

Senior*innen

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People over 65 in Europe: A Dependent and Independent Dialogue Group for Opera Houses.

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Abstract:

In European opera houses, people over 65 have, for several years now, been a significant target and dialogue group. In this conversation, Eva Karterou, Lucia Moro, Theresa Schmitz, and Christina Spanou focus on specific projects developed for this age group at the Greek National Opera (Athens) and at Associazione Lirica e Concertistica Italiana (Como). Whether participants have full or limited cognitive, physical, or social abilities, involvement in opera and music projects has a positive impact on individual well-being.

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People Over 65 in Europe: A Dependent and Independent Dialogue Group for Opera Houses. A conversation between Theresa Schmitz (Klangakt), Lucia Moro (AsLiCo), Eva Karterou (Greek National Opera), and Christina Spanou (Greek National Opera).

Opera White / AsLiCo / Italy

<https://www.operaeducation.org/opera-white/?lang=en>

Opera Education is a long-standing cultural platform created by AsLiCo to make opera accessible to audiences of all ages. For more than 30 years, it has introduced over 100,000 children and young people to opera each season. Through participatory formats, it turns spectators into active protagonists, strengthening creativity and cultural awareness. The program includes productions tailored to different age groups – from early childhood to teenagers – always using live music and professional artists.

After decades focused on young audiences, the program expanded to include intergenerational dialogue and broader cultural participation. This evolution led to the creation of Opera White, designed for elderly people living in residential care.

The project offers interactive opera performances, preceded by workshops for care staff and elderly participants, tailored to the abilities and interests of the audience. It fosters social connection, combats isolation, and stimulates cognitive and emotional engagement through music. Since 2022, in its first three editions, Opera White has presented participatory adaptations of *The Magic Flute*, *Turandot*, and *Falstaff*.

With Opera White, opera continues to be a cultural right — at every stage of life.

Guitar Express / Greek National Opera / Greece

<https://www.nationalopera.gr/en/learning-participation/older-workshops-archive/item/4889-guitar-express>

Guitar Express is a quick, group-based guitar method for song accompaniment, suitable for people of different ages and ability levels. The aim of *Guitar Express* is not to replace traditional guitar methods, but to enable people — who have so far experienced music as passive listeners — to actively engage in group music-making. This is accomplished through the use of an alternate guitar tuning, which makes playing the guitar significantly easier. As a result, participants can accompany a song with their guitars even during the first lesson.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGMn59t-RoM>

Theresa Schmitz: Dear Lucia, thank you for joining this conversation from Associazione Lirica e Concertistica Italiana (AsLiCo), based in Como, Italy, where you work in the Opera Education department as coordinator and promoter of international relationships. Thank you also to Christina Spanou and Eva Karterou, who are responsible for the Learning and Participation department at the Greek National Opera, for joining us from Athens, Greece.

I'm happy to bring you together to talk about the programs you lead with elderly people in different contexts. As an introduction to our talk, I'd like to share two relevant quotes from articles published in this edition of *Klangakt*, which focuses on the relatively new field of music geragogy. So let me simply ask: why did your institution begin to reach out to the elderly population in your urban area?

Learning & Participation (Greek National Opera): For the Greek National Opera, the most important factor was that the opera house moved to a neighborhood outside the city center. It was a neighborhood with many elderly residents. So, when we began programming in 2017, we felt we should do something for the 65+ age group living in the two neighborhoods surrounding the opera house. We wanted to build a connection to the new location – at the beginning we moved in like a UFO. No one in the area knew anything about opera. Normally, opera houses are located in the city centre. So this was a way of creating a connection to the neighborhood and learning its history – because people over 65 hold the history of the area. They know it. They've lived it. We started programs that combined different kinds of music, acting, and dancing – mixing everything to encourage the participants to talk about their stories. And through their stories, we learned the story of this area, through music. Music is a very powerful tool for storytelling.

The second need was to make the new building more accessible. It's physically accessible, but we mean psychologically accessible. The building, designed by Renzo Piano, is very modern and contrasts with the architecture of the surrounding neighborhoods. Before it was built, the site was a hippodrome – an open space. Then suddenly, these huge buildings appeared: the Opera House and the National Library, covering a vast area. But it felt alien to the nearby homes and communities. At first, it was intimidating – interesting, but like something from another planet. We felt the need to bring the institution closer to the people, to give them the feeling that they could come here – that this space is also for them. Today, that feeling has become more real for the local community.

