised and edited by the music education faculty.

A video providing foundational information about opera was also developed. Three questions relating to the outreach opera project provided the focus for the video: (1) What should children know about opera as a genre before attending the outreach opera? (2) Can you think of a way to communicate the necessary information to students that would be original and involve active participation? (3) What should children know about this particular opera in order to understand it better? Children from an area youth choir participated in narrating the video, providing them with a unique experience with opera. The script was developed in cooperation with children from the youth choir. The children asked questions of the cast members from the opera company who provided the verbal response heard over appropriate video clips. The completed video was reproduced and given to the selected school sites.

METHOD

Participants included 2,750 students and 177 classroom teachers in eight elementary and middle schools. Prior to the performance of the children's opera, four of the schools received pre-performance instructional materials and the educational video about opera while the other four saw the opera performance with no pre-performance instruction.

Each performance site was visited early in the project to alleviate concerns about the physical space where the opera would be performed. The researchers provided

instructions about the use of the curriculum materials and the educational video to the school administrators, music teachers and support personnel from the schools that had been randomly selected to receive the instructional material. The selected schools were also invited to participate in pre-performance student workshops led by the researchers.

Due to the constraints of parental permission required for surveying children, the teachers were surveyed on their perception of students' affective attitude toward opera. Prior to the delivery of pre-performance instructional materials, a survey was given to all teachers in all schools. In addition to demographic information, information on the inclusion of opera in the music curriculum, types of special programming provided for students, and student attitudes toward various arts activities, including opera, were surveyed.

A second survey was given to the teachers who were provided the instructional materials. They were instructed to complete the survey following curricular integration of the instructional materials but prior to the opera performance. Included on this survey were students' existing experience with listening to or viewing opera as well as the students' level of knowledge about opera as observed during the integration of the instructional activities. See figure 1 for a sample of the questions from both surveys.

Field notes were taken during the performances by the researchers observing the students' level of engagement and observations of student responses elicited by the performance. Following the performance in their respective classes, teachers encouraged their students to share their responses to the opera. The teachers took notes pertaining to their students' involvement with group activities and organized discussion immediately following the performance.

A final survey was given to all teachers of all schools two weeks following the performance. Teachers' notes from student discussions and all surveys were collected. The teachers from the select schools also provided feedback as to the usefulness of the pre-performance instructional material in preparing the students for the performance.

DISCUSSION

For the elementary school students attending a special event was not unusual since some form of special programming was typical as an enhancement to curriculum. In each school, music classes were offered to all students with 30-60 minutes of instruction

per week. The classroom teachers were uncertain if opera was included in the music curriculum but overwhelmingly identified that 90% or more of the students in their class were enthusiastic about the arts. Responses from pre- and post-performance surveys indicated that few teachers had observed disinterest or reluctance toward the arts in general. Those who indicated a low level of interest in opera included less than 5% of their student population. With this information as a foundation, our observation focused more on engagement of the children with this art form rather than on changes of attitude.

The classroom teachers felt that a majority (95%) of their students understood that opera was a music-based art form comprised mostly of singing, but 43% did not comprehend that operas told stories through song. Eighty-five percent of the teachers recognized that the children associated strong singing voices with opera, but 27% were confident that the children did not associate dancing with opera.

From class discussions following the performances, teachers identified that the students' comments centered primarily on singing, characterizations of the actors, and costumes: "They liked the singing, loved the Bessie, thought the beanstalk ladder was cool, liked the tall giant, liked shaking the flowers at the ogre, and liked the rapping old lady". Another teacher explained: "The students really were intrigued with the villain and his costume." This observation reflects the students' perception of story in opera.

