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Opera for Every Age – Opera for People with Dementia

The project “Oper für Jung und Alt – Opera for Every Age” – which won the 2017 Rudi Assauer Prize, the most important award for dementia projects in Germany – enables people with dementia and their companions to attend performances at the Cologne Opera. They come to see selected performances from the regular program of the Cologne Children’s Opera. These productions are suitable for children and adults alike, and showcase music and acting at the highest level. Audience members experience performances in close proximity to the singers, coming into direct contact with them, and the entire ensemble is prepared for the audience reactions. Attending the opera together with the young audience members thus becomes an intergenerational experience.

Since its inception more than 20 years ago, Cologne’s Children’s Opera has proven to be a model of success. Singing and performing at the Children’s Opera are the soloists of the Cologne Opera ensemble, the singers of the Opera Studio and the musicians of Cologne’s Gürzenich Orchester, which also accompanies the performances on the main stage. It is not opera with singing children, but opera for children – musical theatre at the highest level, in terms of both music and set design.

When selecting the pieces, special emphasis is placed on their length and subject, and on ensuring that plots are transparent and easy to understand. Da capo repeats, long instrumentals and some chorus passages are cut, and the composition is rearranged for a smaller orchestra, meaning that performances run for about an hour. They tell stories from fairy tales, sagas or the “1001 Nights”; ghosts, knights, heroes, villains, princesses, kings and countless singing animals populate the stage. It is easy to find pieces with subjects and plots like these, as they account for the majority of the most frequently performed operas anyway. Mozart’s “Magic Flute” just had its premiere, and the first premiere next season will be Wagner’s “Siegfried,” the third part of Cologne’s “Ring for Children.” This kind of repertoire selection means that there is a lot of overlap between children’s and adult theatre. Although the initial intent was for children and teenagers to participate in adult culture, it is now clear that it is also possible to participate the other way around – in the project “Opera for Every Age” at the Cologne Opera.

Both recent research and a number of practical projects have clearly shown that music has a positive influence on quality of life for people with dementia,

and encounters with children have also proven to have an invigorating effect on them. Music and children are precisely what Cologne's Children's Opera is all about, and this is how the idea to enable people with dementia to attend the Children's Opera came to life roughly five years ago. There was never any conceptualization of special performances for people with dementia; instead, regular visits to the performances of the Children's Opera make inclusion and cultural participation possible for people living with dementia; they are able to access opera performances in the normal atmosphere of the opera house with which they are already familiar.

There are a host of formal factors that are favourable to a project like this – here just a selection:

- For people with dementia, it is important that the performances predominantly take place in the morning or afternoon, when their physical and psychological capacity are at their highest. Moreover, it is easier to integrate early appointments into the schedules of care facilities. Finally, this also means that the attendees can go and have a cup of coffee after the performance.
- The recommendation is that performances last about an hour, but it has also been demonstrated that people with dementia can follow operas of longer durations.
- Cologne's Children's Opera has 200 seats, which means that attendees experience a performance in close proximity to the musicians and singers, and come into direct contact with them. Attending the opera together with the young audience members thus becomes an intergenerational experience that brings everyone together.
- Children's performances have their own rules. In moments of great excitement, everybody suddenly stands up. Rhetorical questions are not understood as such; rather, you put your hand up to answer them. If there are a lot of performers on the stage, children sometimes decide that they are tired of taking a passive role and would like to get involved in what is happening instead. They comment on the events. There are opportunities to sing along. And the best way to find out how a feathered costume in Stravinsky's "Nightingale" is made is by touching it – maybe you can even take a feather home as a souvenir... The entire ensemble is thus prepared for the audience reactions. The fear held by many carers that the person with dementia who they are looking after might forget the kind of social conduct required at an opera performance is thus irrelevant – and, incidentally, almost always unfounded.

The project is a very successful, permanent component of the Cologne's Children's Opera. At the beginning, it was only possible to offer four performances per season, but there are now more than 20 and they are all well attended. The offer is taken up by both family members caring for somebody with dementia at home as well as care facilities. Moreover, the needs and resources of the target group require certain frameworks to ensure visits are carried out successfully, but they have now been thoroughly tried and tested. In addition, during the 2015/16 season, an empirical study was carried out as part of a master's thesis. The findings and success factors have been summarized and are provided to private members of the public and institutions that support people with dementia. There are also materials relating to the performances – for example, illustrated or written retellings of the story, composer portraits, excerpts from the scores of selected arias for singing along, etc. – that can be requested and that attendees can use to engage with the content and music of the opera in advance. Right before the performance, there is an opportunity for the performers to introduce audience members to their roles and for attendees to take a look at objects like props and costumes, which increases recognition during the performance. At care facilities, attendees can reflect upon their visit to the opera during practical musical-theatre follow-up workshops. (The initial focus of the first follow-up workshop was musical: participants sang easy-to-learn opera excerpts and other well-known songs with a thematic link to the content of the opera. Since then, paper theatre has also proven to provide attendees with a good opportunity to reflect upon their experiences by means of practical theatre. Those living with dementia retell the story of the opera and perform it in the paper theatre using costume designs that have been repurposed as little puppets. Musical excerpts from the opera accompany the play or are sung by participants.)