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When adult expectations meet young expectations.
The opera *Swanhunter* composed by Jonathan Dove with a libretto written by Alasdair Middelton reviewed by young audiences aged 8 to 11.

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Abstract

When writing and producing operas for young audiences, adults reveal many information about their perception of children. Lead by the wish to create a positive encounter between opera and children, composers and programmers show a feeling of responsibility when developing specific compositional strategies or creating specific performance frames for young audiences. But how do the young audiences receive these efforts and the artistic works? The case study on the reception of Jonathan Doves/Alasdair Middleton's Swanhunter by children aged 8 to 11 fosters the necessity of taking account of children's voices, their abilities as spectators and the importance to recognise them as valuable social actors of today.

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When adult expectations meet young expectations

The opera *Swanhunter* composed by Jonathan Dove with a libretto written by Alasdair Middelton reviewed by young audiences aged 8 to 11.

Theresa Schmitz

This article is an English translation and secondary publication of excerpts from the monograph *L'opéra jeune public* published by Vrin in 2023. As it exists only in French, this is the opportunity to share insights from research on contemporary operas for young audiences and their reception by young spectators. With the generous permission of our publisher, this article will summarise one of the seven ethnographies realised during our field research and share parts of the general conclusions.

The monograph *L'opéra jeune public* is not a traditional musicological analysis of a selection of works, but a presentation of the mechanisms that collectively build the *world* of contemporary operas for child-spectators, according to Howard Becker's concept of *Art worlds* (1928). The research methodology enriches classical musicological tools with sociological field research (ethnographies) consisting of double participant observation: on the one hand, being part of the production chain as a professional in the production process, and on the other, taking the traditional role of observer, analysing the world premiere process of seven operas aimed at young audiences. The criteria of comparative observation were the production cycle, the first series of world premier performances, and the analysis of public reception, including that of young spectators, the professional field and the press. This ethnography is multi-situated, taking place in five different European countries (and socio-cultural contexts), and is completed by tools of discourse analysis.

In addition, the analytical setting is particular for several reasons: firstly, the discourse analysis places the words of adult and young participants on an identical level of 'truth'; secondly, the reactions and impacts of individuals are analysed in a real-life situational context without isolating specific analytical parameters. The experiences of stakeholders (creators, producers, Mediators)

and spectators (minors and adults) were treated as complete experience, and the parameters taken in consideration for analysis arose from what the individuals considered relevant mention. This means that the child as a spectator is not only the object of the study but also the main contributor to the data set. This research is convinced of the relevance of treating young members of society as reliable informants, recognising that each discourse is shaped by existing influences (peer groups or other levels of socialisation), while respecting the specificities of young people in relation to adults. We are deeply convinced of the reliability of children's voices and of the legitimacy of treating their comments as relevant expressions of spectatorship on a par with adult reactions, thereby recognising children as full participants in the chain of stakeholders. For this reason, 629 pupils from Austrian, German, French, Italian and British schools participated in the data collection for this study, which focuses on how works aimed at a young audience are received by them. The exercise proposed to the children consisted of sharing their reactions to an aesthetic experience as well as evaluating them. The school setting allows this exercise of perception and evaluation of an opera to be transformed into a written and drawn formal exercise.

With regards to this article and the topic ‘Komponieren für Junges Publikum’, it seems appropriate to isolate one section from the overall research. Analysing the reception of *Swanhunter* by Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton, based on the written feedback from 142 child spectators aged eight to eleven, will provide an overview of compositional strategies employed by contemporary creators when writing for young audiences and will set the creators’ discourse against children's reception. According to William Corsaro, when the expectations of adults meet the expectations of young people, an ‘interpretive reproduction’ is created, which is implemented not only by the young generation but also by the composers as they reinterpret the European lyrical heritage in contemporary creative processes. In his work on cultural socialisation and how children are active actors of their own socialisation, Corsaro writes: ‘I have argued […] that the sociological theories of childhood must move away from the doctrine that children's social development involves primarily the internalization of adult skills and Knowledge. Instead, I suggest, we must consider socialisation

not only [a] matter of individual adaptation and internalization, but also a process of appropriation, reinvention and reproduction. We must appreciate the importance of collective, communal activity in the way children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults, and each other.' (Corsaro 2012, 488).

