



## **Commissioning Brief for Composers & Librettists Updated June 2018**

### **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 which is relevant to their age group. Commissioning new works began in 1972 and, to date, over 38 operas have been commissioned, thereby creating a new repertoire available to other opera and music theatre groups working with young people.

The Administrator, Rehearsal Room Manager and Production Team, including the orchestra, are all professionals engaged for the period. The Trustees, and voluntary management are made up of a core team of parents.

Productions are rehearsed at St James's Church, St James's Gardens, London W11 and for many years this was also the performance venue. In 2001 W11 Opera was invited to perform its new work at the Linbury Studio Theatre at the Royal Opera House. From 2003 to 2007 performances took place at the Britten Studio at the Royal College of Music. From 2008 to 2012 W11 Opera performed at Riverside Studio, but since 2013 we have performed at POSK in Hammersmith.

The company comprises only young people aged 9-18 years. 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 piece of music theatre each year for a largely family audience acknowledging - yet not restricted by - the need for accessibility.

## 1. GENERAL

1.1 The cast numbers approximately 80 members, aged between 9-17 years. There are usually around twelve 14-17 year olds. The majority of the cast are aged between 10-13 years.

1.2 There are usually around ten boys with unbroken voices. Often two or three boys with broken voices.

1.3 There are often some cast members with good movement skills.

1.4 The Commissioning Team meet to review examples of a writing teams' past work, submitted for consideration (with scores and recordings) to the Composer & Librettist Liaison (currently Susan Moore contactable at [commissions@w11opera.org](mailto:commissions@w11opera.org)). Writing teams are then asked to pitch a plot for the consideration of the committee. The Commissioning Team will then make their recommendation to the Trustees. Copyright in all submissions to W11 Opera remains with the Composer and Librettist

1.5 The Trustees, via the Chair and Treasurer of W11 Opera, negotiate the contractual arrangements once an invitation to write for the company has been made. The Composer & Librettist are contracted as a team with the fee split 60% (Composer) and 40% (Librettist). The total fee will be in the region of £8000 including VAT subject to experience.

1.6 Ongoing consultation with representatives of W11 Opera, including the Stage Director and Musical Director, is anticipated in the development of the plot, libretto, music and structure. As we now support vocal performances with amplification, the writing team will need to ensure that the number of solo roles per scene do not outnumber mics available and that a minimum of two scenes is allocated for mic swaps between cast members.

## 2. MUSIC

2.1 The opera should be musically exciting and should provide some challenges for the cast. The piece should be, for the most part, original music rather than a pastiche of recognisable musical styles and conventions. However pastiche would be acceptable where it is appropriate to the 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 for which one may be suitable as a principal.

2.5 Vocal ranges for soloists should be E (bottom of the staff) to E (top of the staff) dropping to but not sitting around middle C. One soprano principal may have an extension up to top G.

2.6 Vocal range for the chorus can be wider. Middle C to top G, extending, with discretion, to a bottom A/top A.

2.7 Sustained passage work in the high tessitura (D to G/A) is best avoided unless required for dramatic effect.

2.8 Duos, trios, unisons writing and part writing are all desirable. Two to three parts are manageable, preferably split into character groups, and preferably linear contrapuntal writing, but harmonic/chordal vocabulary is also welcome.

2.9 The opera should use recitative and spoken dialogue should be kept to a minimum.

2.10 Orchestration should be light and typically a maximum of six players, with the options of doubling/tripling and using a keyboard to keep continuity from the rehearsal room to the performer space and to enhance the texture and colour. Occasionally additional players may be considered. Percussion requirements and specialist instruments may be subject to space and budget and should therefore be discussed with the Musical Director and Stage Director at the beginning of the contract. Powerful instruments in the same tessitura as the children's voices should be avoided.

2.11 Orchestral players are professional musicians fixed on a production by production basis. The parts can be challenging, providing that the musical pulse is clearly defined for singers to follow and not too flexible, excluding unaccompanied moments.

2.12 There is no orchestra pit and therefore the orchestra cannot be located downstage, and is therefore either located upstage or in some other position where there is likely no direct sight line to the conductor necessitating the use of monitors for the orchestra. Vocal performances are sound enhanced with downstage mics for chorus/one line solos and head mics for soloists.

### **3. DRAMA**

3.1 The storyline should be pitched at fifteen to sixteen 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 fairytales, biblical subjects and Greek mythology as source material. More recently environmental, science fiction, historical events 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 RECENT PRODUCTIONS (including recordings).

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

4.1 Set pieces involving movement/dance appropriate to the plot (but not of excessive length) are welcomed but for groups rather than soloists.

4.2 General stage movement is in the hands of the Stage Director and the Choreographer.

### **5. STRUCTURE**

5.1 Running time should be one hour with no interval. Minimum 55 minutes, Maximum 1 hr 5 minutes.

5.2 Scene change music should be kept to a minimum, driving forward the pace of the production.

5.3 The opera should be dramatically exciting for all of the cast and should be mediated by the groups as well as by the protagonists.

#### **5.4 Character List:**

1) 8-12 Principals. These should be of varying degrees of prominence and levels of exposure musically and dramatically.

2) 4-8 Sub-Principals/Character Roles. These can be smaller roles that appear throughout the piece or one-scene vignettes.

3) 4-6 clearly defined Chorus Groups of approximately 9-15 voices, preferably with their own character and a role that is integral to the dramatic development of the plot. One line solos for members of these groups are highly desirable.

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 chorus scenes opening, in the middle and at the end of the piece are quite acceptable.

## **6. AUDITIONS & REHEARSALS**

6.1 Audition registration, via the W11 Opera website, begins in the summer prior to auditions, which take place at the beginning of September. Up to forty schools are represented in our cast.

6.2 Music rehearsals take place every Monday until and including autumn half-term.

Production rehearsals begin the week following half term Monday 4.30-7.15pm (Full Cast), Tuesday 4.30-7.15pm (Smaller Scene), Sunday 2.30-6pm (Full Cast). In the last week of rehearsals, prior to Production Week, rehearsals run until 7.30pm with a final rehearsal room run on the Friday and the Sitzprobe on the Saturday.

6.3 Music rehearsals are split into two groups - chorus rehearsals with the MD and Director, solo sessions with the Assistant Director/Vocal Coach and the Assistant MD. Production rehearsals are also split into two groups - production rehearsals with the Director/MD and Movement/Dance rehearsals with Choreographer/Assistant MD. From time to time additional music/drama solo/ small group coaching may be needed with the Assistant Director/Vocal Coach and Assistant MD.

6.4 To best manage the rehearsal space and ensure all cast are integrated into the company the children are split into groups, mostly according to casting, and each group is overseen by a 'Group Parent'.

## **7. TIMETABLE**

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

- 1) March in the year prior to production - INITIAL PLOT PITCH/TREATMENT
- 2) June in the year prior to production - FULL STORYLINE, CHARACTER LIST
- 3) September in the year prior to production - LIBRETTO
- 4) January in the year of production - VOCAL SCORE & ORCHESTRA LIST
- 5) February in the year of production - SING-THROUGH
- 6) April in the year of production - FULL SCORE/ORCHESTRAL PARTS