



## NEW COMMISSIONS

BRIEFING FOR COMPOSERS AND LIBRETTISTS  
APRIL 2012

### BACKGROUND

W11 Opera was founded in 1971 to give local children in west London an introduction to opera. It provides an opportunity for young singers to rehearse and perform work within the operatic medium and relevant to their age group. Commissioning new works began in 1972 and to date over 30 operas have been commissioned, thereby creating a new repertoire available to other opera and music theatre groups working with young people.

The production and music teams, including the orchestra, are all professionals engaged for the period, with the administration and overall management being run by a core team of parent volunteers.

Productions are rehearsed in St James's Church, St James's Gardens, London W11, and for many years this was also the performance venue for the annual six performances in mid December. In 2001 W11 Opera was invited to perform its new work in the Linbury Studio Theatre at the Royal Opera House. From 2003 to 2007 the main performances took place in the Britten Theatre at the Royal College of Music, whilst rehearsals and some performances took place in St James's Church, thereby maintaining links with the community in W11. Since 2008 the production has been mounted in Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, culminating in the Community Performance and four public performances.

The company comprises only young people age 9 – 18; there are no adult singers. The general ethos of the company is social as well as musical. The structure is orientated around groups, and thereby aims to sustain a suitable environment for musical and social development inclusive of disadvantage and disability. The W11 Children's Opera Trust seeks to develop an engaging and entertaining opera or piece of music theatre each year for a largely family audience acknowledging - yet not restricted by - the need for accessibility.

Funding is internal for the most part, supported by sponsorship from the commercial sector and from charitable trusts. We have applied for PRS Foundation Awards, and have also submitted works for the British Composer Awards.

Every year since 2001 W11 Opera has provided the children's chorus for at least one production of Opera Holland Park's summer season. In addition a number of the cast have been recommended for productions outside the borough and some have later enjoyed successful careers in theatre, music and opera.

## **1. GENERAL**

- 1.1 The cast numbers some 80 members normally aged 9 – 17. There are usually around twelve 14-17 year olds but the majority are aged 10 – 13.
- 1.2 There are usually around 10 boys with unbroken voices and sometimes 1 or 2 broken voices.
- 1.3 There are usually a number of cast members with good dance/movement skills.
- 1.4 The Commissioning Team meets to review examples of composers' past work submitted with scores and recordings. Subsequently plot lines are pitched to the Commissioning Team who then report and make recommendations to the Trustees. All submissions to W11 Opera will remain in the copyright of the composer and librettist and returned if not furthered.
- 1.5 The Trustees via the Chairman and Treasurer of W11 Opera handle the contractual arrangements once an invitation to write for the company is made. The composer makes his/her own arrangements with his/her librettist.
- 1.6 Ongoing consultation with representatives of W11 Opera, including both Music and Stage Directors, is anticipated in the development of plot, libretto, music and structure, mostly relating to past experience of the cast and the available rehearsal schedule.

## **2. MUSIC**

- 2.1 The opera should be musically exciting and should provide some challenge for the cast. The opera should for the most part be original rather than a pastiche of recognisable musical styles and conventions. However pastiche would be acceptable where it is appropriate to drama or plot.
- 2.2 Idiomatically the work should be conceived as music theatre rather than as a musical.
- 2.3 Most voices are female or unbroken.
- 2.4 There may also be parts for broken voices of which one may be suitable as a principal.
- 2.5 Vocal range for soloists should be middle C to E as a staple, although there is room for two or three soprano principals with a higher range.
- 2.6 Vocal range for chorus can be wider, say A up to top G.
- 2.7 Sustained passage work in the highest tessitura range (C to E) is best avoided unless required for dramatic effect.
- 2.8 Duos, trios, unison writing and part writing are all desirable; 2 or 3 parts are manageable, preferably split by character group, and preferably by linear contrapuntal writing, but harmonic/chordal vocabulary is also welcomed.

- 2.9 The opera should use recitative. Spoken dialogue should be kept to a minimum and used only for dramatic effect.
- 2.10 Orchestration should be light and typically for six or seven players, with the option of doubling/tripling and the use of keyboards to enhance texture and colour. Occasionally additional players may be considered. Percussion requirements as well as ethnic instruments may be subject to orchestral space and budget, and should therefore be discussed with the Musical Director at an early stage of the contract. Powerful instruments in the same tessitura as the children's voices should be avoided.
- 2.11 Performances are sound-enhanced but individual mics are not current policy. All matters of amplification should be discussed with the Music Director.

### **3. DRAMA**

- 3.1 The storyline should be pitched at 15/16 year olds but must involve the younger children.
- 3.2 Plots need to be direct and have a strong clear narrative. The storyline should build to a climax with a powerful denouement.
- 3.3 Content and characters should be appropriate to the experience of young teenagers. There should be some roles which will appeal to our older performers.
- 3.4 Early commissions successfully used fairy tales, biblical subjects and Greek mythology as source material. More recently, environmental, science fiction and contemporary issues have been used to address contemporary solutions to conflicts brought about by ethical or moral issues. Copyright permitting, well-known stories could be adapted.
- 3.5 The W11 Opera website ([www.w11opera.org](http://www.w11opera.org)) lists all previous productions under Past Years and includes synopses for reference.

### **4. MOVEMENT/DANCE**

- 4.1 Set pieces involving movement/ dance appropriate to the plot are welcomed but ideally more for groups than for soloists.
- 4.2 General stage movement is in the hands of the Director but the company may engage a choreographer for dance-specific moments.

### **5. STRUCTURE**

- 5.1 Running time should be around an hour.
- 5.2 The opera should be dramatically exciting for all the 80 or so young people involved, and should be mediated by the groups as well as by the protagonists.
- 5.3 Character list:
  - 1) 8 - 12 principals. These should be of varying degrees of prominence.

- 2) 4 - 8 sub-principals/character roles. These could be in the form of lesser roles that appear throughout the piece or as one-scene vignettes.
- 3) 4 - 6 clearly defined chorus groups of roughly 9 - 15 voices and preferably with their own character. It is most important that each group has a clearly defined identity with a role that is integral to the dramatic development of the plot. One-liners for members of a group are highly desirable.

- 5.4 One of the groups could comprise the boys with unbroken voices.
- 5.5 Ideally each child must feel they have their moment when all the attention is on them, either as an individual performer or as a member of their group. All cast members need to feel they are involved in the full drama and large groups on stage are quite acceptable.

## **6. AUDITIONS AND REHEARSALS**

- 6.1 Open auditions take place at the beginning of September and casting takes place in the same week. Most children live and attend school in west London. Typically about 30-35 schools are represented in the cast in any year and many of the schools are strong in music. All local music teachers receive a mailing about the auditions during the Summer Term.
- 6.2 Rehearsals take place every Monday evening after school from 5 - 7.15pm from September to December and generally all children attend the Monday rehearsals.
- 6.3 Additional rehearsals for some groups begin in November and towards the end of the rehearsal period there are some rehearsals at weekends for the full cast.
- 6.4 Rehearsals take place in St James's Church W11, the local school and local houses, and up to four groups of children can be rehearsed at any one time.
- 6.5 Children are split into groups, mostly according to character, and each group is organised by a 'Group Parent'.

## **7. TIMETABLE**

To facilitate the smooth scheduling of production, design, casting and rehearsal, it is essential that the delivery schedule is strictly observed.

Outline storyline and character list: by Spring prior to year of production

Full storyline and character list: by early July prior to year of production

Libretto: by January in year of production

Vocal score: by April in year of production in preparation for sing-through presentation in May

Full score: by early November in year of production.