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BEGINNERS PLEASE

There's no better way for youngsters to understand and appreciate opera than by taking part in a show. Keith Clarke meets a group of British companies who have been leading the way in commissioning and staging new work for young performers

When *The Drummer Boy of Waterloo* marches on to the stage of Aldeburgh's Jubilee Hall on 7 November, it will be the first world premiere for a company that has been putting young singers and musicians through their paces for almost three decades. Jubilee Opera's new work, by Megg Nicol and David Stoll, was written to mark the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo. The company was formed in 1987 after a production of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* in Aldeburgh Church, which received such an enthusiastic response from the community that a permanent organisation was set up to give young people a chance to work with professionals on high-quality productions and develop their musical and performance skills.

Established in the same year as British Youth Opera, which provides professional opportunities for singers, musicians and technical trainees on the threshold of their careers, Jubilee Opera was not the first nor the only children's opera company. With a 44-year history, W11 Opera must be daddy of them all, while the Mahogany Opera Group is a relatively youthful 12-year-old. W11 presents its new commission, *Eliza and the Swans* by John Barber and Hazel Gould, at the Posk Theatre in West London on 12 and 13 December. Meanwhile, the Mahogany Opera Group is currently touring its 'mindfulness opera', *Lost in Thought*, which opened at LSO St Luke's in September.

Putting on a show is a perennially popular activity for young people, but what can they actually learn from the process of presenting opera? More than the obvious skills involved, it seems. 'They are building their confidence,' says Jubilee Opera's artistic director Jenni Wake-Walker, 'physically discovering things about themselves – not just their voice, but movement, means of expression. Children have their own individual skills and qualities. Some of them are very shy but by watching and working with people and losing their inhibitions quite early on they learn

so much about themselves and what they're capable of doing.'

'It's not just about the musical and acting skills but also team-working and self-discipline,' says Mahogany Opera Group's executive producer Alison Porter. 'Opera is really special in bringing together lots of skills – acting, singing, stagecraft, set design. They can learn a whole gamut of skills.'

Laura Banes, chair of W11, says that at its best, opera can provide young performers with a stimulating opportunity to create music theatre in a collegial environment. 'We find that young people are capable of making huge leaps as performers during the rehearsal period. The children are challenged by the musical and dramatic material, but the atmosphere within W11 is not overly competitive as groups become close and the cast becomes cohesive.' Many young performers stay with W11 and some cast members get the chance to perform with adult opera companies such as ►

▼ Jubilee Opera's 2012 production of *Hip Hip Horatio* celebrated the exploits of Admiral Lord





▲ Mahogany Opera Group's production of Hans Krása's touching 1938 children's opera *Brundibár*

▼ Creating a close, cohesive ensemble: a scene from W11's 2010 opera *Rain Dance*, by composer Stuart Hancock



◀ On location: members of Jubilee Opera explore the company's roots in Britten's Aldeburgh

◀ Opera Holland Park. Aside from its work on *The Drummer Boy*, Jubilee Opera has produced six children to take part in English Touring Opera's current production of Massenet's *Werther*.

Writing for young performers is a specialist skill. On a practical level, they need to be heard: 'It's very important for a composer to understand that they've got to lighten the scoring when a child is singing solo,' says Jenni Wake-Walker. 'You have to be mindful of the range of children's voices; and you've got to give them stuff that is challenging and sounds difficult, but when you break it down is actually quite easy.'

For Laura Banes, an opera written for young people can succeed or fail on many levels: 'Musically, a piece needs to be challenging but accessible. Dramatically, a work needs to be relevant or capture the imagination of a young cast. Each young person needs to feel a part of the whole. It is W11's ethos that every child or young person should have a "moment" within the production so that all feel very much a part of the performance.'

There is a limited repertoire of suitable pieces that give all participants a share of the limelight. Mahogany is in the process of planning a project with the working title *Snappy Operas*, inspired by Malcolm Williamson's *Cassations*, operas for musically untrained children. 'We want to take that idea and commission five new 10-minute operas,' says Alison Porter. They will be fully staged. We're planning to work with five composers and five different local partners across the country.'

The length of the performance is an important point for young performers and audiences. Banes says: 'Our commissioning brief is the product of our experience. We feel we have learned how to engage young people (and audiences) by creating new works of a manageable length each year. The narrative should not be overly complex and the story must reach a resolution within 70 minutes.'

'We owe it to children to open doors into this world, because it does so much for them, helping them to build their own character and confidence'

W11 Opera has added some 34 commissions to the repertoire of works for young people and in its 44 years has reprised only five. Up to a half of the Mahogany Opera Group's repertoire is newly commissioned. 'Our style is somewhere between commissioning and devising,' says Alison Porter. 'It's not the kind of thing when you write off to composers and they come back in a couple of years with a fully finished piece. There are lots of workshops as a vital part of the process.'

Artistic director of Mahogany Opera Group is Jenni Wake-Walker's son Freddie, a rising star in the world of opera directing with recent credits at Glyndebourne, the Royal Opera and Bregenz Festival. 'I didn't force him into it,' she says. 'He took part in Jubilee Opera as a little boy and sang in a lot of Britten operas when he was young.'

With her long innings running Jubilee Opera, Jenni Wake-Walker has come a strong conviction of just why this work is important. 'Children are absolutely wonderful to work with,' she says. 'We owe it to them to open doors into this world, because it does so much for them, helping them to build their own character and confidence. Children are so open and honest and enthusiastic, and they don't bring a lot of baggage with them. It is very moving when you see children at the end of a run doing the final show – the utter commitment and enthusiasm and the sparkle it brings to their lives.' 🎭

▼ Preparing for the spotlight: behind the scenes at *The Fizz*, W11's 2013 commission

