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Opera, improvisation and empowerment: a creative and pedagogical methodology

Create An Opera! is a fortnightly devising workshop led by the author at Theatre Delicatessen Studios in London. It is free to the general public and has attracted participants including both experienced and inexperienced performance practitioners. It aims to create a safe, inclusive environment for experimentation in writing, composition and collaborative performance. This initiative arose from the author's interest in challenging the socio-political traditions and hierarchical infrastructures associated with opera production. At the workshops, participants are involved in both creative and performance aspects, working individually and collaboratively.

Improvisation plays several important roles in the workshop. It establishes the group collaboration, assists in developing performance skills, provides a tool for generating text and musical material, and leads to the creation of 'instant' improvised group pieces.

This article presents the pedagogical and creative methodologies informing the delivery of the workshops, focusing on improvisation's role in facilitating inclusion, collaboration and independent creativity.

Keywords: pedagogy; collaborative practice; devising; opera; music education

Introduction

Create An Opera! is a series of devising workshops taking place at Theatre Delicatessen's facility Deli Studios near Liverpool Street since October 2017. The workshop activities were designed to empower participants to engage with creative practice through developing skills in movement, voice and writing as well as collaboration and improvisation. This article explores the pedagogical methodology guiding the planning and delivery of these workshops over the course of their first nine months as a reflection of the vast potential of collaborative, de-centralised practice in performance training and creation. Improvisation plays an essential role within this methodology, enabling experiential learning through collaboration.

Opera sits at a fascinating conjunction of disciplines including acting, storytelling, movement, composition, vocalisation and visual art. Unfortunately, it is often associated

with a hierarchical, centralised structure including: the authority of the single composer, writer, director or conductor, the cultural specialisation of the trained singer, or the economic model of the production house and its patrons. Though opera might be considered by some as an elitist art form [1], there is an increasing number of initiatives attempting to create or produce opera in a more inclusive way. Examples include: Streetwise Opera, which works with people who are or have been homeless; Opera Schmopera working with young people to create new opera; Kameroperahuis in the Netherlands which engages with local communities; RESEO - a European network looking into widening access to opera and dance; composer Jonathan Dove's community operas; and the community engagement and educational schemes of the large opera houses such as Royal Opera House, English National Opera and Opera North [2].

The *Create An Opera!* workshop series similarly aims to challenge traditional notions of opera-making, breaking boundaries of single roles, economic status, cultural capital, aesthetic conventions and institutional frameworks. It is influenced by a range of practices including devised theatre, community music [3], community performance [4], participatory art and free improvisation without really strictly belonging within the definition of any single one.

The workshops are open to members of the general public on a bi-weekly basis. They are advertised through a range of online social and professional platforms and have attracted participants from a range of backgrounds and experiences: professional actors, theatre creators, educators in the field of performance and creative writing, poets, sound artists, visual artists, vocalists from a variety of musical traditions and composers. Some participants had very little previous experience in performance or other creative practices, and were drawn to the workshops by their curiosity or love for opera. Participants were from a range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the multi-cultural character of London. All participants were adults, with a wide age range from early twenties to seventies. Most participants were female, though there was a presence of male participants at all the workshops. The number of participants per workshop fluctuated between 5-20, with an average of 10. Most workshops included a mix of regular and drop-in participants. Over time, a group of eight regular participants developed their creative work in a consistent way, resulting in a sharing of work in progress with family and friends.

