Operatunities: The Development of an Opera Education Program
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Abstract

Many young singers begin their collegiate musical studies with little or no exposure to opera and scant knowledge of the skills and training required for a career in vocal performance. The goal of our project is to introduce high school students to skills and areas of study they will encounter in their future studies by creating an educational workshop series addressing these topics. The final workshop includes the students’ participation in the performance of a musical scene incorporating previous areas of study. Upon the completion of the pilot run of the workshop series in April 2009, the lesson plans will be compiled as a curriculum guide and distributed to area high school teachers to use in their own classrooms.

Workshop Development

Research and Process

- An annotated bibliography of sources related to opera, opera education and development issues
- Creation and distribution of a survey outlining university music faculty members’ views on student preparation prior to collegiate study, and the analysis and utilization of faculty responses in the construction of the student workshops

• Each member of the research team prepared a one-hour workshop addressing the skills that faculty members found to be of great importance or generally lacking
• The lesson plans for each workshop, as well as basic supporting research, will be compiled as a curriculum guide and made available for use as a high school educational tool

Workshop Presentations

Application of Research

Workshop 1: Auditioning and an introduction to opera. Students watched a Powerpoint presentation that introduced opera as an artistic genre, followed by a group discussion and masterclass on auditioning skills and skill applications, in which the high school students performed. The student researchers performed a variety of arias, illustrating positive and negative auditions.

Workshop 2: An overview of the history and literature of opera. This discussion was supported by a detailed handout which spanned operas and composers from the origination of opera through present day. In addition to the handout, students had the opportunity to listen to recordings of major operas, composers and singers, in an effort to expose them to the sound of opera.

Workshop 3: The value of language and poetic expression in classical singing. Students participated in a group discussion and analysis of poetry, as well as listened to poetic and musical expression in live student performances.

Workshop 4: An interactive workshop that discussed embodying a character, personal movement choices, Italian movement, and creating and clarifying spatial relationships. Students engaged in various activities that encouraged them to explore physical expression in relation to other characters and objects, as well as to operate music.

Workshop 5: A discussion of the collaborative aspects of opera production, including artistic and administrative components. This workshop also detailed the role of a singer in the production of an opera, using the recent UWEC production of Albert Herring as an example.

Workshop 6: A final performance by the high school students. Students will interact directly with the research team in a collaborative performance that incorporates previously learned songs with elements of movement and poetic and musical expression.

Conclusion

Based on student feedback and participation in the workshops, the Operatunities series has proven to be an effective method for introducing students to opera and voice performance. The “hands on” activities, like the audition masterclass and the movement workshop, were identified as particularly effective by the participants:

“I just wanted to say I really liked the workshop today. I’m generally not very comfortable moving my body. I learned so much and became a lot more aware of the way I move, so that’s good. Now that means I have to practice. A lot.” Workshop participant

Introducing an unfamiliar musical genre to high school students and the successful implementation of a musical outreach program are monumental tasks. In designing the Operatunities workshop series, the research team investigated key skills and areas of knowledge that are necessary for a student to be fully prepared to begin his or her collegiate musical studies. Attaining this level of preparation is the responsibility of the individual student as well as the student’s teachers and mentors. The workshop series provides a basic foundation on which high school music teachers can build in the future.