

RESEO, the European network for opera music and dance education

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RESEO is the European network for opera, dance and music education. Since 1996, it's the only international network totally and exclusively focussed on topics like *mediation-accessibility-education-outreach-participation* within the performing arts sector. The immediate common denominator is to bring opera, dance and classical music to society by different levels of participation going from indirect to direct cultural sharing, creative learning and challenging individual and collective art(-istic) experiences. This is at the same time a way of transforming traditional genres for the next centuries as well as fostering social issues via the (performing) arts. The higher ambition federating all actors is to reach a better way of community, total equality of human beings, full inclusion as well as collective and individual cultural ownership by a new definition of the aesthetic experience through opera, dance and music in human societies.

At the very beginning of the network, in 1997 Christian Leblé, at this point first coordinator of the association, stated in the first edition of a newsletter called *Operaccessibility*: "As talks are going on among the members of the network, it is obvious that there are as many attitudes towards education as departments. It is something that arises especially when it comes to translating the word education. Jeune public here or Musiktheaterpädagogik there, everyone has one's own approach, one's experience. Participation, then. This is a word that appeared during the sessions in London. But is it a mean, a method or an aim? Last fall, [...] Jane Davidson from Glasgow emphasised the idea of accessibility. It seems that it may be the wider, ideal one that people dealing with education in opera houses, festivals or organisations could share as a motto. Accessible, that means within reach, affordable, open, erreichbar, zugänglich. That means beyond the usual or existing audience, towards the community at large."¹ This paper wishes to outline RESEO's origin and evolution until today through three major topics: the origin and history of the network; today's profile in terms of governance, membership and partnership; the evolution of the professional field since its origins and its future challenges.

¹ Leblé, Christian: Editorial, *Operaccessibility*, 01/1997, 1.

History of RESEO network

In the late 1960s a major crisis was confronting the European Opera Houses to phenomena like the mummification of the repertory, the extinction of a large range of subscribers as well as the general ageing of the audience. One of the solutions to help the art form, besides the diversification of the repertory, is building future audiences by addressing a specific attention to the under 16 years: on the one side houses start to programme a new repertory of children's operas (creations or adaptations) and on the other side they begin to develop special education programs (guided tours, workshops, pedagogical guidelines). There is the feeling that in teaching children the European Lyrical tradition (a tradition that ended up being for adults only at this period), the genre opera as well as opera houses can survive. At this state, the adultocentric way of conceiving the young person as future adult, consumer and audience is common ground, but slowly and progressively (also due to the parallel progression of the new sociology of childhood taking children as entire part of society) this group of society is considered as relevant part of the audience as well: new repertory is created specifically for the younger elements of society taking them as a relevant public likewise adults – at least from an ethical point of view as economically the new productions and its actors suffer from lower budgets, less audience numbers and consequently less recognition and legitimation.² Starting in 1971 with a first education department at Scottish National Opera, European Opera Houses created new departments opening a process lasting until the millennial years. The pioneers of the Opera houses investing in education departments are based in Glasgow, London, Paris, Barcelona and Stuttgart. Rarely there is more than one department created in the same country at the same time. Isolation, experimentation and legitimation of the new methods are the main challenges at this starting point. That's why artistic director of Théâtre Royal de La Monnaie (TRM), Bernard Foccroulle hopes to compensate this state of isolation by the creation of an international network: „In 1992, there have been some education departments in England and one at Paris Opera, but still this has been innovative as there were very few education departments in continental Europe. As I was conscious that there could be a danger of marginalisation at La Monnaie and elsewhere in European opera houses for the professionals [...], I came up with the idea of a network. [...] I

² Find a more detailed description of the opera crisis in the 1960s and the development of the opera education field in Schmitz, Theresa: *L'opéra jeune public*, Paris: Vrin, 2023.