Pedagogical methodology

The design of the workshop activities aimed to encourage inclusion and de-centralised creative practice and learning, following several pedagogical principles:

- **Inclusion** The workshops were offered free of charge, and were open to all levels of experience and backgrounds. A wide variety of activities ensured everyone had a chance to step outside of their specific comfort zones, and provided open-ended opportunities for exploration suitable for any level.
- **Devising and collaborative practice** The workshops were informed by the collaborative creative practice known as ‘devising’. This methodology emerged in a range of theatre practices throughout the twentieth century and particularly in its second half, with links to a range of fields including political activism, community theatre and physical theatre. Companies and practitioners include: SITI Company, The Wooster Group, Complicité, Robert Lepage and Frantic Assembly. Devising companies often challenge the centralised tradition of the single-creator, relying on an intensive collaborative process involving the whole ensemble and production team. Bicat and Baldwin’s definition of ‘devising’ emphasises the creative process in devised work taking place without the common knowledge of a pre-existing script, thereby opening up the opportunity for unexpected discoveries during rehearsal time (7). Even though usually professional opera productions are often created with a pre-existing score, some attempts have been made to include devising methods in more recent productions. One such case is Efthymiou’s opera *Myisi* (see Efthymiou 2016). In this production, Efthymiou included collaboration throughout the various phases of the production, including exploration of relevant themes, creation of the score and libretto, stage design and video projections. However, in the last phase she took on the role of director of the project making overall decisions about the shape of the piece. As she points out, there is no fixed methodology within devising, and each production will discover what is relevant to its creative process.

Heddon and Milling (2004, 4-5) suggest ‘devising’ can have a wider range of characteristics than those suggested by Bicat and Baldwin:

Devising is variously: a social expression of non-hierarchical possibilities; a model of cooperative and non-hierarchical collaboration; an ensemble; a collective; a practical expression of political and ideological commitment; a means of taking control of work and operating autonomously; a de-commodification of art; a commitment to total community; a commitment to total art; the negating of the gap between art and life; the erasure of the gap between spectator and performer; a distrust of words; the embodiment of the death of the author; a means to reflect contemporary social reality; a means to incite social change; an escape from theatrical conventions; a challenge for theatre makers; a challenge for spectators; an expressive, creative language; innovative; risky; inventive; spontaneous; experimental; non-literary.

The collaborative, non-hierarchical, experimental, challenging and occasionally socio-political aspects of devising all informed the *Create An Opera!* workshops.

- **Empowerment via holistic training** The workshop is a training for participants to develop a set of skills that encompasses the whole creative trajectory in order to empower them to develop their own work.
- **Experiential learning** According to Beard (2010, 19-20), though experiential learning has had various definitions, it is usually agreed to be a method of learning that is active rather than didactic and passive, related to doing, reflecting and applying what is learned in generating new ideas. This active engagement ideally includes a balance of the physical, sensorial, emotional, cognitive, bodily and the inner psyche. Learners and teachers are all involved in a feedback loop that includes evaluation and reflection.
- **Embodied learning.** Experiential learning at the workshops was through embodied practice. Borgo (2012, 204) states that:

[E]mbodied views of cognition share a core belief that bodily experiential knowledge is the foundation upon which all new knowledge is built. More precisely, this view holds that human motor, sensory and conceptual processes have co-evolved with each

other and with their environment such that they are inextricably linked.

The importance of embodied experience is famously explored in the music pedagogy of Dalcroze (see Borgo 2012) as well as in theatre workshops and rehearsal practice (Spolin [1963] 2015, 412; Marshall 2008). At the workshops, physical exercises encouraged creative improvisation in movement and voice, which in turn stimulated creative work with text.

- **The group as a resource.** According to Hahlo and Reynolds (2000, xii) ‘a workshop should promote collective learning, where a group of people spend time together using certain materials and, more importantly, each other as resources to explore ideas through interaction’. Neelands (2009) discusses the value of ‘ensemble building’ in professional as well as educational settings, advocating the notion that within ensemble-based drama, there is an opportunity for a group to be self-organising and connect the social and artistic aspects of its individuals’ lives. In the case of the *Create An Opera!* workshop series, activities are designed to encourage the participants to learn from others who have a different background or experience and provide an opportunity to experiment, collaborate and play, as well as develop a sense of community.
- **Improvisation as a tool for creation** All of the workshop activities include an element of improvisation. As well as being a highly useful performance skill, improvisation also supports experiential learning through the act of creating and decision-making in the moment. It is also valuable in unblocking the creative writing process.
- **Flexible, adjustable in the moment.** Workshop activities were adjusted and reshaped on the spot according to the circumstances of the day or the moment including: the mix of participants and their mood or state of mind, the space, the season and time of day. An open mind and need for flexibility is known to be crucial for workshop leaders (Hahlo and Reynolds 2000, xxiii), who need to draw on quick, intuitive choices based on their past experience (McMillan 2015, 84-86).