Half of the schools received preparatory materials while the others did not in order to identify if there were observable differences in the student response to opera during and following the performance possibly influenced by the preparatory materials. Comments from teachers who received instructional materials prior to the opera performance focused on students' interaction with the storyline. In the opera, an ogre was added to the story line primarily to assist the giant, who walked on stilts under his costume so he would not fall. But in this addition, it became a concern that the ogre would be too scary for the very young children. As part of the pre-performance activities, the students created large flowers and were told that if they became scared, they could hold their flower up and it would repel the ogre. The students enthusiastically used the flowers, which became an integral part of the performance: "The lower grades commented several times about how neat the play was. They loved waving the flowers at the ogre!" At the end of the opera, sample bags of magic beans (jelly beans) were handed

out to the students. These types of additions to the storyline increased the appeal of the fairytale and appeared to enhance student engagement: “My class believed the jelly beans were real magic. They were thrilled at the program.” The instructional materials were strongly associated with the students’ perception of the relationship of story to opera. Post-performance surveys revealed that those schools without the pre-performance materials did not have student responses associated with the storyline.

Researcher notes taken during the performances identified noticeable differences in student participation and level of engagement depending on whether the elementary school had received materials and/or in-service prior to attending the performance. Teachers also observed engagement from students involved with the pre-performance instruction:

The first graders enjoyed and benefited from the pre-instructional time. I feel they were better prepared and aware when the opera came to the school. The students enjoyed the costumes and characterization guiding their engagement with the story. They were very excited and listening attentively.

Typical responses from the schools that were offered the pre-performance instructional materials were generally positive: “The Jack and the Beanstalk opera was a good experience. The concept of opera was taught very well in the pre-program activities. The dance coupled with the variety of music was great.”

Teachers who used the pre-performance materials identified the video as the most valuable tool for student preparation. The instructional materials correlated to art, drama, and music was identified as the next most valuable. The least valuable were the opera books and worksheets. Unfortunately, the classroom teachers did not use some of the instructional materials. At some schools the preparation for the opera performance remained in the music classroom. Comments from teachers who did not receive the instructional materials were focused more on student enjoyment than on specific elements in the opera: “They didn’t make specific comments but totally enjoyed it and thought the performance was wonderful.” Other teachers in the same school identified a transfer of engagement with the opera into their other classroom activities: “We did fairy tales in literature class and some of the students fashioned their skits on the opera!” This

could indicate that the instructional materials not only had impact upon student engagement with elements of opera but could have been instructional for the classroom teacher as well.

The students did not appear to be concerned with opera as an unfamiliar musical style nor did this unfamiliarity with the genre of opera appear to be a hindrance to their engagement with the performance. A study by Rose and Wagner (1995) indicated that students disliked styles of performance based on a lack of prior experience with that particular style or genre. This study does not support these findings. There does not appear to be a developmental significance to the use of historic, possibly unfamiliar musical style or form used for children's opera: "Students loved the music, character voices, and costumes. Some indicate a desire to be part of a play/opera. Many younger students were busy trying to come up with ideas for your next production."

Unfortunately, the primary difficulty with the entire project was acoustical due to the gymnasium being the performance venue in all cases: "I think the students' interest would've been higher but it was hard to hear. Understanding the singing dialogue was a little hard." A sound system was used to help amplify individual singers, but stand-held microphones were not conducive to most of the opera because of the movement and dance. Performing in a gymnasium for so many children requires an efficient sound system with wireless microphones.

In the process of the study, additional influences were observed. While developing the pre-performance materials for the outreach program, a number of benefits were identified. Music education students who participated in the development of preparatory activities experienced the creative process required for instructional development, explored the developmental level of elementary school students, and came to understand elemental components of opera necessary for student engagement. The additional practice of creating a unit of study to be used immediately by children in the local schools added interest to their learning. Some of the class members volunteered to help with the videotape project and attended the outreach opera during dress rehearsals.

