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 developmental 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

Analytical survey created by the research team

- An investigation of the educational programs offered by regional opera companies, including participation in *A Day at the Opera*, a high school program presented by the Minnesota Opera

The research team with Jamie Andrews, Education Director of the Minnesota Opera, "A Day at the Opera"

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***Operatunities* Workshops:**

- Auditioning
- Operatic Literature and Sound
- Language and Poetry
- Characterization and Movement
- Business of Opera and Rehearsal Process
- Final Collaborative Production

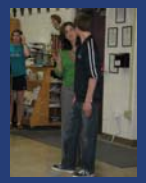
- Each member of the research team prepared a one-hour workshop addressing the skills that faculty members found to be of great importance or generally lacking
- The lesson plans for each workshop, as well as basic supporting research, will be compiled as a curriculum guide and made available for use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

Workshop Presentations

Application of Research

Dr. Mitra Sadeghpour addresses a group of students during the first workshop

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.



Dr. Mitra Sadeghpour works with a high school student during the auditioning workshop

Tara Metcalf performs "Chi il bel sogno" by Giacomo Puccini

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.

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)
- had a taste for high drama
- memorable melodies
- a genius of emotional manipulation
- known for decadence and showmanship
- fusion of high passion and sweet melodies
- recognizable and accessible style that grew out of the music of Verdi
- often sentimental
- plots are at times trivial
- revived the Bel Canto tradition and brought it into the 20th century

Selected Operas:
Manon Lescaut
La Bohème
Tosca
Madama Butterfly
Il Trittico
- Il tabarro
- Suor Angelica
- Gianni Schicchi

Turandot

Listening Example: "Nessun Dorma" from Turandot, sung by Luciano Pavarotti

Example of composer entry from the history of opera handout

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.

Materials for Language and Poetry Workshop

Holly Shattuck performs "Bel Piacere" by George Frideric Handel

Workshop 4: An interactive workshop that discussed embodying a character, personal movement choices, Laban 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 operatic music.

The use of movement creates individual characters From the UWEC production of Albert Herring, *Spring 2009*

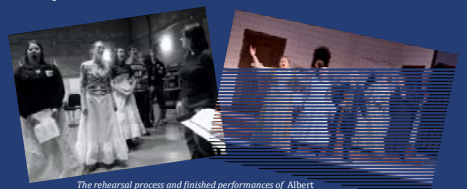
Movement:
1. The progress of events, as in a narrative or drama.
2. *Fine Arts*: The suggestion of motion in a work of art, either by represented gesture in figurative painting or sculpture or by the relationship of structural elements in a design or composition.
3. A progressive development of ideas toward a particular conclusion: *the movement of his thought*

Laban Movement used with the elements of space (direct/indirect), time (sustained/quick), and force (light/strong):

Flick, Dab, Glide, Float, Press, Punch, Wring, and Slash

Definition and qualities of movement implemented and experimented with during movement workshop

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 producing of an opera, using the recent UWEC production of *Albert Herring* as an example:



The rehearsal process and finished performances of Albert Herring *demonstrated the collaborative nature of opera*

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.