The following pages present the strategies composers have used when writing new works for young audiences and specifically highlight Jonathan Dove's account of his creative act and reflections when composing *Swanhunter* in 2009. His case is then connected to themes shared in the comments and reflections of other composers (Wolfgang Mitterer, Iris ter Schiphorst, Jens Joneleit, Georges Aperghis, Luca Francesconi, Raffaele Sargenti, Stephen McNeff, Violeta Dinescu, Sandeep Baghwati, Wilfried Hiller) whom we have interviewed for this research. After a brief look at the concrete realisation of Dove's ideas – such as musical adaptations and staging – we share feedback from young audiences who attended a performance of *Swanhunter* presented by Opera North at The Howard Assembly Room in Leeds in 2010.

Writing for young audiences

Targeting an opera for a specific audience, that of children, requires most creators and producers to reflect on the reception of the work. The desire for this contact between the opera genre and the children, often the first, to be a successful encounter is linked to a sense of responsibility, provoked by a widespread view of the children as human beings in the process of learning, or as a 'blank page' on which the experiences that shape their personality are imprinted. The discourse of composers highlights the existence of diverse concepts of childhood and certain attitudes towards children that can arise unconsciously (due to a lack of knowledge of the genre), and are sometimes even denied by a very strong apologetic discourse ('I'm not changing my style'). Other composers explicitly emphasise that it is not the child that influences their musical style, but the subject matter or the pedagogical context with which the child is often associated. In truth, reflection on children and the questionable legitimacy of artistic work for young audiences lead to a discourse fostering

multiple possibilities of reception: these are not operas intended exclusively for children but works that can engage audiences of all ages.

The various interviews we conducted with composers confirm the hypothesis that the child and its world, or representations of it, preoccupy the composer before and during the creative act and influence their aesthetic language. Every composer, like every adult, has a certain image of children in general and of children as spectators in particular. For the majority of them, the general representation of a child is based on the concept of the ‘innocence-child’, which Jean-François Dupeyron describes as follows: ‘The innocence-child [is] perceived as a sacred source of purity and presumed authenticity’ (Dupeyron 2010, 15). As a spectator, the representation of the child vacillates between that of the innocence-child and that of the ‘lacking-child’ who is ‘perceived pejoratively by his imperfections, in relation to what the adult is supposed to possess’ (Dupeyron 2010, 15). These representations of the child, present in most adults’ imaginations as well as in the mindsets of the composers studied here, stem on the one hand from ‘the individual’s past, with all its emotional charge’ (Dupeyron 2010, 15), and on the other hand from personal life and existing direct or repeated contact with contemporary children. However, the necessarily artificial reconstruction of one's own childhood is rarely in line with today's existing diversity of childhoods (Dupeyron 2010, 14).

The memory of his childhood is particularly dominant for Georges Aperghis, more so than for the other composers discussed here. Elements of personal memory are nevertheless present or integrated into each approach to creation that we might describe as biographical for the majority of the composers. Jonathan Dove refers to his own musical preferences and tastes during his childhood. In her description of what *child* means to her, Iris ter Schiphorst mixes her childhood memories as an older sister with her experience as a mother. Without mentioning his own childhood, Wolfgang Mitterer refers to biographical data: he is both a father and a grandfather. The description of the various representations of the child, conveyed in the composers' accounts, highlights these intimate links with their biographies. This might also specifically

characterise the composers of our corpus whose work for young audiences is quite exceptional within their overall oeuvre.