was thinking that by meeting people having the same difficulties, the same questions and the same types of institutions surrounding them, the people working in education departments would be strengthened and empowered. And this is exactly what happened.”³ The European Network for opera music and dance education, quickly called RESEO due to its French name, Réseau Européen des Services Éducatifs des Operas was born in 1996 in Brussels. Founding members are Théâtre Royal de La Monnaie, Opéra National de Paris, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Het Muziektheater Amsterdam, Den Norske Opera & Ballet, Grand Teatre de Liceu, Glyndeboure, English National Opera, Royal Opera House, Scottish Opera, Welsh National Opera participating all together at the first conference in London. Focroulle (TRM) was not only the ideological founder and supporter of the network’s origins but guaranteed also financial existence during the first four years (1996-2000). TRM provided the office and administrative facilities, one part-time network coordinator as well as larger financial support for the steering committee’s and staff’s travel expenses, highly necessary in the time before zoom. The second partner without the network would not have been able to be born, was FEDORA, the European Circle of Philanthropists of Opera and Ballet, with a remarkable donation of 26.000 Euros from Ralf Lieberman foundation. A third partnership was given by the European Commission that funded several projects during those first years: Kaléidoscope 1996-1997 and Netdays 1998. In 1998 the network is settled officially as an International non-profit organisation (AISBL) in Belgium, but at this state, RESEO is not ready yet to persist by its own and is still mainly financed by TRM beside a small membership fee (320 Euros per year) paid by the member institutions. In its third year, the first crisis took place: managing the coordinator was neither assured by the steering committee nor by TRM, some European funding was lost. In 1999, TRM and the SC decide for a new coordinator and stricter rules of administrative control and staff management by setting up more formal agreements and internal guidelines. Again, TRM accepts co-financing the coordination position and hiring the office until RESEO was granted for an important European Culture 2000 program. The network starts now to be financially independent enough to take over total control of its governance. This was also the choice of the membership assembly in 2000 when accepting to increase the membership fee to have more structural independence. Finally in 2001, the network reached full administrative and financial stability.

³ Interview with Bernard Focroulle, Paris, 18.03.2010.

During the years 1996 and 1999 RESEO core activities are shaped: the main one's being international conferences in London, Paris, Stuttgart, Como-Milan and Brussels as well as specific publications and newsletters. These actions establish RESEO as an important platform for networking and professional exchange for people working in education departments in European opera houses. Having started in 1996 with 11 opera houses, 23 institutions⁴ meet in Como-Milan in 1999. Continuously growing, RESEO can have a new second staff member in spring 2002, Isabel Joly, who will develop the network's rising during more than 14 years. In 2006 the network is reaching its first climax, by having united 47 member institutions and by being ranked as the most important European cultural network (receiving at the same occasion an operating grant) by the European Commission. Operational funding is guaranteed by the EU for a 6-year period (1998-2013), additionally to specific project funds. Unfortunately, the application for the following triennial funding starting in 2014 means a brutal stop to RESEO's rise: "For the first time in almost 10 years, RESEO has not received funding from the European Commission's budget for Culture, leading to a financial shortfall. [...] The RESEO Steering Committee and co-directors have been working hard on laying down the foundation of a "new RESEO" via a renewal of our missions and aims."⁵

The network's profile: governance, membership, partnerships

Governance

The administrative structure of the network is an international non-profit organisation (AISBL) registered in Belgium and based in Brussels at TRM, due to the historic context of its creation. The average membership counts 60-75 institutions and individual members. In 2024 the 73 members are based in 19 countries and managed by a steering committee with the assistance of three freelance positions (coordination and administration, communication, project management). Without no physical office, staff and steering committee members are based all over Europe and

⁴ AsLiCo, Den Norske Opera, English National Opera, English Touring Opera, Glyndebourne, Gran Teatre del Liceu, Het Muziektheater Amsterdam, Opéra de Bordeaux, Théâtre National La Monnaie, Opéra du Rhin, Opéra National de Paris, Opéra National de Lyon, Opera North, Opéra Royal de Wallonie, Royal Opera House, Salzburger Festspiele, Scottish Opera, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Suomen Kansallisopera, Théâtre du Capitole, Welsh National Opera.

