

Children's opera: **who is it really for?**



Britten's opera for children, Noye's Fludde, in Wes Anderson's Moonlight Kingdom

If you asked me why there's so much opera for children going on at the moment, I would honestly have to say I don't know. Usually, in the costly world I work in, it's a good idea to take the *All The President's Men* lead and 'follow the money' – so, my guess is that there's gold in them thar hills. Sorry, that sounds cynical. I'm sure the intention of getting young people into opera is absolutely sincere - and indeed it is praise-worthy – but I'll bet there's a tasty chunk of extra funding for it too.



***Magic Flutes* – like young noses – should be picked carefully**

Does putting on so-called 'children's opera' encourage them to stick with the tricky genre as they become adults? Difficult to say, but there's probably no harm in trying; though I don't understand the logic whereby a performance which is a bit of a trial for adults (I'm remembering a particularly third-rate *Magic Flute* I saw a couple of years ago) is supposed to be good enough for children. [Festival goes in Edinburgh, on the other hand, should book the whole family in to see Barrie Kosky and 1927's production, because it's quite brilliant \(/uk/features/interviews/artist-interviews/suzanne-andrade-artistic-director-of-1927-cabaret-opera-company\).](#) Otherwise, *Magic Flutes* – like young noses – should be picked carefully.



Barrie Kosky/1927's The Magic Flute is at Edinburgh International Festival from 27-30 August 2015
(<http://www.eif.co.uk/2015/magicflute#.VZp1ePIVhHw>)

Some of the current crop of youth-friendly operas have a lot of kids in them. But I tend to be rather dubious about the idea that an opera with lots of children in it is more likely to appeal to kids than one without. Even as a child, the bits I always found least interesting in any form of entertainment were the bits with kids in, and that includes *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*. That hasn't changed as I've (supposedly) grown up. Much as I adore Britten's music, there's too often the *de rigueur* bit where some kids sing and I want it to be over as soon as possible; the chorus of midshipmen in *Billy Budd* being a cringe-worthy case in point.

The main benefit of a child-heavy cast is selling at least two tickets per child

I don't ever remember taking my own children – now in their 20s and still partial to a bit of opera – to a children's opera. They came to a few rehearsals and saw their dad doing all the usual things, like prancing around and being stabbed in the neck ('and that, my little sausages, is what pays the mortgage...').

We also once saw a production of *Carmen* in Cologne that was pure *regietheater* and they didn't bat an eyelid. I don't think they became particularly interested when the children's chorus appeared (if anything, my adolescent son was more focused on the Carmen's cleavage, my teenage daughter, a handsome dancer with good legs). From a promoter's point of view, the main benefit of a child-heavy cast is the guarantee that you'll sell at least two tickets for every child in the show – a lot more if the grandparents come too.

It's time to call a moratorium on any more *Alice in Wonderland*s

This isn't to say there aren't some brilliant 'children's operas' out there – Oliver Knussen's *Where The Wild Things Are* and *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* being as outstanding as they are musically uncompromising – unlike some of Britten's (*Let's Make An Opera*, for instance), which can be rather twee. *Alice in Wonderland* has now had so many operatic versions that I wonder if it's time to call a moratorium on any more for the next ten years. I'm not even sure it's a children's piece, as so much of it is baffling. I've sung in two versions and I'd struggle to explain the plot of either.

No, I'd say the winning formula for converting children to opera is to make sure it's properly done, to the very highest standard. Do it well and they'll get it. Don't do something with a trombone, a cello and a clown and expect it to produce masses of converts to classical music. It was a child, after all, who pointed at the Emperor and announced loudly that he was wearing no clothes.

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