Jonathan Dove's view of the child

The image of the child suggested by Jonathan Dove seems to arise partly from the world of childhood constructed by media and consumerism, which he considers to be the central environment of children, but also from his experience with young audiences. Various productions have given him indications of children's behaviour as spectators of the performing arts: 'Doing *The Enchanted Pig* was a very useful learning experience because there the theatre had a lot of ideas about what would make a good piece for children. Especially observing the performances which were only for school children. The first performances were just 500 eight- to twelve-year-olds, watching this piece where the characters had been singing all the way through it. And I was thinking, oh is this gonna work...? And it was very encouraging, because actually as soon as the piece started the kids wanted to see what was gonna happen, until we got to two places where the music was slow and quiet. And there wasn't very much happening on stage, and the lights were a bit dark, and at this point the children just desperately wanted to be somewhere else.' (Dove 2010).

Dove is one of the composers who clearly acknowledge the aesthetic adjustments that, in his view, a creation for a young audience requires. These adjustments result not only from a personal definition of the child, whose behaviour as a spectator differs from that of an adult, but also from the assumption that children would have different tastes. The main characteristic of this *childish taste* would be a preference for fast music and rhythms, perhaps linked to a different *physiology* compared to that of adults, and the biological need to move.

Without expanding on the seven works forming the dataset in detail, it seems important to highlight the adjustments that the composers almost systematically undertook to facilitate the reception of their pieces by children. The composers

sought, in one way or another, to create bridges to the children's world: through certain types of melodies that refer to children's songs; through rhythmicity related to the importance of movement for children; through techniques of repetition, building systems of reference throughout the works; through contrast of scenes and atmospheres, based on the hypothesis that children have reduced capacity for concentration; and through instrumentation and sounds familiar from their everyday world. In addition, pedagogical concerns sometimes gave rise to a musical language aiming to present a wide range of musical styles to young ears, which could be described, for this reason, as a polystylistic language, drawing on historical, multicultural or mixed-cultural (high arts-low arts) sources.

The risk of bored spectators

The majority of our interviews reveals a certain respect, distrust, or awareness in the composers' mindset regarding a *particular trait* of children's behaviour: if a child is bored, if they do not like what they are shown on stage, they quickly express their dissatisfaction. According to a frequently mentioned perception, boredom represents the lost bet in the pact between creator and spectator. It manifests as a loss of concentration, whispering, or a gradually increasing restlessness. These representations of children as *complicated* audiences lead to the application of particular *methods* in musical writing and in the overall conception of the work.

Many times, composers emphasise the importance of building bridges between familiar and *foreign* sound worlds, starting from a common musical culture, consisting either of children's songs or of commercial culture. Others emphasise repetition as an important tool (to *guarantee* comprehension of the message), or contrasts between different atmospheres, especially between lightness and seriousness. All share a common concern: to maintain the audience's attention, which corresponds to the intention of entertaining them.

Some of Dove's techniques used in *Swanhunter*

Swanhunter (2009*)*
Opera in one act. Composition by Jonathan Dove; libretto by Alasdair Middleton based on the Finnish Kalevala legend.
Cast: 1 soprano, 2 mezzo-sopranos, 2 tenors, 1 bass
Orchestra: horn, violin, double bass, harp, accordion, percussion (four tom-toms, bass drum, snare drum, hi-hat, ride, crash, tronchet, shakers, woodblock, guiro, whip, glockenspiel)
Duration*:* 65 min (plus intermission)
Age: from 7 years old

Plot: In search of a wife, Lemminkaïnen sets out on a journey to the North, renowned for the beauty of its daughters. Before leaving, he stabs the door of his mother's house with a knife. When it bleeds, his mother will know he is dead. The journey takes the hero to Louhi, the mother of the most beautiful girls in the North, after having "enchanted" her guard dogs and sons with his voice – except for the youngest, Soppy Hat, whom he considers too young for magical fight. Louhi agrees to give him her daughter's hand, the one "the moon desires and who makes the sun sigh," on the condition that he pass three tests. Lemminkaïnen must chase away the devil's elk, ride the devil's horse, and shoot the swan on the river of death. After the first two tests, Lemminkaïnen is shot dead by Soppy Hat just as he is aiming for the swan. Cut into pieces, he is immersed in the river of death by death itself. Alarmed by the bleeding knife, his mother travels north with the help of the spirits and the sun to find her son. Using a huge rake, she gathers his limbs, reassembles them, and restores him to life by singing her maternal love.