Workshop activities

The workshops were split into two parts. The first part included warm-ups, movement

training, vocal exploration and group improvisation. The second part focused on creative practice around a theme or narrative and included creative writing, exploration of melody, songwriting and structured improvisation. All of the sessions ended with a sharing of materials created by the participants.

Warm-up sessions are known to be an essential part of performance workshops and rehearsals (McMillan 2015, 84-85; Hahlo and Reynolds 2000, 7-9). Warm-ups started with a relatively easy task involving movement in the space. Specific instructions encouraged the participants to relax tensions in the body, connect movement with the breath and find mobility in the spine. They were then encouraged to interact with the space as well as other participants via eye contact, gestural communication or response to light touch. This helped create connection and trust within the group, enabling subsequent experimentation, playfulness and collaboration.

The session subsequently progressed into a more structured framework. With the intention of connecting embodied practice and the composition of materials, I adopted the Viewpoints system (Bogart and Landau 2014, 35-54). Starting with a simple action such as walking, elements were introduced and layered: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, spatial relationships, topography (the group's arrangement according to a 'floor plan' such as a circle or a line), shapes (the arrangement of one's body form and its connection with the shapes created by others), gesture, and architecture (working with the attributes of the space). As the exercise progressed, participants were encouraged to continue considering and overlaying the elements introduced previously. As workshop leader, I observed the group and encouraged them to explore all possible options within these compositional elements. In this way, participants became aware of the 'toolbox' or palette of options at their disposal and how they could use it in coordination with the rest of the group.

While still engaged in movement, the participants were then encouraged to explore the sound of their voice, considering dynamics, pitch, timbre, melodic contour and texture. No words or text were used during this vocal experimentation.

Enthused by this exploration, the ensemble was sometimes tempted to overproduce movement and sound, leading to lack of overall clarity. In order to address this, listening exercises were introduced in the form of Pauline Oliveros's Deep Listening meditations such as *The New Sound Meditation* (2005, 44) and *Sound Fishes* (2005, 50) Both exercises focus on listening as a crucial part of performance with sound.

At this point I would introduce the theme of the day (e.g. ‘community’, ‘animal welfare’, ‘political activism and resistance’). The participants were asked to choose five words relating to the theme, with a focus on the variety of sounds they contained. An open movement and sound improvisation ensued, in which the sound components of the words were explored and developed, leading up to the use of whole words. The use of phonemes and the connection between sound and semantic content were inspired by the work of Trevor Wishart (1996, 240-298)

Vocal warm-ups were led by me or by experienced vocalist and vocal coach Elise Lorraine, a member of the group who generously offered to share her skills. The aim of the warm-ups was to activate the voice through relaxation, use of the whole body, the use of breath support, opening of the vocal tract and resonating cavities. Vocal warm-ups always concluded with a group vocalisation, in the form of guided improvisation or singing a round.

The second part of the workshops was focused on devising and creative activities, including the creation of lyrics and melody, dialogues or narrative. My main role was to stimulate the creation of materials, guiding and pacing the writing sessions, and then providing feedback on the materials created.

