



Notes from the General Director

San Francisco Opera Education

There I was, nine-years old, living in a Pennsylvania farm town and attending public school. Every day we had music class. I knew every key signature, the clefs, the note values. We sang in three part harmony! And I played in small ensembles of plastic recorders—"song flutes." During our rest period, the third grade teacher played a half-hour of classical music. That's when I fell in love with Brahms's Symphony No. 3. I was musically literate.

If this happens any more, the occurrences are few and far between. In most schools, music has been excised from the academic schedule. A third grade class is lucky to get fifty minutes a week of music, taught by an itinerant music specialist who fights to put some context and continuity in his or her work. Don't get me wrong. There are present day teachers, administrators, and parents who crusade to get music back into school curricula, but in most cases they're fighting a tidal wave of support for English, math, and science. In some locations they've even carved out a niche for music of one sort or another, but seldom as a daily subject. Opera, as one of many forms of musical expression, can be easily marginalized.

In this environment, a professional opera company like ourselves must make an existential decision about what to do in this situation, because the future of our art form depends upon it. Sure, adults with no musical education can identify themselves drawn to opera, and we continue our efforts to find and nourish them. But to miss making an impact upon children during the impressionable years spanning ages 7–12 is simply squandering an opportunity to shore up the future of opera. If the formal educational establishment is not going to do it, we have to.

When I was appointed general director of this company we had no education department and ceded educational programs to our affiliate organization the San Francisco Opera Guild. The Guild does an amazing job providing programs for schools and I will forever salute their commitment to reach children. The Guild, celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2014, is fiercely independent and totally in charge of its programs—and they've doubtlessly made a positive impact.

In 2007, San Francisco Opera conducted a national search for an education director and the result was the hiring of Ruth Nott in 2008. She has doggedly pursued a number of key incentives that fulfill my philosophy of educating young people in opera when the present system doesn't consider it a priority.

My philosophy includes concentrating on 7–12 year-olds—sponges who can get enthusiastic about almost anything. It

also means involving the classroom teacher, which today means that *opera—in all or some of its components—needs to be used as a means to more effectively teach the arts and core academic subjects.* This is where the ARIA (Arts Resources in Action) programs come in. In the Network program, classrooms learn the elements of opera, study and see an opera, then create their own opera of a subject arising out of academic subjects over the course of a semester or school year. An SFO teaching artist and the classroom teacher partner overseeing this effort. The ARIA Network program currently encompasses 45 year-long classrooms (with an additional 20 being added this spring) in the public schools of San Francisco, Oakland, San Leandro, Richmond, and Daly City. It has been so successful that there is a waiting list, which begs for funding the training of teaching artists and their resources. Schools on the waiting list are participating in the shorter Residency program. Attendance at opera dress rehearsals is provided to those students who have a context of opera in the classroom.

The PEAK (Practicing Everyday Arts Knowledge) awaits more high school classes. Free video productions of opera movies have found their way into classrooms and local cinemas for family enjoyment. And web content helps prepare students to attend rehearsals and performances here. Adult education programs and symposia enrich the lives of people interested in learning more about opera.

As far as I'm concerned the sky is the limit when it comes to our opera education programs. But they can happen only if they are funded. Please contact Bonita Hagbom, bhagbom@sfoera.com, if you are interested in helping SFO Education! ❁



Students participating in the Education department's ARIA (Arts Resources in Action) Network Program perform at a San Francisco Opera board meeting.

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