For Dove, in *Swanhunter*, beyond the stimulating rhythmic dimension, the exceptional experience of the lyrical voice – especially a *superhuman* register – is a *sure* means of captivating children. Playing with a style of human voice,

rarely encountered by children in its lyrical form, runs throughout the work: ‘I don’t know whether the children who have seen S*wanhunter* realised straight away what they had seen. It doesn’t need electricity to perform this piece. These are the sounds they make with their bodies, and with their voices; it’s completely immediate as a human exchange. So I think that it’s more and more precious now, because it’s not the most common experience. Mostly when people see somebody singing, they are a long way away and they have a microphone. Here is someone singing close up but who is able to make this powerful sound. I think it’s a reminder of human capability.’ (Dove 2010).

All lyrical voice registers are represented, from bass to soprano. Dove also incorporates surprising elements, notably, the voice of Death: in this scene, the female performer of Louhi plays the character of Death on stage, while the voice the audience hears is that of a bass. But the real *event* is the swan's aria. The press almost unanimously described this song as reaching "stratospheric height", and the children in the audience were left speechless (sometimes while covering their ears with their hands). The extreme tessitura is probably a first listening experience for the children, but also for a large number of adult spectators. With the exception of a few flagship roles in the standard repertoire (Olympia or the Queen of the Night), such high notes are an exceptional phenomenon in themselves. Dove therefore intends to create *new* emotions through the experience of hearing something unknown. Since the stage situation is clear, the song no longer requires text, which would be difficult to understand anyway. The swan's high notes are made accessible by the exceptional nature of the character who expresses them: ‘I felt it was quite a risk to write slow music for the swan – as it's quite slow music towards the end of the swan – but she’s singing these incredibly high notes that children would almost certainly never have heard anyone sing, or certainly never live, in the same room without a microphone. So they may think it’s weird but probably they will be interested. It will hold their attention’ (Dove 2010).

The musical conception of *Swanhunter* not only meets dramatic and stylistic requirements but also raises the following questions: How can we keep children interested throughout the entire (!) performance? How can we teach them

something new without frustrating or boring them? How can we create an exceptional event that they will remember for a long time? The interview shows that Jonathan Dove, based on his experience with many works created for young audiences and communities, clearly anticipates various possible reactions of the young audiences. During the interview he explained having learned from earlier productions – for instance, when he ‘could hear rustles of sweet wrappers’ during slow passages – about the importance of balancing action and composition, with each parameter serving the other.

The impact of the stage design

The stage design is another means of communication: it not only situates the plot but can also transform it, revealing another aspect of the story. Often, in productions for young audiences, the setting is inspired by children's aesthetics. It therefore includes intense colours, many *surreal* details (for example, *real* hair on imitation animals, or *real* flowers on the lawn), as well as objects typical of a child's room (toys, a stroller, a baby bottle) or of the broader world of children (balloons, bubble machines). Visual richness seems to be perceived as an effective way to attract children's attention.

Knowing that *Swanhunter* has slow parts, despite his efforts to capture children’s attention with his music, Jonathan Dove wanted the set and staging to add a ‘spectacular’ dimension – an additional layer of entertainment to compensate for what he considered problematic aspects of the libretto (which he had originally not seen as particular relevant for young audiences). Dody Nash's staging only partially met his expectations. In fact, he admitted that, in his opinion, the realisation of the various devil's animals in the first part of the work was not impressive enough: ‘Actually, it would be more extreme […] I loved the idea that the elk would be made out of garden instruments and I imagined a rig and the thing you dig with, and the whole company would create this creature; so a kind of puppetry. And what she did was not contained in a way – it was not spectacular, it was very abstract. In the Leeds Museum there is a skeleton of an elk, it’s really frightening, it’s huge. After all, I wished we had something like that. I think children were ok with this experience, but I don’t

know if they would think, oh opera is wonderful I want to see more of it, whereas children came out of *Pinocchio* saying – daddy that was great, what are we going to see next. That would have been nice.' (Dove 2010).

