



Opening up contemporary music theatre for young audiences

by Annett Israel and Gerd Taube

There are over 40 opera houses and opera departments in municipal and state theatres in Germany. Families with children are also a traditional part of audiences for this form of music theatre. And opera directors tend to rely overwhelmingly on tried and trusted operas when planning their repertoire for adults and children alike. As a result, the classical repertory for children which has evolved since the end of the 19th century is very limited.

Above all in the Christmas period and around New Year the repertoire often includes performances of fairytale operas like "Puss in Boots" by Cèsar Antonovich Cui or Maurice Ravel's "The Child and the Spells". That said, Engelbert Humperdinck's opera "Hänsel and Gretel", premiered in 1893 and based on the fairytale by the Grimm brothers, has been the absolute favourite amongst children's audiences in German opera houses for over a hundred years.

Nowadays classical operas for adults are often adapted to suit children's audiences, and presented in a reduced and abridged version with a smaller orchestra and fewer singers. Good examples here are "Papageno plays the Magic Flute", based on the opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, "The Ring for Children" based on Richard Wagner's work and "The Secret of the Wolf's Gorge" based on "Der Freischütz" by Karl Maria von Weber. Since 2009 a children's version of Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" has even been presented at the Bayreuth opera house. Such productions are intended to introduce children to the world of conventional opera, and younger generations are thereby invited to take an aesthetic journey into the past.

Furthermore over the past 50 years there have been operatic adaptations of fairytales especially for children. Some of these have found a regular place in the operatic repertoire. Some examples from the last 12 years include "The Valiant Little Tailor", a small-scale opera for children by Wolfgang Mitterer and "Small Muck". The

opera theatre "Komische Oper" in Berlin commissioned a version of "The Snow Queen" from the composer Pierangelo Valtinoni. As in the era of the artistic director Walter Felsenstein (1947-1975), for the past 11 years librettists and composers have been continually commissioned to create new operas for children in which the children's opera choir of the "Komische Oper" can be involved. But in the meantime there have also been other artistic strategies to access new forms of music theatre for young audiences.

New music theatre for young audiences

These include opera productions featuring young performers adapted to reflect themes of interest to young people, or productions which examine classical operas to discover links with the lives of contemporary young people. Some examples here are an opera premiered in 2006 at the "Komische Oper", entitled "Hip H'Opera – Così fan tutti", a cross-culture project freely adapted from the opera "Così fan tutte" by Lorenzo Da Ponte and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and "The Ring: Next Generation" (Deutsche Oper Berlin), a young people's project featuring motifs from "The Ring of the Nibelungen". When young people stand on stage alongside professional singers and orchestral musicians, young people's culture and opera culture can meet up in participative shows. The "Junge Oper Stuttgart" now presents artistic productions by young amateurs and professionals (often equally young singers) as part of their standard repertoire. Every year they produce two to three music theatre productions in their own studio theatre spaces in which the spectators can "see their own lives reflected on stage", according to the artistic director of the "Junge Oper Stuttgart", Barbara Tacchini.

Alongside its work with young people on stage, music theatre for young audiences has also become more distinguished. The cooperation between operatic artists with artists in children's and young people's theatre opens up new ways to release music theatre for children from its traditional links with operatic conventions. Whereas music theatre specialists can bring their knowledge of forms of operatic storytelling, methods of composition and instrumental theatre into the joint work, children's

theatre experts can draw on their experience with young audiences and the development of material, forms of acting and storytelling.

In 2005 a pioneering model was set up with the “Junge Oper” at the Mannheim National Theatre. It is the fifth department in the theatre alongside drama, opera, ballet and TYA and functions as a co-operation between the opera department and the department responsible for children’s and young people’s theatre. It was set up under the artistic directorship of the heads of both departments, Prof. Dr. Klaus-Peter Kehr and Andrea Gronemeyer, and given its own venue in the Old Fire Station. Other theatres have followed this example. These include the “Staatstheater Oldenburg” which presents its music theatre work for children and young people in a model which integrates all its departments; the independent children’s and young people’s theatre company “Pfütze” in Nuremberg which set up a joint project with the municipal theatre “Stadttheater Fürth” in 2012 entitled the „Junge MET“ (short for contemporary music Theatre for young people in the metropolitan region of Nuremberg); and the “Deutsche Oper Berlin” which in 2012 under the direction of the deputy head dramaturg Dorothea Hartmann set up the “Junge Deutsche Oper” in the “Tischlerei” (the former carpenter’s workshop of the “Deutsche Oper”), a new venue for experimental forms of music theatre.