⁵ AGM report 2014, 3.

are meeting online once a month and twice a year in person. The administrative general annual meeting of the membership is held online to reach the highest participation possible. One annual in person conference is held in autumn every year, permitting 50-60% of the total membership to have a face-to-face encounter and meet the team of one member institution, the host, as well as artists and professionals of the regional sector the conference is taking place. The governance of the network evolves according to the evolution of its membership. Until 2013, two network directors define the general strategy and political development supported by a steering committee having at this period mainly a consultative role. When RESEO loses its financial foundations, the network is obliged to release the two directors in 2017. Since then, the steering committee is transformed into an operational team. Steering committee members are professionals of the membership institutions working for RESEO as volunteers in addition to their job and private life. The transition period until the new way of governance hits the ground running is relatively long as the importance and workload of the chair and steering committee changing consequently. In general, there are 8-12 steering committee members, elected for a two-year period. Chair elections are realised within the group, again for two-year turn. The existing lack of budget leads to a flat hierarchy and total democratic governance. Strategy and programming of the network activities are defined by the steering committee in continuous exchange with the membership. Support is given by a small number of freelancers paid for their services in communication, finance and administration as well as specific project management for the organisation of the annual conference or European projects management. The steering committee is further split in different working groups, depending on the ongoing ambitions and concerns. The efficacy and visibility of the networks activities on an international level are linked to the availability of the board. The time dedicated to the network's activities and its development depend on the individual workload (professional and personal) of each steering committee member. The average turnover of a two-year engagement has acknowledged the highest efficacy in keeping the network dynamic and innovative. During the last years (exception made of course during the pandemic) a standard season for RESEO is looking like follows:

- 1 in-person annual meeting (main conference) of a 2-3 day duration
- 1 annual general meeting being held online since pandemic
- 1-4 professional trainings > in person meetings in different geographic areas

- 1 symposium in cooperation with another network (FEDORA)
- 4-8 online information sessions or online training
- 1-3 member's invite events: these special activities are based on an invitation from a network member to its peers by providing privileged access to a performance/open rehearsals and conferences included in their seasons' programme.

Additional events and projects are mainly depending on specific European funds within the Creative Europe program: RESEO is a regular partner at a European level especially due to its high dissemination capacity and the density of knowledge and expertise united by its members. Today, the network is identified as an agglomeration of experts in creative learning, outreach and education in the performing arts sector even beyond EU boundaries.

Membership

The membership, since the beginning is defined by an annual fee, financing the networks' activities and management. At its very beginning, RESEO is supported by the *big* European Opera Houses. Elephants of the sector, their education department coordinators meet and reflect on the strategical evolution that would be necessary to bring opera to the societies of the 21st century. The profile of the practitioners is (even today) characterised by a series of ambitions like inclusion, quality, accessibility, diversity, empowerment - lead with an activist's and pioneer spirit as the evident value of their work is not necessarily recognised within the institutions by the other departments, colleagues and sometimes not even by the board of directors. About ten years after its establishment, independent opera companies join the network. Pedagogical activities and productions for young audiences start to be outsourced as not all opera houses can produce or produce enough for their public in terms of financial and human resources. The directors of independent companies - often opera singers and stage directors being simultaneously mediators, artists and administrators, discover RESEO as platform for developing their professional network, reaching out to more international touring opportunities and receiving informal and official professional training at a state when public diplomas do not yet exist. First, they are rarely considered as "equal" members by traditional opera houses and are arousing either suspicion or an arrogant welcome - until the existing membership community ends up recognising the inherent advantages of diversifying types of institutions within RESEO. By contrast, the high number of individual

members like students, researchers or independent professionals is integrated immediately as a group of experts by the other members – rather than being considered as potential concurrent. In this manner membership categories develop from one to three (organisations – companies without a fixed venue – individuals) up to today's six different membership categories.⁶ Criteria are currently the number of permanent staff of an institution deducing by these the entities' financial capacity supporting an annual fee.⁷ This unique richness of different scales implies:

- a large diversity of artistic styles and languages
- easy peer to peer exchange about different methodologies and approaches conditioned by the institution's size and sector of performing arts
- high variety of target groups the members are focussing on according to their geographical and socio-cultural implementation
- inspiration from successful methods as well as sharing the moments of failure
- a new awareness of an existing history and repertory in the sector of arts education
- enriching networking possibilities for coproductions, co-creations and participative processes.