The setting did not sufficiently emphasise the 'exciting adventure' aspect of the plot, but rather offered a stylised, abstract-art-like vision, which Dove considered insufficiently child-friendly. 'I'm less comfortable that children have a completely good time. Also because the production of *Swanhunter* is not a child-friendly production. It's not exactly what I was expecting and hoping for.' (Dove 2010). Neutral and built of silhouettes, the world of the story remained symbolic. The absence of colour and the abstract side of the design, however, left much to the imagination, but could not impress with visual abundance, something Dove seemed to criticise in the scenography. On the other hand, this staging contrasted with the overload of colours and decorations, as well as over-characterisation of Disney and Pixar cartoons, television programmes or video games that usually surround children. This gap between daily visual stimulation and what the staging of *Swanhunter* offered seemed, in Dove's view, to weaken his attempt to win over young spectators.

The reception of *Swanhunter*

147 British children aged eight to eleven, from the city of Leeds and its surrounding areas, responded to evaluation questionnaires[1] provided by Opera North. Since Opera North systematically evaluates its programming for young audiences using questionnaires, we were unable to add another writing exercise – which would have required more work for the teachers. The compromise reached, adding questions to Opera North's feedback form, turned out to be a *false compromise*, as our questions were omitted in all but one class.

[1]All written responses are represented in this article without grammatical or linguistic correction.

All the children were prepared for the visit to the performance through a workshop conducted in advance by opera singers and cultural mediators from Opera North. Certain details of the story and staging were therefore known beforehand. The expectations of this group of children were thus not only built on pre-existing knowledge of what an opera might be, but were also *co-produced* by Opera North. Based on this preparation, the evaluation form asked, among other things, whether Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton's *Swanhunter* met the children's expectations. 18 out of 147 children answered ‘yes’, while 24 out of 147 emphasised that *Swanhunter* even exceeded their expectations: ‘It was even better than I imagined’ (girl, aged 8 to 11). 85 out of 147 children said they had not imagined it that way. Some were disappointed: ‘No, because it was a bit stink’ (girl, aged 8 to 11); ‘Not really, I thought there would be more actors and actresses’ (girl, aged 8 to 11). Others had expected a different, more realistic staging:

> ‘I thought the swan was going to be black not white.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘No, because the man didn’t turn to stone.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘Not really. I imagined the animals to be a bit more realistic.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)

Most of the answers did not specify why expectations were not met. The very concise questions provoked very short replies. For most children, the answers were ’yes’ or ‘no’. When reasons were given, they often referred to staging ideas. The children were impressed by the reconstruction of Lemminkaïnen's dead body using white blocks. A stylised body appeared when the blocks were tied together and suspended in the middle of the stage:

> ‘I coulden stand it with the body.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘I liked how the shapes became a body.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘I liked the end and I did not like the bit were he was chopping.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘The bit when the mother was putting the man back together; it was a bit long.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)

The simplicity of the staging and the devil's animals provoked both admiration and disappointment among the children who would have liked more realistic ‘beasts’ and sets, as Dove had anticipated:

> ‘I liked how it was so graphic.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘It was set out oldfashioned.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘They did not have many proprs which made it wierd.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘I liked the story but I think you could do with more props.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)

The thank-you letters from one class to the Opera North team provided richer feedback. While more detailed, they nonetheless repeated elements already mentioned – such as the devil's animals – but also referred to the hero's resurrection through the roof of the nursery. In this class, the children also mentioned the lighting and that the play was perhaps a little too long.