Seeing with your ears and hearing with your eyes

Contemporary music theatre for children is not simply conventional drama with music, but also a form of staging for the ears. For this reason the principle aim of the music scholar, opera director and Professor at the Hildesheim University, Matthias Rebstock, is to get audiences to listen to music in a very specific way. He does not consider the story as the primary element. By contrast, Dorothea Hartmann states that stories are very important in music theatre. Here she emphasises the central status of music for storytelling and scenic action. For music can also tell stories and these can be experienced in a similar fashion to imagery, textual and physical languages. Her opinion is shared by the director of the Opera department at the “Staatstheater Oldenburg”, Ina Karr. She underlines that music has an enormous dramatic and scenic power. It’s tonal colours, emotions, dynamics, instrumentation,

styles and forms can tell stories in a completely different manner from words, bodies and images. Andrea Gronemeyer, the artistic director in Mannheim is also a stage director. She sees the compression, alienation and superelevation inherent in musical presentations as a way of strengthening the emotional perceptions of the audience.

The unbiased audience

“Children react in a completely unbiased way to different tonal languages. Regarding young children`s perception of music, we can assume that Bach is just as alien to them as Miles Davis, a contemporary composer, or music from completely different cultural circles.“ This means that children of up to 6 years old are an almost ideal audience for contemporary music theatre. “New Music” (“Neue Musik”) is closer to them than conventional opera and they are naturally curious to discover sounds, rhythms and musical styles. This includes, for example, making the act of music-making visible on stage. To do this the musicians have to abandon the pit and enter the stage. Thus the separation of the musicians and the performing singers can be dissolved in music theatre for young audiences. For Matthias Rebstock it is clear that when musicians can free themselves from their music stands and perform their instruments on stage they are no longer simply musicians but also become actors. As a result the music does not simply tell stories in an acoustic fashion but also gesturally in relation to other theatrical languages. Thus the impulses emanated by the music can change the events on stage more directly and transparently and create new spaces for interpretation. Or put another way the events on stage can re-find themselves “mirrored, commentated and supported in the music. The more closely text, music and scenic presentation are enmeshed the more sensual becomes music theatre“, Ina Karr believes and she adds: For example, small children take great pleasure in simple sounds like the human voice, “and the voice is also sound. For this reason every form of sound which differs from normal musical experiences is interesting and awakes attention.”

Dorothea Hartmann is convinced that the focus on sound precedes the dramaturgic relationship of tensions between scenic events, images and sounds, for in this way

the audience's curiosity will remain alert to everything that produces a sound. Andrea Gronemeyer reports from her own experience that: "Practically speaking we have learnt a lot from creating tensions and awaking people's interest by emphasising specific tonal qualities, by focusing on individual sounds, reduction instead of forcefulness, surprise instead of simply reproducing known patterns". Contemporary music consciously works with a certain degree of excessive demands which can stimulate the desire for aesthetic discovery amongst young audiences.

Thus in contemporary music theatre children can develop a consciousness for the quality of music via their experience of differently staged tonal languages. In order for this to happen the artists themselves must set themselves the highest standards for composition, text, staging and sets. For this reason Andrea Gronemeyer is convinced that the success of any contemporary music theatre show is dependent on the attitude of the artists to their audiences. "The most important precondition for artists in their dealings with children is that they are prepared to communicate with children and meet them with the same openness and affection that they in turn would wish to receive from the children. When artists are interested in their audiences, when audiences are made to feel that an interest is there, this creates a common trust. The upshot is that audiences are open to all the different forms of human expression, whether in thoughts, images or sounds."

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