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Opera for Children

Operasonic: working with the opera makers of the future

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Introduction

This paper looks at the work of Operasonic with young people, specifically through the development of its project *Newport Legends*. Rhian Hutchings is the founder and Creative Director of Operasonic. Cath Barton is a writer who followed the development of *Newport Legends* for the on-line creative hub Wales Arts Review. They consider what worked well during the process, challenges faced, and the essential contribution of networks of support both at local level and further field, including internationally. They conclude with observations on the contribution of young people to the future of opera, and raise questions for a round-table discussion.

Operasonic is a not for profit company limited by guarantee and a charity, founded in November 2014 and based in Newport, South Wales. The charity is passionate about opera as an artform that connects with the potential and creativity of young people in a direct and visceral way.

Its vision is to enable young people to own opera, as audiences, as participants, as creators, as leaders. Operasonic proposes that young people need contemporary opera created on their terms and in their communities, venues, schools, and online spaces. The opera of the future should be driven by them, and should enable them to develop as creative and potent members of society.

In order to fulfil the vision, Operasonic creates opportunities for young people to explore, create and experience opera: participatory projects focusing on opera writing; opera productions created specifically to open up the world for different age groups. Operasonic aims to keep participation at the heart of everything it delivers.

Operasonic is led by Creative Director Rhian Hutchings, who brings vast experience to the organization through her career as an opera director and her time leading the Youth & Community department at Welsh National Opera. The organization is supported by a committed group of Trustees bringing with them experience in arts leadership, entrepreneurship, community and heritage links, financial management, and HR and charity law. Since its inception, Operasonic has also worked with a wide range of freelance artists who bring expertise in composition, design, direction, technical theatre and producing.

Operasonic has developed strong key relationships in Newport with the Riverfront Theatre, Maindee Unlimited, Community House and a range of primary schools. Partnership projects have been created with Bristol Plays Music, Iford Arts, and Welsh National Opera. Operasonic has presented work at St George's Bristol, The Riverfront Theatre, and Tête-à-Tête Opera Festival. Between April 2016 and April 2017 Operasonic ran 46 workshop sessions reaching 551 participants.

Newport Legends

a) Genesis and who was involved

Newport Legends was created to begin the work of fulfilling Operasonic's core vision and develop opera with and for young people. It was important for Operasonic that this process happened in collaboration with a community of young people, and the company's base in Newport offered rich content for the project, as well as a number of key partners to support it.

Newport Legends had the following aims:

- to make young people and artists creative collaborators in making opera

- to seed an Operasonic community of practice for artists making opera with young people
- to showcase local stories and celebrate Newport and its residents
- to make Newport a centre of excellence for opera for young people
- to change perceptions of opera in Newport

Newport Legends was planned to be delivered across one academic year, 2016 – 2017. Creative Director Rhian Hutchings brought together a strong creative team to deliver the project, including five composers, four drama leaders, three opera singers, five musicians, two designers and a producer. The team came together at the beginning of the process to plan and created a practice ethos for the project to guide practice decisions. They saw each other's work as much as possible, and came together after the project for a final reflection session. Key elements of the practice ethos included handing over ownership to participants as much as possible, making sessions fun and inclusive, offering a varied experience of different art forms, and delivering a high quality, professional experience.

The project was funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Tŷ Cerdd, Communities First Central Newport, and was created in partnership with Newport Live. It was also supported by a Crowdfunding campaign; as well as having 111 contributors, this also generated wider interest in the project.

b) The process

Three distinct legend strands were developed with different groups of young people aged 6 to 10. Workshops took place in each of three Newport Primary schools after school hours, during autumn 2016 and spring 2017. The workshops lasted for 90 minutes, once a week for ten weeks. (See Appendix 1 for activity data.) At least one member of Operasonic staff was present at each workshop session, to do necessary administration, to ensure safeguarding procedures were followed and maintain an overview of the entire process. The workshop sessions were led by the director and composer appointed to work with each school. At the end of the workshop period in each school there was a showing of the work to date to parents and other family members.