> ‘Dear Opera North, Thank you for doing a performance, I loved *Swanhunter* although I think it was to long and the devils horse and elk were strange because I couldn’t see them and didn’t like Lemminkainen. He was a good singer but he was strange and my favourite actor was the girl who played Louhi she was pretty and I thougt the swan was the best at singing high. She changed into a lot of characters. I loved it when Lemmeinkaïnen’s mother asked the road where he was and I think the end was marvellous how they built Lemminkaïnen back up with the red foam and then the roof opened out and his head came out of the tower.’ (girl, aged 10)
>
> ‘Dear *Swanhunter* performers, your performance was very good. I enjoyed the part when lemminkaïnen rode the devlis horse; I thought the swan had a breath taking voice but I would have been more interested if it was 15 minutes shorter. The best bit was when the mum sang Lemminkainen back to life. Overall it was an good performance. But I don’t think operas are for me.’ (girl, aged 10)

Dove's composition was commented on by 70 out of 147 children. The comments generally focused on the singing rather than the music. The

orchestra and its various instruments were not included in the questionnaires, even though they were placed in plain view next to the stage. Only one child mentioned the ensemble: ‘It’s good but you need a bigger orchestra’ (girl, aged 8 to 11). Few children (7 out of 147) were surprised that the story was sung throughout:

> ‘I liked the people singing but I didn’t know they would sung every single word.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘You could not hear what they were singing and it was too loud.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘I know it’s an opera, but I thought they might talk.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)

Others reported not understanding the singing at all. This did not necessarily lead to negative evaluations. Often, children pointed out that despite what they considered flaws, they would want to return to the opera. About ten children admitted that they did not enjoy the opera singing at all:

> ‘I got a bit bored with the singing.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘But there was too much singing.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘It would have been better acted, not sung!’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)

As Dove had predicted, the swan song had an impact on about ten children who mentioned it in their questionnaires. Some appreciated its exceptional heights:

> ‘I liked the singing of the swan.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘The swan was encredible.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘All the singing gave me a fright.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘I liked it because the actors had really high voices.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)

Others found it painful:

> ‘The swan voice was too high and did hurt my ears.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘Too much ear-piecing sounds.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘Noisy, was too noisy.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)

Perhaps in connection with the swan song, ten other children pointed out that the volume was generally too loud. One girl preferred not to return to the opera: ‘No, just because it was too loud for me. I would see another on the TV, o I could turn it down or off’ (girl, aged 8 to 11). Regarding the music, all the thank-you letters that mentioned the performance (7 out of 15) talked about the swan and the singers. The presence of the orchestra also impressed them, something not obvious from the questionnaires:

> ‘Dear Opera North, The opera was amazing, and all the actors or singers were amazing, too. And the way they made the animals with everyday objects is wonderful and very creative. The lady who was playing the swan, her voice was amazing and so high. The violonist cought my eye, she was so fast in playing the violin, and the conductor, they were thrilling. Moving the lights and using them for the river was a good idea. I really enjoyed it. Best wishes.’ (girl, aged 10)
>
> ‘Dear Opera North, The performance we went to see was enjoyable and interesting. I could see that the actors had put a lot of effort into perform it. The orchestra were amazing. It was my favourite bit; They all knew exactly how to play their instruments perfectly. Opera isn’t my thing, but I really enjoy it and it wasn’t to short or to long. Best wishes.’ (girl, aged 11)

In the end, 109 out of 147 children said they liked *Swanhunter*, including 21 who ‘absolutely liked everything’:

> ‘I loved it, I liked the livelyness.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘The swan was great and I thought there was nothing wrong.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘Yes it was brillant.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11))

Interestingly, some responses to the question ‘Did you like the performance or not?’ did not correlate with whether the children wanted to return to the opera. Six children, for example, said they did not like *Swanhunter*, but would like to return to the opera. 56 children, more than a third, said they did not want to repeat the experience. Overall, 81 children, more than half, said they would like to return to the opera; ten children were unsure:

> ‘Yes and no because I thought it was good but I do get fed up with every word sung into a song.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘Not for a while.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘Maybe in a few months.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘Well I would but it dipends what it is about.’ (boy, aged 8 to 11)