By opening its membership categories, the network starts its diversification and opera is not any more the only genre the practitioner's work is focussing on, even if in many minds, RESEO is still mainly a network of and for the "lyrical sector". By this means, the risk of a closed society of opera mediators is waived, having a hybrid network in continuous evolution of topics focussed on according to the current membership priorities. Still, the risk of a *white and western* cultural homogeneity is given when considering that a major part of membership is based in the traditional opera countries of Western Europe. That's why, in summer 2024, RESEO is launching a new programme called *Europe and Beyond* to challenge the question of cultural diversity by geographic diversity: a specific grant for institutions and practitioners based in those countries of the European continent with the lowest median equivalised disposable income⁸ providing financial support to access to RESEO

⁶ See on the website: <https://www.reseo.org/members/join-reseo/>, last access on September 14th 2024.

⁷ The network takes also in consideration the fact that each institution potentially subscribes to several national and international networks.

⁸ The underlying source for the selection of countries is https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_income_distribution_and_income_inequality presentation of country-classification as to income distribution and income inequality in Europe, last access on September 12 2024.

activities. It's a first tiny step in phase with the networks financial capacities and we hope that this programme will be continuously extended as it is a question of sharing equally knowledge, connections and resources within Europe and beyond.

Partnerships

RESEO's cooperation with different international partners is a way of serving its membership not only as a whole but by specifically responding to the different needs of its membership categories. Traditional partners are JMI International⁹, Opera Europa¹⁰ and enoa¹¹ as well the privileged companion since the beginning: FEDORA¹². With many of those networks RESEO has a shared membership, like for example with Opera Europa. Historically both institutions have been hosted at TRM. Then Opera Europa expanded to include the whole diversity of departments existing in an traditional Opera House, whilst RESEO did develop the outreach and educational department only by opening it up to different type of institutions like individuals and smaller companies. Today both networks have a straight connection especially through a biannual partnership consisting in the organisation of an Education Forum at one of the major Opera Europa Annual Conference (this network holds two major meetings instead of one as RESEO). Whereas RESEO conferences bring together 60-80 people, Opera Europa conferences host up to 250-300 attendees. The difference of scale is impressive and has a natural impact on the content offered. The cooperation of both networks provides to their members precious possibilities to connect with an international community (Opera Europa) as well as a deep focus on a specific topic in an intimate setting (RESEO): this complementarity is very enriching for both conferences' attendees and networks.

⁹ The network *Jeunesses Musicales International (JMI International)* is the largest youth music NGO, with the mission to "enable young people to develop through music across all boundaries". It counts in 2024 76 member institutions from over 70 countries. See <https://jmi.net/>.

¹⁰ Opera Europa is the professional organisation of opera companies and festivals in Europe, <https://opera-europa.org/>. The network counts 237 members from 46 countries.

¹¹ *enoa* is a European network of opera academies which supports and accompanies artists from the operatic sector – creative artists and performers – in developing their professional careers. See <https://www.enoa-community.com/>.

¹² FEDORA is the European Circle of Philanthropists of Opera and Ballet. FEDORA's main objective is to encourage emerging artists to renew these genres, thus making opera and dance more accessible, while fostering the emergence of new business models. In order to achieve this goal, FEDORA raises funds to stimulate innovation in the sector not only on, but also behind and beyond the stage, fostering its sustainable, inclusive and digital transformation. See <https://www.fedora-platform.com/about/about-fedora>

With regards to the other European partners, let's highlight here the RESEO participation in curating the categorie Best Opera for young audiences of the Young audiences music award (YAM awards) ¹³ as well as the FEDORA Education prize: International recognition for high quality productions independent from scale and genre, as well as for participatory projects, strengthens also RESEO's position as central resource of the sector. Through those prizes, RESEO contains archives of existing productions, an informal data base of existing repertory of works and participatory projects, the knowledge of projects in process looking for financial help and coproduction partners and provides a space to develop new works and cooperation. Besides this role, RESEO develops and offers professional training,– online as well as in person workshops with partners like Eenoa and Materahub¹⁴.