The three groups of young people were brought together with a group for adults and young people – which had met in Maindee Library to develop a fourth legend (not discussed here) – for a final performance of *Newport Legends* at The Riverfront Theatre in Newport in July 2017. The four legends were framed and linked by music composed by Errollyn Wallen, sung by three professional singers, who also took roles in the individual legends.

How it worked

In collaboration with the Operasonic creative team, the director and composer for each of the separate legends started with a core idea, but the details of both music and words were created by and with the young people involved. Information was collected from all the participants about their previous experience of opera and/or theatre (if any) and their creative preferences, so as to track the different ways that individuals wanted to engage with the project.

The Legend of the Flood was the story of a woman waiting for her fisherman husband during the devastating flooding of the Gwent Levels in 1607. In this legend the group of young people – most aged 6 to 8 – acted and sang as a chorus, responding to the baritone and soprano soloists. Particularly powerful in this legend was the onomatopoeic section where the young people told the story of the families drowning, their wave-like actions reinforcing the sounds they were making.

The Legend of Tom Prothero told the story of the Chartist leader John Frost and his conflict with the once poor, now wealthy Thomas Prothero. Divided into groups of rich and poor, the young people embraced the dramatic conflict of the story and responded with energy and purpose to the lead given by the professional baritone. There were also a number of solo roles for the young people in this legend, two of which were substantial, and sung in the final performance by the young people concerned with poise and assurance.

Twmbarlwm Legend was a story of myth and magic, a quest using both chorus work and individual characters. The young people contributed hugely to the words of the song, as well as musical ideas. When several participants were unable to attend the final performance and last minute changes had to be made to the choreography of the piece, the remaining performers were unfazed.

What worked well

There were a number of factors which contributed to the success of the work in all three groups and of the final, combined performance:

- Responsiveness to the participants. The skills of both the composers and directors were crucial in identifying and building on the young people's interests and strengths and keeping them motivated through the rehearsal period. The professionals also followed an agreed practice ethos (see Appendix 2) to which this was central, as it overtly stated that a high level of participant ownership was a key part of the project. This led to an interesting exchange at the evaluation session which explored levels of ownership and methods of creating agency.

- Demystifying opera. The rehearsal process entailed a lot of fun for the participants, while teaching them a huge amount at the same time about how words, music and movement can come together in a magical amalgam. It was important to Operasonic that the artists made their process as transparent as possible so participants could see clearly how the opera was created and where their ideas had been incorporated.

- Involvement of professional singers. This gave the young people a role model and an example of a professional approach to being a singer in the rehearsal room. Having the singers in the classroom in rehearsal meant that the participants could relate to them as adults, working with them on the same level, no different from their teachers or parents. This demonstrably increased the young people's confidence in their own singing and encouraged them to aspire to a higher level of attainment. Their confidence was amplified in the final performance.

- A unifying design concept, and skilful use of props – a paper boat passed between participants in wave-like motion in the *Legend of the Flood*, hats for the *Legend of Tom Prothero*, and, most impressive of all, the Fox's head and tail, Badger's head and claws and Barn Owl in flight in *Twmbarlwm Legend*. This brought the diverse mini-operas together as one family and gave them a sense of community identity.

- Musical clarity and coherence. The work produced by the different groups was in quite different styles, but there *was* a coherence in the final performance, due above all to the linking music written by Errollyn Wallen. Her use of ostinato motifs in the instrumentation – for piano, double bass, clarinet/saxophone and percussion – gave an easy flow to the interludes between the pieces. The work of music director Helen Woods also contributed to this. Helen worked with all the composers involved to bring together a final score for the ensemble that accompanied the final performance which had a sense of continuity and identity.

Challenges

There were, of course, also challenges:

- Young people in the schools involved in the project elected to take part, subject to their parents or guardians giving permission for them to attend the workshops, which took place after school hours. Inevitably this meant that numbers in each of the groups fluctuated from week to week, and there were several drop-outs from one of the groups on the day of the performance, necessitating last minute changes.