It is also interesting that some children pointed out that opera was not for them. We did not find this type of remark in our other ethnographies:

> ‘Well, I am not really an opra person but it was pritty good.’ (girl aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘I enjoyed the opera. But Opera is’nt my thing.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘I definately appreciated the talent of the performers but I dont think opera is for me.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)
>
> ‘No, not really because opera really isn’t my tipe.’ (girl, aged 8 to 11)

Without wanting to interpret this as social distance from a genre they believe is intended either for ‘city people’ or for those ‘from another social class’, it is striking that they reached this conclusion, especially when they apparently liked the show. The reasons may be multiple; the hypothesis that they were reproducing the discourse of their parents or peers is tempting. We were unable to question the children further on this point, but it remains a plausible explanation.

Composers and young audiences are co-creating the art world of operas for young audiences. Listening to their voices provides important insights into the specificities of this sector. The composers contribute with their reflections and through the creative act resulting from them to the reinterpretation of the lyrical heritage, by adapting, reinterpreting, and developing this art form for specific audiences. Comparing these concerns of adult creators (and producers) with the children's perceptions can provide information on what aesthetics adults consider appropriate to create delight and enthusiasm in young audiences, and how this is received by the target group. The composers’ reflections highlight the sense of responsibility they feel when writing for young audiences, also

based on the conviction that the encounter with their work might be a first and perhaps unique encounter. The wish is to build memories – ideally positive ones – while at the same time offering aesthetic excellence, convinced that this does not need to be a contradiction. Before we conclude, let us define the child as an experienced spectator in more detail.

The child – a spectator with experience

The child spectators in our surveys were critical and generous towards the pieces in the corpus. Guided by their teachers or in discussion with friends, they provided precise and valuable analyses of reception. They criticised the works where they felt the need. They distinguished between the pleasure of going out in a group and the experience of works that they only partially liked. The more artistically and aesthetically demanding the works encountered by young spectators, the more significant their reactions. Confronting an unusual artistic expression – not lyrical singing as such, but rather experimental narrative construction and eccentric sound experiences – broadens the spectator's horizons by challenging habits, expectations, and imagination.

Despite their young age, children are not completely free of expectations, nor innocent, nor naïve. Klein denounces this adult belief, insisting that children are, on the contrary, complete human beings to the same extent as adults. As such, they possess knowledge of life and theatre itself, either through their own experiences (first visits and role-play games), or through the media (internet, television and films) with which they are familiar (see Klein 2009, 44). The same observation is made by Deldime and Pigeon: children have already developed expectations, opinions and knowledge through their general culture (even if modest), through other similar experiences, and through preparatory workshops and sessions before the show (see Deldime and Pigeon 1989, 16). Children link what they have seen at the opera to what they already know about the genre, shaping expectations before the show. Depending on age and personality, the coherence between these expectations and reality can either renew their

personal conception of the genre or lead to disappointment and perplexity when the gap is too big.

Based on these remarks, one is tempted to ask what distinguishes children from adults as spectators. Klein bases this difference ‘exclusively’ on the fact that children have less experience. She hypothesises that children up to the age of seven and eight perceive theatre and opera differently. ‘Children's aesthetics, their distinct interpretations of theatre, which are based in part on their more limited experience with this medium, differ from the claims theorised by adults’ (Klein 2009, 41). The adult's task is then to allow the child-spectator to experience in a way as diverse and numerous as possible. Reception of an artwork such as opera is not primarily achieved through learning and understanding all its elements, but through the stimulation of feelings and emotions. In this way the school of the spectator – understood as the building of an emancipated and critical spectator – progresses. For Deldime, ‘performances provide them with a type of intellectual, emotional and aesthetic enrichment that school and family, precisely, do not provide. […] In other terms, by setting the bar every time higher, this gets a question of anticipating development, not following it’ (Deldime 2005, 138). Alongside the quality of the artistic offer, the quality of the spectator’s experience (quality of welcoming, listening and seeing) is at the origin of maximum pleasure when attending performances.