Visual stimulus proved to be highly useful for the creation of music and text, guiding the exploration of narrative context as well as musical material. Referring to works of art or archive photos, participants were asked to imagine themselves as a character within the image and, guided by a series of questions paced to short time intervals, continuously wrote text from the point of view of the character. The text created was then edited and revised by the participants and used as a basis for a song or an aria. Visual stimulus was also used to consider musical elements. During the sessions focusing on melody, I encouraged participants to draw a line representing emotional intensity of a text they had written or a poem they had brought in. This then informed a process of composing a sung melody through repeated individual improvisation. Graphic scores were also created by the participants and used to inspire group ‘choir’ improvisations.

At several sessions, socio-political themes such as gentrification of the city or the history of the Occupy London protest movement were chosen as inspiration for creating site-sensitive narratives. Inspired by the psychophysical approach to acting developed by Stanislavski (Merlin 2007, 21-25, Stanislavski 2017 [original 1938], and Michael Chekhov 1953, 1-20 and 61-84), which emphasises the connection between the body

and psyche, I encouraged work with archive photos. Inspired by improvisation based on the physicality of the persons in the photos, the participants created character and text.

Recordings of existing songs and opera fragments were often introduced and discussed. Encompassing a range of musical genres, examples were chosen according to the thematic context of the session. Group discussion of the examples allowed for shared active reflection on writing lyrics, and the connection between musical elements and text.

Every workshop ended with a sharing of materials created: reading a text, singing the beginning of an aria or performing a small group improvisation around a narrative. This enabled the participants to receive positive encouragement from the group and sense that some tangible result had been achieved. It was also an opportunity to consider the presence of an audience as an essential part of performance practice.

Improvisation

A large part of the workshop activities was based on improvisation tasks that encompassed various disciplines: movement, sound, acting and text-writing.

Improvisation played four distinct roles:

- **Establishing an ensemble feel:** Improvisation was used in the warm-ups, as well as group exercises and was essential in creating an atmosphere of trust and playfulness. Guided improvisation exercises enabled the participants to get to know each other through collaboration and also provided a chance for peer learning through imitation, adaptation, dialogue and experimentation.
- **Developing performance skills** such as: listening, kinesthetic response, vocalisation and creation of musical structures. This was particularly the case in the Viewpoints exercises, which provided the opportunity to make conscious choices with an awareness of the full range of possible sound and movement.
- **Creation of structured improvisation pieces:** With the awareness of physical and sound materials and how they could be applied to a narrative context, participants were able to create structured improvised pieces.
- **Generating text and musical material that is subsequently integrated into arias and duets.** Improvisation was also used as a method for creating text and composing music. Writing exercises encouraged an uninterrupted, live flow of text providing material to edit and reshape into lyrics. Physical acting

improvisations and dialogues also inspired the writing, by encouraging thinking from within a character.

Overall, improvisation provided a useful method for participants to access the process of creation quickly in a non-judgmental way and unblock the procrastination that can sometimes be a hindrance to creativity.

Peer learning and de-centralised pedagogy

I was keen to encourage non-hierarchical learning, where my role as ‘facilitator’ was to provide instruction and feedback as a framework for collaborative learning and creation. The points of de-centralised learning included peer learning through:

- **Group improvisation** in movement, sound, acting and writing, allowing participants to learn from and be inspired directly by each other’s actions.
- **Peer feedback** For some improvisation tasks, the participants were split into smaller groups performing to each other in turn, with the observing group providing encouragement as well as constructive feedback. Participants also gave each other feedback and guidance during the creative writing sessions.
- **Group discussion** occurred after each improvisation exercise allowing reflection on the creative process. Discussion during the listening sessions provided deep peer insights into the interpretation and creation of lyrics, melody and instrumentation.

Challenges and development

Approaches, methodologies and planning of activities were constantly adapted in response to the participants’ needs and concerns. These include:

- **Duration** The workshops included a wide range of activities with the view of providing a full experience for one-off participants as well as ongoing training for regular participants. Participants sometimes felt that there was not sufficient time for the creative process. I addressed this by emphasising the importance of the process rather than presenting a result at the end of every session.
- **Time-keeping** due to various personal reasons, lateness was a recurring problem. In an attempt to keep the inclusive nature of the workshops, I adopted a modular approach to accommodate this, in which the second part, focusing mainly on creative writing or devising, could be experienced without the preparatory

aspects of the first.