- There was a gap of between 4 weeks and 5 months between the end of the rehearsal period in each school and the date of the final performance; all the work had to be reprised and put together on a single day.

- The more components are introduced into a performance, the more there is to go wrong, potentially. Beautiful as the hats for *The Legend of Tom Prothero* were, for example, they were also, for some participants, a distraction; work had to be done on a one-to-one level to ensure no-one had a hat that was too big or too tight.

- Young people's concentration levels inevitably vary; when they become very excited, as before a performance, their energy can become dispersed rather than focussed and they can forget moves.

c) The network of support at local level

Producing high quality opera requires input from people with a range of professional skills, and the success of a project like *Newport Legends* depends on successful partnership working close to home.

Artists

Since it was founded in 2014, Operasonic has built up excellent relationships with a wide range of professional artists who share the organisation's commitment to making high-quality opera with

young people. It now has strong links with a network of composers, directors, producers, writers, singers, instrumentalists and designers in South Wales and the South West. However, it is a challenge for a project-funded company to keep up links with artists and offer them the ongoing support they need to develop and grow.

Schools

In order to work successfully with young people, the support of their schools is essential. Operasonic committed time and energy to developing relationships of trust with headteachers and class teachers in the three primary schools involved in *Newport Legends*, and these relationships not only facilitated the work on this project, but will provide a firm footing for any work which Operasonic wants to develop with young people in those schools (and indeed the wider school network in Newport) in the future.

Other opera and arts organisations

Signposting young people to other opportunities is a very important part of Operasonic's work. A project like *Newport Legends* is necessarily time-bound, but Operasonic needs to take responsibility for the interest and excitement that it might foster in the young people who participate.

Operasonic has built links with arts organisations local to Newport who also offer youth arts opportunities. Organisations like Tin Shed Theatre, Defying Gravity, Gwent Music and Ballet Cymru are all possible progression routes for young people.

Operasonic's strong working links with Welsh National Opera's Youth and Community staff (who also cover work with schools) ensure a possible route forward for young people who have been involved in a project such as *Newport Legends* and want to do more singing.

Operasonic also has strong links with Youth Arts Network Cymru who link out to youth theatres across Wales and also to National Youth Arts Wales, which offers singing, dancing, theatre and orchestral opportunities.

Venues

Using a venue is not simply a question of hiring a space. Work needs to be put into developing on-going relationships with statutory, voluntary and commercial organisations committed to community development and making the arts accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds.

Newport Legends gave Operasonic the chance to bring something into the Newport community and make an offer to organisations. This has begun strong relationships with The Riverfront Theatre, Maindee Library and Community House which will lead to further projects.

d) Contributions to UK-wide and international networks

Newport Legends has also been presented internationally at a RESEO Conference allowing Operasonic to raise its profile in Europe, and Creative Director Rhian Hutchings is now Chair of the network. Links with RESEO members and experience of the range of work on offer across Europe is important for Operasonic to benchmark its work and keep challenging its practice.

Newport Legends was also shortlisted for the RPS Learning and Participation Award in 2018 and again this raised the profile of the company and will hopefully lead to further collaborations across the UK.

Conclusions

Operasonic is committed to the future of opera being driven by young people, and not simply made for them. We draw a number of observations about this from the work on the Newport Legends project.