The exigency of quality

The first condition of a successful aesthetic experience is the artistic quality itself. The excellence of the work is indispensable for creating a positive memory of the genre, knowing that children experience opera as a genre through the works in our corpus and through any other lyrical form intended for them. Initially, commercial categories and musical sub-genres are secondary to them. Young spectators will not go to see a children's opera one day and an opera for adults another – they simply go to see an opera. There are no specific quality criteria for general programming. Its elements are subject to the fashions and tastes of a particular era, thus shaping a kind of common sense or leaving it

entirely to artistic independence. While shock, provocation, and especially the refined complexity of the artistic message can today be considered stylistic means, or even marks of quality, in encounters between works and the adult audiences, these elements are often harder to accept in works for young audiences.

Where artworks for adults aim to stimulate intellectual reflection and emotional impact without necessarily focussing on aesthetic pleasure, works for children openly seek to entertain, while also, to some extent, educating the child-spectator. Creators and programmers rightly emphasise that they should not overwhelm young audiences but rather awaken their interest in artistic creation and opera in particular. This position contributes to the very status of art for young audiences. Although the youth sector now has a ‘contemporary’ history of around forty years, its practitioners are continually confronted with the obligation to defend both their activity and its artistic legitimacy.

The composers interviewed for our research were chosen specifically for their ‘legitimised’ position within the field of contemporary classical music. Their works for young audiences are an exception within their oeuvres, except for Jonathan Dove, whose catalogue includes numerous community operas and works for young audiences. ‘Musicology and music criticism on the European continent may regard Dove as a populist who ignores the modernist cues of Pierre Boulez or Elliot Carter and continues to write tonal music. But the fact that Dove is one of the most successful composers of his generation should be taken seriously’ (Sutcliff 2008, 20). Whether or not they have written regularly for young audiences, the composers we spoke with feel a strong sense of responsibility towards this audience and are considering compositional strategies that can best support the lyrical experience. Nevertheless, a tonal style like Dove's is not a *conditio sine qua non* for positive reception. Tonal style does not mean a lack of complexity, nor does it preclude demands on performers’ virtuosity.

The corpus and the existing repertoire of contemporary operas for young audiences may be described as innovative, creative, and contemporary compared to ‘classical’ opera forms – whether Baroque opera, opéra comique, Romantic opera, or early twentieth-century opera. On the other hand, compared to contemporary avant-garde works, one can often clearly see an attachment to the conventions of ‘traditional’ opera. The children's opera, guided by the idea of familiarising children with the genre and all its forms, reinvests this heritage. Without resorting to parody or mockery composers model themselves on its structures and symbols, dare to mix eras and styles, play ironically with conventions, and engage in a kind of interpretative reproduction. The goal is not to invent a new genre, but to reinvent, extend and position opera as a living art form rather than a museum piece.

However, when speaking about their works for young audiences, composers express a variety of discourses: sometimes to defend themselves against mistrust from the contemporary music community, sometimes to affirm the aesthetic quality of a work that is inserted into an educational context. This discourse on the suitability of the genre for children reflects an attitude that presupposes, above all, the desire to take children seriously. It is the desire to put oneself in the position of this specific spectator and to integrate creation into a dynamic not only of transmission but also awareness of a different way of seeing the world, which constitutes art’s unique perspective. It is the desire to engage socially, to create a social action through its direct link with *its* audience: children who are not only the future, but also social actors of today.

Biografie

Theresa Schmitz holds a doctorate in musicology (CRAL-EHESS-PARIS) and published her dissertation on contemporary opera for young audiences in Europe, L’opéra jeune public, in 2023. After 15 years of production management of opera and ballet, she has been working freelance since 2022, among other things as coordinator of RESEO and its Research Space. Since 2025 she has co-conceived at SciencPo Paris the first course dedicated on Young Audiences.

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