- **Mixed level-ness** Though some participants were worried about their lack of experience in comparison with others, the mixed level of the group was ultimately an advantage. Turino (2009, 110) describes the value of participatory practice in improvisation:

Within participatory traditions, circumscribed improvisatory spaces are one key way that advanced performers can continue to challenge themselves while maintaining a musical or dance style that has easy points of entry for neophytes. Successful participatory traditions (ones that draw people back again and again) have evolved to have something for everyone and seem almost specially designed to create the potential for flow for a wide variety of people.

With a range of diverse activities, each participant had a chance to work both within and outside of their comfort zone, and to learn from each other's experience, skills and individual life experience.

- **The vulnerability of the creative act** In a devising workshop, one is constantly performing, experimenting and sharing unfinished fragments. This is an exposed process, which many find daunting. It is therefore essential to take the time during the warm-ups to create a relaxed, playful atmosphere, in preparation for a gradual increase in creative challenges.
- **Individual sensitivities** Any group consists of individuals with their own sensitivities, concerns and aesthetic preferences. It is not always possible for a workshop leader to be aware of these, especially if they are not communicated in advance or at the moment they occur. Participants were asked to take responsibility for their safety by making adjustments to exercises where necessary, and to avoid participating in any activities that they found uncomfortable or express their concerns in the moment. In order to address sensitivities, multiple points of feedback and channels of communication were made available, including email, written feedback and informal discussion.
- **The 'tyranny' of the workshop leader and the group** While designing the workshop activities I adopted a particular aesthetic and approach, favouring devising methods to scripts, improvisation to fixed composition, collaboration to

individual creation and experimentation to convention. However, one size cannot fit all. As well as being clear in advance regarding the overall approach of a workshop, it is also important to consider the individual voices as part of the communal creative process itself, as Koppers (2007, 10) states in relation to the field of community performance:

The 'warmly persuasive' nature of the concept [of community] can stand in the way of rigorous and effective exchange and exploration. Who is included, who excludes, through which explicit and implicit means? It is easy to be caught up in the warmth of communal celebration, and to uncritically stop exploration and development too early.

It is essential to be aware of the individual voices within the creative process, and include them within the collaborative framework to maintain a sense of plurality, interest and inclusion.

The participants' response

Several trends emerged from the participants' feedback (see Table 1). Many participants very quickly felt at ease with the group, and found that the workshop provided a safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment for playful exploration and creation. They pointed to the importance of the warm-up activities in achieving this. Many participants appreciated the group's diversity of experience and backgrounds and the possibility of collaborating and learning from each other. Participants found the exercises positively challenging both physically and mentally, and were happy to 'leap into the unknown'. Some commented on the importance of listening within improvisation, with Pauline Oliveros's listening exercises to becoming an important part of the sessions. Many participants felt a sense of achievement by the end of the session and were amazed that they had managed to create something in such a short time. Some of the experienced creative practitioners mentioned that they found what they had learned useful for their own practice and the creation of future performances.

Further insights and observations were collected from a question-based survey taken by the regular participants. Many of them found the structured improvisations exploring pitch, tempo, timbre and dynamics a useful method for exploring their full

range of vocal possibilities, enabling access to music practice without needing to develop specific music theory or instrument-playing skills. Participants generally appreciated the role of improvisation to access creativity and write lyrics and melody. Several participants, including some with limiting physical conditions or disabilities, found the physical exercises helpful in freeing the body and boosting confidence, sometimes in a therapeutic way.