Theresa Schmitz: It became theirs, a little bit?

Learning & Participation: Yes. I believe it's not only the people participating in our workshops – in general, people now use the large park around the opera house. They feel more comfortable there now. It's a positive thing for the neighborhood, but it felt strange in the beginning. Today, many people come just to have a coffee. It's no longer just about the Opera House. At first, we had to create reasons for them to come, to bring them closer, to help them accept the building. That's why we started thinking about this group. It wasn't a sophisticated idea – it came from necessity.

Theresa Schmitz: So your action was linked to the need to facilitate the integration of a cultural and architectural identity coming from the city centre into a different social space. Did you imagine that the elderly would become ambassadors, given their central roles in families?

Learning & Participation: In a way, maybe. At the same time, we had programs for other groups too – not just elderly people, but also children, intercultural groups, and anyone who could be part of this new space. But yes, if elderly people from the neighborhood participate in a workshop, maybe their families would see the opera house as more accessible and interesting – even for attending performances.

Theresa Schmitz: What was the socio-economic context of the neighborhoods where the new opera house was built? Was this a population familiar with opera? Could you expect them to become spectators, not just workshop participants?

Learning & Participation: The new building sits between two very different neighborhoods. One is Faliro, a wealthy area by the sea – a privileged population. In general, there's a large elderly population there. The other is Kallithea, a traditional working-class neighborhood with many refugees – Greek refugees who came from Turkey or Russia. In fact, the area around the opera house is full of refugee housing. When we started the workshops, the participants were about 50-50 from Kallithea and Faliro. You could clearly see the differences between the two groups — in their stories, in how they perceive music, and in how they view opera. People from Faliro were already part of the opera audience, even when it was in the city center. Opera is part of their cultural experience. But for the people in Kallithea, it's not like that – it's a more popular neighborhood.

Theresa Schmitz: Lucia, let's go to Como. The origin of creating programs for the elderly at your institution was quite different.

Lucia Moro: Yes, our starting point was the pandemic, a strong global context. Especially in Lombardy, where Como is located, the COVID-19 restrictions were very strict. This was especially true for care homes, which became completely isolated. It was a very difficult time. To protect the residents, care homes closed their doors to outsiders – including relatives and those who normally bring in workshops or activities. So there was a new need. This need existed before the pandemic, of course, but COVID made it much more urgent. These places became very difficult to live in.

So we tried to respond to that need using the tool we always use: sharing beauty and wellness through art. We adapted our participatory format, originally for children, for the elderly. It turned out to be very different as it's the only case where the performance goes to the audience. With *Opera Baby* (0–3 years), *Opera Kids* (3–6), and *Opera Domani* (6–14), we always work on bringing audiences to the Opera House. But here, we bring opera to people who can't come to us. This could include people in prisons, or anyone who wants to go to the Teatro Lirico but can't, due to physical limitations or other barriers.

Our proposal was very well received by local institutions. Normally, there are some music therapy programs related to health, but nothing like this – nothing that simply offers the beauty of a performance. That's something totally new for both the elderly and the care home staff. Our project brought a real change to their daily routine – a time when they could just enjoy music, move their bodies, and activate memory. In Italy, this generation holds the heritage of opera. Usually, we work with children who are having their first experiences with opera. But with the elderly, opera is often already part of their general culture. It's very moving, especially when working with those experiencing memory loss — they may remember music from their past that even their caregivers don't know. They become the experts. After two years of isolation, this project gave them the opportunity to come together again, to have a goal, and to find hope.



Figure 1 - Memorie di un'amore - Opera white II ed., from Turandot - ph_Alessia Santambrogio - Casa Vallardi, Appiano Gentile (CO)

Theresa Schmitz: How does it work concretely? How do you approach the care homes as a whole? Who defines the participants – is it open to everyone? What is the role of the caregivers?

