



# A Parent's Guide to Creating Original Opera

Dwight-Englewood School





Dear Parents:

On behalf of the Dwight-Englewood School Fifth Grade Opera Program, welcome! Since 1986, the School has produced an original opera each and every year, and it has been my privilege to run the program. Students of all ages (and D-E alumni who graduated years ago) repeatedly tell me what an incredibly memorable experience it was to be involved in our Opera Program. I look forward to having an equally positive experience with your child!

This Guide is intended to help you, as a parent, understand the details of this yearlong process, and its importance in the curriculum and in your child's education. The Creating Original Opera course is most successful in those schools where there is cooperation and support among students, teachers, administrators and parents. If at any point in the coming year you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Being a part of the Creating Original Opera program is a once in a lifetime opportunity. There is no way to truly measure the lifelong skills that students learn as a result of their participation. With your support, this could be the best year ever!

Sincerely,

Mary Heveran





## 1. THE HISTORY OF THE ORIGINAL OPERA PROGRAM

In 1976 Jo Ann Forman and Bruce Taylor developed a program to help children learn to appreciate how an opera is created from inception to completion, and to become familiar with all of the components necessary to do so.

By going into elementary schools and working with students on a year long process that culminated in a final production, Ms. Forman and Mr. Taylor were able to teach students how to write, design, document and produce an original opera. Although the culminating event is more like a musical than an opera, the program was intended to help students understand and appreciate opera as an art form.

In the early 1980's Forman and Taylor's program was presented to the Metropolitan Opera Education Department. As a result, Forman and Taylor went into New York City schools to work with the teachers and students as part of a yearlong residency program. The Creating Original Opera concept was so well received, that the two teachers were in very high demand. So, the Met decided that there needed to be a teacher- training program for educators who wanted to make this process part of their curriculum. In 1985, I was chosen to participate in the program.

Since then, the teacher training program has continued to spread throughout the country and Europe. In 1991 The Metropolitan Opera partnered with the Royal Opera House in London to begin a similar program. I was honored to be chosen as only one of four teachers in the United States to be asked to participate in this exchange program.

Students all over the world have been involved with the Creating Original Opera program. Children in public, private, suburban, urban, and inner city schools, and from kindergarten through 8th grade, have experienced this outstanding program. Together with their teachers, they have worked on this process and experienced some of the most memorable moments in their educational life.

## 2. THE PROCESS

By forming their own opera company, students realize the importance of teamwork and their own responsibility in the learning process. Learning becomes meaningful and purposeful because we place children in situations in which they are motivated to take responsibility for their own learning.



This process requires students to make use of knowledge and concepts from other curriculum areas such as social studies, science, physical education, math, language arts, computer science, visual art and music. They also apply analytical skills in the process of creating and mounting the production.

In the course of this process, each participant must analyze his or her task, execute



it, and evaluate the results. The students' conception of learning is altered: Learning means something; it is useful. By forming their own opera company, the students take ownership of their project. This challenge pushes them to use and extend their potential in order to make it a success.

In addition to the development of skills essential for individual achievement and self-esteem, this project reinforces the value of cooperative effort. As the students engage in group decision-making and problem-solving with other members of the class, they begin to develop the communicative and interactive skills necessary to carry out various tasks.

*“I learned  
that you need  
to always plan  
ahead”*

-Sofia C.

### **3. PRODUCTION JOBS**

An opera company is comprised of writers, composers, set designers, carpenters, electricians, costume and make-up designers, public relations directors, historians, performers, stage managers, and a production manager. (The objectives and learning outcomes of each of these jobs are described in Chapter Four).

At the beginning of the semester, each student will apply for a job. The job application has two parts; the first part is designed to allow the applicant to demonstrate effort and desire for the position; the second part involves independent work, which is taken home and turned in at the next class. Here are some of the qualifications needed for the various jobs:

WRITER .....	Imaginative; enjoys writing; does not need to have good writing mechanics
COMPOSER.....	Imaginative; some knowledge of music notation and instruments
SET DESIGNER.....	Imaginative; enjoys designing but does not necessarily have to draw well
CARPENTER.....	Neat and precise; follows directions; works well independently
COSTUME AND MAKEUP DESIGNERS....	Imaginative; enjoys designing but does not have to draw; is resourceful; well organized; can work quickly and efficiently
PUBLIC RELATIONS .....	Articulate; outgoing; relates well to adults; some artistic ability
HISTORIAN.....	Self motivated; self-reliant; well organized
ELECTRICIAN.....	Imaginative; follows directions precisely
PERFORMER.....	Active imagination; enjoys acting, moving, and singing
STAGE MANAGER.....	Self-starter; responsible; calm under pressure; has respect of performers; well organized; self-assured
PRODUCTION MANAGER.....	Self-starter; has respect of peers; relates well to adults; well organized; self-assured

In choosing students for a particular job, teachers are looking not only for a student who is highly motivated to apply for that job, but also one who as a result of working in that job will have a better understanding of his or her own potential. All members of the opera company should be able to work both on their own and with others-without a great deal of adult supervision.



