

The Salt Lake Tribune

Bravo this! Do you know how to watch an opera?

Utah educational program adopts game-show energy to train aspiring singing stars

By Celia R. Baker
Special To The Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

West Valley City »

After Chanel Wood's soprano voice soared to the glorious climax of an aria, her listeners didn't offer a standing ovation, and not one hollered "Brava!" Instead, many in the audience burst out laughing, and some covered their ears.

Tough crowd.

It didn't take long for Wood and her colleagues from Utah Opera's Ensemble Apprentice program to win over the pupils of West Valley City's Whittier Elementary School, though. That's because the singers introduced the venerable art of opera through a medium grade-schoolers already understand -- a game show.

"Who Wants to be an Opera Star?" is the brainchild of stage director **Patricia Weinmann** and Utah Opera education director Paula Fowler, who describes it as a cross between "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" and "American Idol." Making the program work requires a quartet of seriously talented opera singers who don't take themselves too seriously.

The set-up for the mock game show has one singer function as a moderator, asking questions and specifying skills competitions. At Whittier, it was Wood's turn to take on the role while her fellow singers in Utah Opera's Apprentice Ensemble program -- mezzo-soprano Gretchen Windt, tenor Dominick Chenes and baritone Brent Turner -- played the three contestants.

Pianist Emily Williams, also part of the apprentice program, provided accompaniment for aria excerpts that demonstrated a gamut of moods -- from Turner's jolly turn as Papageno from Mozart's "The Magic Flute" to Turner's take on the tragic aria from Donizetti's "The Elixir of Love." The latter was interpreted so broadly that no child could fail to realize the singer was wallowing in sadness of operatic proportions.

The show is lightly scripted, allowing the opera singers plenty of opportunity to ham it up, play to the crowd and show off their talents, all useful skills for aspiring entertainers of any kind. Contestants score points for ringing in the fastest on questions and winning skill contests such as singing the longest notes.

Extra points are given when the audience "helps" by recognizing which emotion is being portrayed or identifying answers. The performers find out who wins the game at the same time as the audience does, when the final points are tallied. And don't think you can wait until the fat lady sings to make a guess. All of these opera singers are young, attractive and fit.

As the scores mounted during the Whittier Elementary performance, the audience got smarter about the opera world. Meanings of musical terms such as *aria*, *duet*, *trio* and *quartet* were covered, and the defining characteristics of soprano, mezzo, tenor and baritone voices were demonstrated. The students learned what it takes to make an opera, simply a story told through music, including props, costumes, scenery and lighting.

They also learned that even though operas are frequently sung in foreign languages, the story's events and emotions can be understood through composers' musical choices and the performers' acting abilities.

"I think [the students] learned a lot of the vocabulary and the terminology in a fun way and didn't even realize they were learning," said Judy Giles, principal of Whittier Elementary. "I think assemblies like this are really beneficial and important to educating the whole child. It's an experience many would never get otherwise."

For the singers, who were chosen through national auditions to spend a 10-month apprenticeship at Utah Opera, the school concerts are a refining fire. Each has a graduate degree in music and hopes for a career as an opera star. Right now, they are racking up experience in front of audiences as part of the company's educational outreach program while soaking up the coaching, master classes and workshops Utah Opera provides. As they ply their trade in school gymnasiums, they are polishing arias they hope to sing in the world's great opera houses.

The kids at Whittier cheered wildly for their favorites during a contest to see who could hold the longest note, and laughed through a humorous scene from Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" set in Figaro's barbershop. Turner took the youthful crowd's approval as a sign that his performance as Figaro is growing ever more secure.

"Figaro is a role I want to sing professionally," he said. "It's good to sing it day after day. This gives us the tools we need to become professional opera singers."

Turner said performing morning school assemblies has removed any dread he might have felt about getting his voice working for early-morning auditions. "Now, I can perform any time of day, day after day," he said. "I've learned the technique and developed the energy to do that."

Overall, the game-show format seems to help capture students' interest. "The kids love the concept of the game show," Windt said. "They get into the competition. It's enthusiasm, not unruliness."

Utah Opera's outreach programs visit every school district in the state within a three- to five-year rotating schedule. The current game-show format has been in use for several years, Fowler said, so a new script is under development for next year's apprentice assemblies, ensuring that schools receive fresh material. Like the current program, it will take a light-hearted, entertaining approach to the world of opera.

The success of "Who Wants to Be an Opera Star?" has been gratifying for Fowler. She's glad principals and teachers like the show, but takes her greatest pleasure in watching kids.

"After the show, we see kids competing in longest-note contests at recess," she said.

"It's important for kids to actually hear opera, to erase any stereotypes if they exist," Windt said. "The things they know, they learned from cartoons, so they giggle at first. But the stories and the tunes win them over, and they really get into it."

Wood says she is getting used to seeing children with hands over their ears during her first aria's high notes, and to seeing students applaud her with sincerity by the show's end. "All singers should perform for kids," she said, "and see them laugh, and cover their ears, and boo you. It's good for us. It's a reminder to get outside the opera bubble now and then."

Or, maybe, it's an invitation for young people to take a peek into the world of opera. After watching the singers score points on questions about appropriate behavior at an opera, the children at Whittier responded to the show's final quartet with loud applause and scattered shouts of "Bravo!"

So you want to be a Utah Opera apprentice?

Utah Opera's Apprentice Ensemble program offers aspiring singers a bridge between graduate studies and professional careers.

Each year, the company selects a quartet of singers and a piano accompanist by national audition. They receive professional coaching, master classes and performance opportunities. During a 10-month residency, the group performs in-school presentations on the art of opera at Utah schools, and outreach concerts throughout the state.

Each of this year's apprentices -- soprano Chanel Wood, Texas; mezzo Gretchen Windt, Illinois; tenor Dominick Chenes, Nevada; baritone Brent Turner, Florida; and pianist Emily Williams, Utah -- has performance experience and holds a master's degree in music.

The company also selects a quartet of Studio Artists each year for a six-month residency program that includes comprimario and cover roles in Utah Opera's mainstage shows, performance opportunities with the Utah Symphony and outreach concerts. Studio Artists don't participate in school presentations.

More about Utah Opera's educational outreach programs:

State funding and private grants underwrite the company's educational programs.

Apprentice Ensemble school programs » These include "Who Wants to Be an Opera Star?" for elementary schools, "Opera 101" for junior-high students and visits to high-school choral classrooms.

"Opera-tunities" » The program invites junior-high and high-school students to attend dress rehearsals with their teachers at minimal charge.

Residencies » They include one-day programs that allow students to rotate through five workshops: costumes, props, sets, lights and music. Five-day residencies, for schools and communities in outlying areas of Utah, include student workshops and conclude with a community concert.

Children's Opera Showcase » School classes create and present student operas through a partnership with the annual Kennedy Center Imagination Celebration.

Information

Learn more about Utah Opera's outreach programs at www.utahopera.org <<http://www.utahopera.org>> .
To schedule, e-mail pfowler@usuo.org

Resource materials for teachers » www.usuoeducation.org/teacher_materials
<http://www.usuoeducation.org/teacher_materials> .

Jana Allred

Public Relations Manager
801.869.9027 office
801.244.1892 cell

UTAH SYMPHONY | UTAH OPERA

Opera Production Studios 336 North 400 West | Salt Lake City UT 84103 | Phone: 801.736.4605 | Fax: 801.869.9051
Ticket Office 801.533.NOTE (6683)
Online <http://www.usuo.org/>

<<http://www.utahsymphonyopera.org/>>