Lucia Moro: We started with private funding in the province of Como, because after COVID, the urgency was clear here. We contacted the directors of four care homes for the first edition, and they were very open – more so than the staff, because the staff, like most people, weren't familiar with the language of opera. So caregivers became our starting point, just like we begin with teachers when working with children. Care staff take part in workshops with our mediators, and then they select the residents who would benefit the most from our participatory work.

For the final performance, everyone in the home can attend. But for the participatory workshops, the staff selects around 20–30 people per institution. The participants have very diverse abilities – some are in good physical and psychological shape (for example, people who moved into care homes simply because they were alone at home). Others have more difficulties but still make progress during the series of workshops. We trust the staff to make the selections, as they know the residents best and choose people based on

their individual needs. We don't want to force anyone.

For example, in our children's programs, we work with the whole class – everyone takes part in the theater trip and year-long preparation. But with elderly participants, we're dealing with strong personalities, and this project may not be for everyone. People are free to say, "I don't want to do this." Staff often suggest that more isolated individuals join, but ultimately, they are adults – they have desires, needs, and very strong identities.

Theresa Schmitz: Eva and Christina, in your case, what motivates your group of over-65s to take part in your programs? Why do they come? How did you reach out to this generation and bring them in?

Learning & Participation: In the first season, we visited the leisure centers for elderly people, which exist in every Athens neighborhood. These are places where they spend time together – playing games, having coffee, talking. Some of them even have choirs. They are public, open care centers provided by the municipality, and each area has a number of them depending on the population size. We went around to many of these places with flyers, inviting people to join a workshop. Of course, some of the more adventurous ones responded and came to us that first year. We started with 20–30 participants, but from month to month, the number grew – eventually reaching over 200. People started inviting friends, and now – 10 years later – we have a large group from all over the city, including the city center. Our mediators run workshops both in these care centers and at the Opera House. People travel from all over Athens – sometimes for more than an hour – to join the workshops.

Theresa Schmitz: Wow, you've built a big community!

Learning & Participation: Yes, actually, it's the biggest community we've built since our department was founded.

Theresa Schmitz: How do you manage this community?

Learning & Participation: They call us.

Theresa Schmitz: Kiki (one of the mediators) is available to respond? That must take a lot of time.

Learning & Participation: Yes, she's even friends with all of them on Facebook.

Theresa Schmitz: What kinds of projects do you create with this community? We

mentioned *Guitar Express* earlier. You spoke about different repertoires, transmission, and co-creation?



Figure 2 - Photo: Greek National Opera 2025

Learning & Participation:

Guitar Express is a program where they learn to play guitar with repertoires selected by Kiki. Now, we use the *Guitar Express* method to co-create a full music-theater production at the end of each season – with participants talking, playing, and singing, like a real play. It's a co-creation process. We start with a theme, but then they are free to bring whatever they want into the workshops. We don't decide what to teach them. It's modular and built from the ground up, using their input. During the workshops, someone takes notes and collects materials that later become the libretto. For example, this year's theme is "love" — we'll see where that leads.

Over the years, we've learned that participants don't want to talk about aging or just the past. They want to talk about love – even about sex. They care about these topics. So we thought, okay, if this is where they want to go, let's go there. It may sound surprising, but they don't want the nostalgic image we often project onto them. They don't necessarily want to talk about their grandchildren or children. They want to talk about the *now* and the *future*. Sometimes they also talk about their relationship with opera, although that's not as common in Greece as it is in Italy. But if some of them have that connection, they bring it

up. And they love being in shows – having people come to watch them and inviting their friends.

Let me share a funny story: A few years ago, one of the ladies was performing at the Alternative Stage, which seats about 400 people. But she had too many friends to invite, so she made her own tickets – handwritten ones that said "Guitar Express – Invitation" – and handed them out to everyone. People showed up at the door with these fake tickets, and we had big arguments at the entrance because there wasn't enough space. They thought they had official invitations from the Opera House! Now, we do the performance on the Central Stage with 1,400 seats, three performances, and also at the Alternative Stage. It's always a full house – and free for everyone. Yes, they've taken the lead.

Photo

Theresa Schmitz: Your group of elderly people still has the mental, physical, and social resources to take the lead. Lucia, in your case, their capacities are more limited. But is there still a possibility for them to take the lead – to co-create – or not really? How would you describe this possibility in your Opera White project?