*“I learned that  
no matter what  
happens, trust  
each other”*

-David S.

Each student “gets what they need” out of this year long process. It is not always the child with the best voice that gets the solo, or the best artist that gets to design the set. It is our hope that each student will grow and develop way beyond what they feel they are able to do. The skills learned in this course are lifelong skills.

Your child may want to apply for a job that is different from the one you'd like him or her to consider. And although you may want to make suggestions to your child, the decision should ultimately be his or her own. It is important that you realize that this is the job the student will be working on all year.

Once a student has completed the application process and has had an interview, the individual jobs will be announced.

#### **4. FINDING OUT WHAT YOUR CHILD'S JOB IS**

All parents want to see their child happy and successful. As adults, we realize that we do not always get what we want, and that part of life is learning to accept disappointment. Regardless of whether your child has been given the job he or she most wanted, or has been given a job that was not his or her first choice, you need to remember to be supportive and excited for your child and the experience upon which he or she is about to embark.

If your child comes home the day that the jobs are announced and is disappointed or does not understand why he or she did not get the desired job, here are some suggestions as to how you can help your child handle the situation:

- Explain to your child that he or she was given the job that the teachers feel is the one from which he or she will learn the most.
- Remind your child that he or she did a great job during the application process, and that you are very proud.
- Your child needs to know that there were many reasons why he or she was not assigned a particular job, and that as work on the opera continues, he or she will find out just how right the teachers were then they assigned the jobs.
- Remind the child that the jobs have only been announced, and he or she won't be able to fully appreciate what goes into each job until he or she begins working with the teacher and the other students.
- Explain to your child that a big part of life is learning to deal with disappointment, and that this will be a good opportunity to learn that lesson.
- Encourage your child to speak to one of the teachers to get a better understanding of what the job will entail.
- And as a parent, please feel free to contact any of the teachers if you wish to share your concerns.

## 5. THE PRODUCTION COMPANY

In the way in which each child is unique, a production company has its own identity as well. Once students have been assigned their jobs, the company begins the process of creating an original work. First, the students need to decide on a name for their production company. The company name changes from year to year and it is only used for that company. Students choose the company name by making suggestions and then voting on a name that best reflects who they are as a group.

Previous opera company names have included - Stairway to Imagination, Exiting Opera Company, The Opera Company that Could, D-E Lightful Opera Company, and Opera's Most Wanted.

Once the company has brainstormed about the themes of their opera, the writers begin their work to develop characters, the motivation for each character's behavior, conflicts, and an outline for the plot. Also at that point in the process, students will be taught the skills necessary to be successful in their particular jobs. Students will be assigned job-related activities and homework, and will also be asked to write journal entries. Teachers will consider all of this work when writing students' progress reports in January and June.

Here is a brief description of what each job entails and the type of work students will be doing:

**Writers:** Develop characters, conflicts, scenario, the placement of the musical moments, a narrative, lyrics, and dialogue.

**Set Design:** Develop ideas for a set; create a two -dimensional sketch or drawing of the set design; learn about color, shape, texture, stagecraft terminology, gridding, and scaling.

**Carpenters:** Construct scale models; use tools to build flats; paint scenery; measure out the performance space; work on scene changes; move scenery during the performance

**Composers:** Generate musical materials in concert with writers; become familiar with the basic elements of music; develop musical moments to be sung by an ensemble, as a solo, or as a duet; orchestrate the musical moments with appropriate instruments.

**Electricians:** Learn about the components of electricity; find the circuit panel/breaker panel for the performance space; construct footlights using tin cans, electrical wire, light- bulb receptacle bases, and wood; construct a dimmer and dimmer board; decide on placement of lighting equipment; practice lighting cues; execute lighting cues during performance following stage manager's instructions.

**Costume and Make-up Designers:** Coordinate all costuming and make-up components; make use of clothing and other materials to reflect and enhance

*"I learned  
what it takes  
to be a leader"*

-Taylor K.





specific qualities of characters; realize that the most important reason for stage make-up is to enable the audience to see the performer's face and understand the character; learn that make-up brings out or emphasizes the eyes, cheeks, mouth, nose, and hair.

**Public Relations:** Communicate information about the opera through various communications media such as flyers, press releases, posters, programs, and school website; design a logo that will reflect the company; use oral communication skills and basic etiquette when dealing with the public and in person.

**Historians/Documentation Team:** Increase awareness of the process and its importance in a company geared to a specific goal; learn the basics of exhibit design and layout; learn the basic elements of a successful interview; learn the basics of photography.

**Performers:** Understand the character he or she is portraying; work as part of an ensemble; stay in character dramatically and musically throughout the performance.

**Stage Manager:** Maintains callboard; supervises performers; manages rehearsals; notes blocking; supervises peers; calls cues including electric cues.