Advocating for a sector – missions and challenges

Today, RESEO is defining itself as “a unique European network for arts education and creative learning with a specific focus on opera, music and dance”¹⁵. Partnership strategies as explained above correspond to the core of RESEO's missions: networking possibilities, professional training, overview of the field creating repertory and methodologies, and sharing new impulses for the field at an international level. These main goals culminate in the role of being a stakeholder and major advocate for the whole sector. But how did those ambitions evolve from the beginning? The spirit given to the network by its founders was based on the essential objective to create a human community. A safe space for sharing and exchanging individual experiences of what can be considered as the creation of a new profession¹⁶: opera education. This human factor privileging the encounter, today often called empowerment, was the *raison d'être* of the network even before networking with a specific aim like coproducing, co-creating or selling projects arises. This reason for being is still at the core of RESEO network and its main specificity. Given those foundations, we can

¹³ This prize is also co-financed by RESEO.

¹⁴ Enoa as described earlier, see <https://www.enoa-community.com>; Materahub manages international pilot projects to support cultural and creative industries, encouraging innovation and inclusion processes and a new entrepreneurial vision to face contemporary challenges: see <https://www.materahub.com>.

¹⁵ <https://www.reseo.org>, last accessed on September 14 2024.

¹⁶ The first genre of performing arts developing education methods is the theatre sector. Very surprisingly there was no interaction between the opera field and the theatre sector, besides the development of one German method (Szenische Interpretation für Musiktheater) by Kosuch and Strobel at Stuttgart Staatsoper.

see that since the beginning some goals and ambitions are challenged by the membership and with the years passing new and diverse responses are given. Still some focus points are the same, for example the central question of how to call and define education in opera, dance and music. In 1996, the aspiration of education departments was formulated like this: “1. to provide a link between opera houses and the public; 2. to break down intellectual, social and cultural barriers; 3. to be a force for action in society itself.”¹⁷ Again, since the beginning, those aspirations are realised at a double front: mediators of an institution need to “reassess the purposes for education internally” and at the same time they need “to define what audience is in the educational context”¹⁸: With regards to opera, yesterday's questions are the same as today: “Why go to opera? – What has it to do with me? – What should I look for? – How should I listen? – Is there opera in life? How? Where? – What sort of experience should I expect from the opera?”¹⁹ Though, the integration of new members (not only opera houses) producing different genres or cross-over productions transposed those questions to their art form and the focus shifts slowly from *genre* to *communities and participation* – even if opera is still the most represented art form RESEO members are working with. Ten years later, the AGM (annual general meeting) report of 2008 supplies a five-level programme for the network, enlarging now the field to opera *and* dance:

Exchange – RESEO aims to be the principal platform for exchange of practice for opera and dance educators in Europe.

Research – RESEO aims to be a valuable research and resource centre for the opera and dance sector in Europe and a space for reflection and evaluation for education professionals.

Innovate – RESEO aims to initiate artistic collaboration, experimentation, risk-taking and innovative new work across Europe.

Promote – RESEO aims to raise the public profile of opera and dance education within the cultural sector and to the wider public.

Develop – RESEO aims to continually develop its organisational structure to meet the varying needs of its membership”²⁰.

¹⁷ Operaccessibility, 1997, 2.

¹⁸ Operaccessibility, 1997, 2: a concept stated by David Sulkin.

¹⁹ Operaccessibility, 1997, 2.

²⁰ Annual general meeting report 2008.