Lucia Moro: We always start from the repertory because we have one opera title each year for all the education projects within the platform. It's central to use diverse versions of the same operatic title – from ages 6 to 36 months, in schools, and even for their grandparents. We select the title every year, the music director adapts it, and Francesco, our workshop leader, works with the director to define the participatory moments that best suit the needs of the elderly. We try to adapt the *Opera Domani* show – the main one for ages 6 to 14 – to fit into care home spaces: one piano, three singers.

We work a lot with memory in our groups. This is a big difference from the audience we were talking about earlier, because our participants really like to talk about their past and relationships outside the care structure. In our project, the focus is less on the theme of the selected opera and more on the participatory process. The goal is to re-activate them physically and mentally through workshops and to involve them in the show according to their abilities: they sing and perform small movements, simple choreographies.

Of course, in the past three years we've seen that some easy movements – simple for children – are much harder for elderly people due to reduced fine motor skills. So even just moving their fingers for choreography can be a challenge. We try to push them, within their

limits, through the path of opera. We also work on memory and life stories. But even in Italy, not everyone sees opera as part of their cultural heritage. In many cases, learning something new is rare – maybe they spend all day watching the same TV shows, repeating the same routines, without much autonomy. But in the workshops, we empower them to be present, to participate – with whatever strength they have.

Theresa Schmitz: During the first three years of the project, how did you work with medical staff and families?

Lucia Moro: In the first three editions, the workshops were led by Francesco Malanchin, educational coordinator of Opera Education and curator of Opera White, together with Marta Ferri, a music therapist with extensive experience working with elderly people. Every process begins with open dialogue with the staff – a collective brainstorming session to get to know the participants and understand their limits and possibilities.

This year, in two institutions, we included the Alzheimer's department, which meant working with people who couldn't respond actively. Together with the staff, we decided to involve their relatives. Their children, grandchildren, or friends came to the workshops and did the activities with them. So in the final performance, the participatory elements were performed by the relatives – but it was based on a shared journey they had experienced together over several months.

We observed some responses – some recognition, some small memories resurfacing during that period. It was a very intense moment for the families: being there, working together towards a shared goal with their loved ones. It's not something they get to do every day. Normally, care is focused on necessity. But here, they were creating something together – something new. A "surplus" beyond the usual needs. Of course, we know that access to art and cultural creation *is* a need, but this was a new experience for many. So that became part of our intergenerational approach.

Additionally, in the last edition, we began creating connections with schools. Since we work extensively with schools, we noticed that in Como, some institutions were located on the same street: a kindergarten, a primary school, and a care home – housing the grandparents of some of the students. So, at the end of the school year, some classes came to the care home for an end-of-year party. The children introduced the opera to the elderly. Since our school project runs from January to June, and Opera White begins in June and July, the children were already familiar with the choirs and participatory moments

– and they were proud to teach them to the older generation. It was refreshing and served as a really strong launch for the new season. When grandparents saw their grandchildren in the choir, it had a powerful impact. This is something we want to expand in future editions, even in places where the different institutions aren't located so close together.

Theresa Schmitz: Eva and Christina, you mentioned that your elderly participants are less connected to these kinds of intergenerational aspects. It doesn't seem to be going in that direction.

Learning & Participation:

Yes, that seems right. I think one reason is that in Greece, most participants are women. Many of them spent their lives raising children and grandchildren. In this generation, a lot of women didn't work outside the home. So these projects might actually be their first opportunity to do something just for themselves – something that doesn't involve children or grandchildren. It's very empowering for them not to be in a caregiving role, for once. It feels very natural to me that they wouldn't want to talk about the care work they've done their entire lives. That doesn't mean they don't love their grandchildren — in fact, many of them come to the shows, and their grandchildren are thrilled to see their grandmothers performing. But it's not a topic during the workshops. It's just not important to them in that context.



Figure 3 - Photo: Greek National Opera 2025

Theresa Schmitz: We're coming to the end of our conversation. Thank you for your time and for sharing the incredible evolution of both of your projects — and how they continue to grow in terms of participant numbers. That's clear proof of positive impact. But even more valuable are the small, heart-warming individual stories. Thank you very much for sharing them.

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