- We need new stories for opera, not simply retellings of the old stories, and these stories need to reflect the life experiences of young people growing up in the diverse multi-ethnic environments of the twenty-first century. It is only the young people themselves who can convey the nuances of their experiences. It was crucial to the success of *Newport Legends* that there was a practice ethos drawn up, specific to the project, and to which all professionals involved were committed (see Appendix 2).
- In working with young people in primary schools, conversations with both school staff and parents are crucial. When working in school after school hours it is only with the co-operation of the schools that parents can be engaged; GDPR compliance requires the active consent of parents and we encountered difficulties in achieving this to the level we would have desired.
- There is a missing level in the work, which is about how to capture the social and emotional learning outcomes. We need to get better at evidencing how our work develops decision making, social awareness, self-awareness, self-management and interpersonal skills.
- It is professional artists who drive this work. Developing a network of local practitioners has an exponential value for all concerned which goes far beyond a single project. It is important to value and support these artists as much as possible.
- In carrying out work of this nature a third set of eyes is needed to track the process and learn from it fully; the artists taking part in the work are too closely involved and too focussed on delivery to see everything or have time to capture it.

- We identify this work as part of a string of pearls on a golden thread that makes up the world of opera. The pearls need to be securely threaded for the necklace to be complete and displayed in its full glory. As long as there is strong music provision around them, the young people who take part in work like *Newport Legends* in primary schools can move along the thread, to work in secondary schools, to Youth Opera and so on. The cuts in funding to Music Services and other local provision mean that the clear progression routes are not always available.

Questions for discussion

All of us engaged in work to develop opera with young people are learning that it is a rich and complex process!

Here are some questions for us to consider together:

1. *Newport Legends* is one model for engaging young people with opera. Do you think it helps us to think in terms of models of practice? Is there a distinct practice for making opera with young people? If so can we identify its components?
2. Different artists work differently with young people. How best can they develop their practice? Do they share enough or is there a need for a stronger infrastructure, possibly a UK-wide forum?
3. How do you grow operamakers from young people? How do you empower them? What structures and progression routes do we need to put in place?

APPENDIX 1

Newport Legends Activity data

(from Evaluation Report, August 2017)

55 activity sessions (3 hours maximum) were delivered as part of the Newport Legends project from May 2016 – July 2017. Over the project 270 people took part, 67 participants performed as part of the final Riverfront Theatre performance, and 340 audience members saw either a sharing or the final performance. The below tables breakdown the session activity and participant numbers.

Dates	Group engaged	Legend	Number of sessions
May 16	RawFfest Participants	Legend of the Flood	1
August 16	RawFfest Festival Participants	Legend Links	2
Sept 16 – Dec 16 / June 17	St Michaels Primary Legend Makers	The Legend of the Flood	11
Jan 17 – March 17 / June 17	Clytha Primary Legend Makers	The Legend of Tom Prothero	11
March 17 – June 17	St Woolos Primary Legend Makers	Twmbarlwm Legend	10
December 16	St Julians High School Music department	Legend Links	1
December 16	Maindee Library Open Session	Maindee Legends	1
December 16	Operasonic Supporters Session	Legend Links	1
April / May 17	Community House Sessions	Maindee Legends	7
April 17	Community House Youth Group Session	Maindee Legends	4
June 17	Maindee Community Choir	Maindee Legends	3
June 17	Community House After School Group	Maindee Legends	1
July 17	All Performance Groups	Final Newport Legends Performance	2
TOTAL SESSIONS		55	

NB: Date includes Maindee Legends for mixed group of adults and young people not discussed in this paper

APPENDIX 2

Newport Legends Practice Ethos

The Intention

- A high quality experience that the participants can be proud of.
- The process is as important as the product.
- To have a clear structure in which each session has its own purpose and goal.
- It's fun and inclusive.
- Inspiring and engaging for everyone involved.

The Activity

We need clear information about each group and venue for session leaders.
Sessions should be well planned but flexible enough to respond to feedback.
The venue should be safe and clean.
It should be fun, but productive. Each session should be unique.
Feedback should be recorded clearly.
Photos and videos should be used to record the sessions.

The People

- Participants should work with professionals.
- Participants should have the freedom to create and contribute.
- Participants should own the process and the product.
- We need to offer varied experiences to participants, e.g. writing, directing, composing, designing.
- The project needs to link with the community around the participants – parents, teachers, board members etc.
- Participants should be engaged but also challenged.