**Assistant Stage Manager:** Obtains props for the production; maintains a prompt book; makes sure that stage area is clean; makes sure that all props are pre-set correctly for rehearsals and performances.

**Production Manager:** Acts as liaison between the opera company and the school faculty and staff; locates and maintains resources; is familiar with, and works with all members of the production staff; supervises the entire production staff.

## **6. WORKING WITH THE PROFESSIONALS**

Between the months of November and February, students will be given opportunities to meet and learn from adults who work in areas related to the various jobs of the opera company, including professionals in the fields of writing, composing, designing, lighting, technology, photography, public relations and performing.

Participants in prior years have included a composer, an actor, a Broadway lighting

designer, a musician who has been in the orchestra for “The Lion King”, a public relations director for a television station, an opera singer, and a writer for a Disney film. Some of the participants are friends and family members of the opera company, some are members of the faculty, and some are Dwight Englewood Alumni. By working with these professionals, students realize that the individual jobs they hold in the opera company can also someday be career options.

## 7. CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

In addition to making use of knowledge and concepts from the traditional curriculum areas including language arts, social studies, math, and science, the Creating Original Opera program reinforces skills that have been taught throughout a child’s educational experience at Dwight-Englewood. Some of these skills include:

Decision making; concentration; reading and following directions; responsibility; group decision; respect for rules and regulations; analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, deductive reasoning, vocabulary, oral communication, investigating literature, investigating poetry, compromise, respect for individual differences, rhythm, sound, non-verbal expression, money management, budgeting, ratio, proportion, measuring, graphing, geometry, addition, subtraction, positive and negative numbers, scale, decimals, reflected and refracted light, developing an idea, carrying out a complex sequence of steps, problem solving, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, editing, communicating ideas verbally, communicating ideas visually, working independently, working cooperatively, memorization, appropriate judgement, turning something abstract into something concrete, appreciating different cultures, translating the written word to visual expression, research skills, note taking, cause and effect, enunciation, articulation, diction, proper breathing, coping with stress and self-esteem.

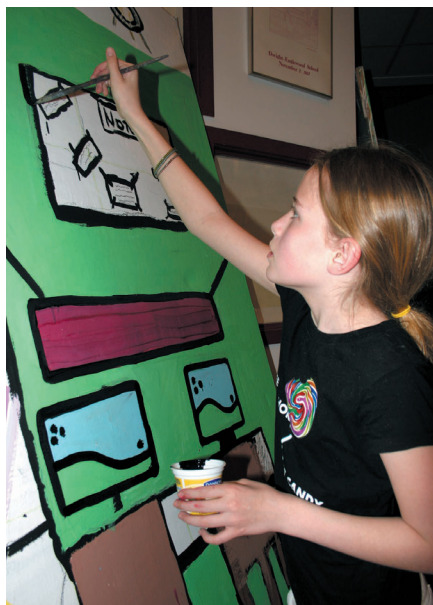
“The whole is larger than the sum of its parts”

*“I learned that it is important to be open to other people’s ideas”*

—Adrianna R.

## 8. THE PRODUCT

After working together for an entire school year, the students are ready to present their work. The morning performance is for the Lower School students, faculty and staff, as well as the current sixth grade. (the previous year’s opera company). The evening performance is for the family and friends of the opera company. This is a very exciting time for the students. It is the moment that they see the fruits of their labor, and realize that what started out as a blank piece of paper is now a three -act original work...with dialogue, music, scenery, costumes, make-up, lighting, singing, props, programs, an exhibit of the year long process, presented by the students themselves, and will leave them with pride and accomplishment for a job well done. Exit interviews are also conducted with each of the students to get their first-hand impressions. Statements provided in these interviews are provided throughout this Guide.



# BRAVO!

## STUDENT TESTIMONIALS

"I learned about teamwork" -Kristina D.

"Work hard and be creative" -Chris A.

"Stay on task and focused on your work" -Andoni T.

"Be yourself, have a positive attitude and stay open minded" -Tyler F.

"I learned how to accept disappointment" -Kristina B.

"Keep your cool and be respectful of everyone" -Hartej. S.

"Move on, even if something goes wrong" -David S.

"I learned how important it is to be patient" -Sophia K.

"Everything does not always have to be perfect" -Ali D.

"I learned that all jobs are important in their own way" -Kendall S.

"I learned how to use a saw and make lights from scratch"! -Andrew C.

"I learned how to make a flat and a jack" -Nicole K

"I learned how to take constructive criticism -Catherine D.

"Take a risk" -Noah R.

"I learned how to stay in character even when you are not talking" -Michael M.

"I learned how to use a camera and take photographs" -Jean L.

"Help each other in hard situations" -Katerina K.

"Never stop trying" -Guy B.

"I learned to work well with people I did not really get along with" -Tanner C.

"I learned how to create music to go with lyrics" -Vanessa P.

"Always do your best to solve a problem" -Bailey O.



315 E. Palisade Ave., Englewood NJ 07631  
201.569.9500 • [www.d-e.org](http://www.d-e.org)