A major trend in the feedback was the participants' enjoyment of the group improvisations, which one participant described as the emergence of a 'hive mind' or 'mass body'. Expanding Csikszentmihalyi's notion of individual 'flow' (1996, 110-113), Sawyer (2015, 94) speaks of 'group flow':

[G]roup flow is a property of the entire group as a collective unity... In this state, each of the group members can even feel as if they are able to anticipate what their fellow performers will do before they do it... Group flow can inspire musicians to play things that they would not have been able to play alone, or that they would not have thought of without the inspiration of the group... Group flow helps the individual performers to attain their own flow state... There is an open communicative channel among the performers; each performer is open and listening to the others and each performer fully attends to what the others are doing, even as they are contributing to the performance themselves.

According to Borgo (2006, 184), a state of group flow requires trust and, according to some, 'involves reaching a state of egoless state in which the actions of individuals and the group perfectly harmonise.' The gradual build up of trust in the warm-up stage and structured progression with defined common goals encouraged this state of flow at the workshops.

Working towards a performance

Six months after starting the workshop series, a core group of regular participants worked towards a sharing of work-in-progress with family and friends. Setting a performance date placed positive pressure on the group to shape some of the materials created during the sessions into a more defined and structured form.

Composer/pianist Tsivi Sharett, who has vast experience in a variety of musical styles both improvised and composed, worked with each member of the group on an

individual aria or song that they had started writing. Due to the limited time, these individual sessions resulted in solo pieces that were not fully composed, but rather a combination of vocal improvisation and more structured melodies. Due to the short tutorial time with Tsivi and some participants' lack of experience with composition or music notation skills, this was a process that some participants found quite difficult. Solo performance is also a particularly exposed and vulnerable experience, and one that participants dreaded. Tsivi encouraged the performers to trust the power of their writing as well as their improvisation skills.

The sharing performance consisted of three scenes incorporating some of the most successful group improvisations from the workshops as well as the solo pieces created with Tsivi. Despite concerns that some group members had regarding the lack of a more specific script or thoroughly rehearsed staging, the work shared was a testament to the group's power of collaboration, the richness of individual experiences and narratives, and the fresh, spontaneous energy of improvisation.

Conclusion: multiplicity and cohesion.

Opera, devising and improvisation practice are the three main inspirations for *Create An Opera!* They have provided a richness of methodologies and practices informing the workshop structure. All three have in common the negotiation of multiplicity and cohesion. Opera negotiates a multiplicity of disciplines such as text, storytelling, vocal and instrumental music, acting, movement and set-design as well as a range of voices and characters, all of which must be combined into a cohesive experience for the audience. Devising favours a plurality of voices in the creative process to the single voice of the 'author', yet aims to produce a piece of work that has a consistent 'logic'. Improvisation practice, be it in music, movement or theatre, is the process in which this 'logic' is constantly negotiated and discovered in the moment.

Incorporating these three strands in the workshops has led to the creation of a dynamic, constantly changing community of individuals, exploring the multiplicity of individual voices and the possibility of finding refreshing emergent cohesions – a powerful sociopolitical act in its own right.

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Notes

1. See for example this article from *The Independent* December 4, 2017:
<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/news/opera-attendance-public-deterred-posh-long-expensive-etiquette-elitist-classic-fm-survey-a8090356.html//>
(accessed 25 August 2018)
2. For further information, see respectively: <http://www.streetwiseopera.org>,
<http://operaschmopera.co.uk>, <https://kameroperahuis.nl/pijlers/ct/verbindt> (in Dutch),
<https://www.reseo.org>, <http://www.jonathandove.com/works/stage-works/the-palace-in-the-sky/>,
<http://www.roh.org.uk/learning>, <https://www.eno.org/discover-opera/eno-baylis/>,
<https://www.operanorth.co.uk/about-us/education/>.
3. For a useful survey of Community Music definitions and practices see Veblen 2008.
4. For an overview of the field of Community Performance see Koppers 2007.

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