When the youth choir was contacted about helping with an opera project, they weren't sure what to expect: "We don't know very much about opera...". These children learned aspects about opera from rehearsing and participating as narrators of the opera

video. Even before the taping of the video, although not issued formal invitations to the opera production of Fledermaus, some of the children attended the performance: “We wanted to learn more about the opera before making the video.” Then later youth choir members became a dress rehearsal audience for members of the opera outreach cast. Following the completion of the project, parents reported that some of the youth choir members chose to create videos for homework projects that occurred after the filming of the project. Some parents volunteered to work as backstage “crew” members for future operas. Many choir members also indicated a willingness to do “anything for opera” in the future.

IMPLICATIONS

Following this study, all of the schools who participated during the 2003-2004 academic year participated again during 2004-2005 along with a number of additional schools. Individuals from the participating schools stated that they recognized the value of having operas presented for the students in their school. The implied value is that live opera performance enhanced students’ engagement with the opera experience in comparison to viewing opera videos or listening to recorded portions of opera. Through pre-performance activities and video, observing live opera performance, and activities generated by the teachers and students after the opera, students learn more about opera as a genre than through viewing the opera alone. When including experiences with opera in elementary music education programs, affective response can be enhanced through the development of familiarity with the genre through instruction.

As a result of participating in this cooperative project, members of the university’s opera program believed that they had found a unique niche for their opera performance majors. The outreach opera provided an opportunity for students to perform a number of times in front of a live audience. The level of musical difficulty and the length of the performance were ideal for the undergraduate singer and many of the students stated that they enjoyed the outreach experience. An increasing number of college students auditioning for a role in the outreach opera over the previous years and the number of people willing to be a member of the backstage crew also increased. The director of the opera program found this outlet to be a good experience for students who wanted to explore a career in professional opera.

Professional opera companies should examine the results from this study and other similar studies. As vocal performance majors from major universities hone their performance skills in preparation for a career in opera, established companies could use children's operas to provide emerging singers with opportunities for professional growth. Many companies are currently using young singers for this purpose, but the benefits of pre-performance instructional materials found in this study could enhance existing programs.

Finally, music education programs should actively seek opportunities to work with arts organizations as a method of providing their undergraduates with authentic lesson planning skills. The experiences provided by working with performing arts organizations can be mutually beneficial. As students learn about arts integration, they also experience an unfamiliar genre and sequential lesson planning. Opera companies can save time and resources if materials are developed by music education students at local Universities.

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Figure 1 Sample Questions from the Pre-performance Questionnaire

1. Has your school participated in the outreach opera before?

- Yes
- No

2. How many of your students have attended an opera outside of school before?

- None
- Less than 25%
- 25-50%
- More than 50%

3. In your discussions about opera, indicate on the scale below the level of knowledge your students have about the conventions of opera.

	Know a lot			Know a little bit	
Operas have music	1	2	3	4	5
Operas tell a story	1	2	3	4	5
Operas are mostly sung	1	2	3	4	5
Operas have acting	1	2	3	4	5
Operas have dancing	1	2	3	4	5
Opera singers have big voices	1	2	3	4	5

Comments

4. Rate the list of pre-performance activities in terms of usefulness and level of interest shown by students.

Video	1	2	3	4	5
Opera books					
Opera worksheets	1	2	3	4	5
Art correlation	1	2	3	4	5
Drama correlation	1	2	3	4	5
Literature correlation	1	2	3	4	5
Music correlation—Faure	1	2	3	4	5
Music correlation—Opera	1	2	3	4	5
Music correlation—Text	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

5. Judge the level of interest shown by students when talking about the upcoming performance.

	Low			High	
	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

Sample questions from the post-performance Questionnaire

1. Student comments about the opera centered on the following elements (check all that apply):

- Singing
- Acting
- Costumes
- Staging
- Props
- Music
- Storyline
- Other (please list) _____

Comments:

2. General level of student interest during the performance was (circle one):

Low		Moderate		High
1	2	3	4	5

3. General level of student interest after the performance was (circle one):

Low		Moderate		High
1	2	3	4	5

4. Assess the amount of impact the pre-performance materials made in preparing the students for the performance.

Low		Moderate		High
1	2	3	4	5