Only since 2017, RESEO is rebranding itself as the primary network with specific focus on *arts education* (in general) in Europe. Internal documents (AGM reports) and newsletters of the network are showing the shift from opera education to arts education during a 20-year process. A recent study launched by the network at the same time as the networks new “research space” confirms that the target groups of the member institutions and individual members have continuously evolved since the creation of the education departments focussing today not only on the future audiences (the under 16 years old) but on ALL possible groups of audiences.²¹ In parallel to the enlargement of genres and audiences, scientific researches about life-long learning are inspiring the RESEO community who reappropriates the concept for themselves with the term of creative learning. We see a process of generalisation from opera education to arts education and creative learning that is moving the network forward until today. This ideological umbrella permits to embrace the whole sector in its existing diversity and continuous evolution: it's the daily ambition of the network to highlight unity in diversity. In other words, on the website are given the following four reasons to join “a dynamic network for exchange, creativity and diversity in arts education”:

- *Learn and exchange*: RESEO enables the development of project ideas and the exchange of knowledge. 87% of members believe that RESEO allows them to develop new competences.
- *Connect*: RESEO facilitates collaboration, promotes the international touring of productions and enables connection between potential partners and co-producers.
- *Innovate*: With a strong focus on creative learning and over 20 years of experience in the sector, RESEO is a constantly-evolving network. 100% of members find that RESEO broadens their horizons.
- *Contribute*: Being part of RESEO provides arts education professionals with the opportunity to contribute to improving the quality of opera, music and dance education for all.²²

²¹ “The high variety of different target groups can be classified by criteria of age, geographic implementation, social groups, ethnic origins, professional groups”. Schmitz, Theresa, *From Education to holistic Engagement*, communication at Opera Europa Forum, Vienna 11/04/2024.

²² See <https://www.reseo.org/members/join-reseo/>, last access on September 18th 2024.

Challenges for the future

The biggest challenge for the network today is to coordinate and promote this diversity (= expertise and knowledge) in an efficient way for different types of users: arts practitioners, education program managers, researchers, foundations and public institutions. Further it's RESEO's aim to represent the richness of the field to other sectors and mainly the EU commission to support each member as well as the professional field in total. The high number of existing initiatives in Europe gives the impression that the institutionalisation of the field is achieved. But on another side, by facing the reality of geographic discrepancy of participation in the recent RESEO study of all European countries or several institutions of the same country, the institutionalisation of the field is not achieved at all. The big challenge for RESEO is though the big challenge for the sector: continue to legitimise the value and benefits of outreach and mediation for our societies, create permanent funding, continuity of projects and enough human resources to be able to respond also to the increasing demand of democratic sharing cultural institutions are confronted with. By today, the force of the network by facing this challenge is given by its governance structure but this is its weak side at the same time. The elected board of directors is shaping during the two-year mandate the actions of the network: the monthly confrontation with the European context lifts the focus of the individual's and national concerns to a higher level: how can the members cooperate to empower through the international and European community local activities? This voluntary and personal investment is very intense, and the handover after two years is welcomed in order to keep RESEO's exigencies at a top level. At the same time, with this system the development of a long-term strategy is undermined by the increasing complexity of continuously revising ambitions and aims. The latest changes of the network's statutes are meant to improve this situation by permitting longer mandates of the steering committee members and by introducing the position of a vice-chair with the underlying intention that a vice chair takes over the chair position with two years and the period of decision making is slightly extended to a four-year period. Crucial importance is also given to the paid staff and the importance of keeping turnover as low as possible regarding the - for the moment precarious - financial situation of the network – in line with the precarious symbolic situation of the professional field: especially because it's not anymore the question of educating communities to the benefits of high arts, it's not only anymore the question of increasing audience

figures: the ambition of the professionals and cultural institutions is to question the role of arts, opera, music and dance in our societies in a holistic and inclusive manner.

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Biography:

Theresa Schmitz, musicologist specialised in the field of opera for young audiences, has 15 years working experience in opera and dance production management, before joining RESEO as network coordinator and initiator of the RESEO research space in 2022.

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