

An Opera From Scratch: The Case of Raanana’s Mor Metro-West High School

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Abstract: This article describes the project of composing and performing an original opera by the students of the music department at the Mor Metro-West High School in Raanana, Israel. This project has achieved such success that it has become a tradition of over two decades in this high school’s music department, with 15 operas performed on stage, composed by music students aged 16-17. The case reported here may provide valuable insights into how collaborative creativity and collaborative music-making may be promoted in educational settings, also within the framework of public education, while at the same time demanding and attaining a high artistic level.

Keywords: composing, collaborative creativity, music in high schools, community outreach

Music in Israeli high schools

Music classes, and the arts in general, are absent from Israel’s compulsory high school curriculum (Grades 10–12). However, 135 high schools throughout the country have dedicated music departments offering a three-year program for students who choose to major in music studies.

The Israeli high school matriculation is a qualification of secondary-school academic achievement beyond the compulsory 12 years’ school attendance. Students are tested in required and elective subjects. In order to receive a full matriculation certificate, a student must pass at least one subject-matter exam at the 5-units level (on a difficulty scale of 1–5) and earn a total of at least 21 units. Music is one of the approved programs of advanced study (i.e., “major” subject) for the high school matriculation exam; music majors can accumulate up to five units toward their matriculation, plus an additional five units for those who prepare and present an advanced-level vocal or instrumental performance program (“recital”) or composition project.

The core curriculum for the music major includes such subjects as music theory, sight-reading, ear training, harmony, and the history and literature of music. Elective subjects include arrangement, composition, music and computers, and more. In addition, participation in at least one performance ensemble is required. The incoming students are assigned, according to their personal specialization and preference (voice vs. instrument; classic vs. jazz or popular music, etc.), to a choir, chamber orchestra, classical or jazz small

ensemble, big-band, jazz vocals, etc. Enthusiastic students, as their study program allows, may broaden their musical activity by joining an additional ensemble. These ensembles rehearse for performance in the annual concert that is an integral part of the music department’s program.

The music major program at Raanana’s Mor Metro-West high school

The Mor Metro-West high school in the mid-sized central Israel city of Raanana (pop. 72,000) was established in 1991, and its music department was opened in 1992. Students are admitted to the music department after an audition in music performance on their instrument or as vocalists. In addition, candidates are tested in reading and writing basic music notation.

During their three-year music-major program, students commit to continuing individual studies on their instrument, or voice lessons for singers, at the municipal conservatory or with private teachers.

The starting point in terms of formal musical knowledge, as well as performance level, varies significantly among the tenth-grade students, posing a particular challenge for the teaching staff.

In this high school’s music department, composition studies have always been an integral part of the curriculum. All first-year students have a weekly composition lesson, after which the subject is offered as an elective workshop for Grades 11 and 12. Students also receive instruction in music-notation software in a well-equipped computer-music lab where they are allowed to work on their compositions tasks outside of classroom hours.

Why opera?

The Opera Project was launched 23 years ago as a final project for the Metro-West music department’s first graduating class¹. We sought a project which would integrate a maximal number of students in a collaborative creative enterprise, a project affording students the opportunity to express and expand their varied individual musical abilities while developing cooperation, collective responsibility, and artistic excellence. Opera, being a multidisciplinary art form, involves the music majors in composing, singing as soloists or in the chorus, acting, playing in the orchestra, and coordinating all these elements into a performance production.

¹ N.B.: I have been on the faculty of this music department since its founding, and have headed this project, together with my colleagues Ms. Avital Gefen and Dr. Michael Shenhav, from its launch in 1993 through the present.

In the early years of the opera project, we added a course on the History of Opera to give the students a broader background in this musical form. The course was taught in the first semester of Grade 11, prior to beginning the composing process. It presented topics related to the development of opera in the history of Western music, and concepts that characterize the musical form, such as recitative, aria, ensemble, *seria*, *buffa*, etc. It also featured debates on issues of concern to composers, exploring the relationship between drama and music, through questions such as: “Does the music need to serve the text or is the text mainly a scaffolding supporting the music?” In addition, students attended an opera performance of the Israeli Opera on its home stage in the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center and participated in a guided backstage tour of the rich and complex world behind the scenes: costumes, props, scenery, lighting, stage lifts, rehearsal studios, etc.

It is axiomatic that this genre of music is not widely popular, especially among adolescents. At the outset, the idea of making opera was not easily accepted by the students. In 1993, when we initially proposed this project to our first class of music majors, they reacted with some astonishment. However, after the success of that first production, the second year we presented the project the students received the idea naturally and with enthusiasm. In the third year, the students took the project for granted and even anticipated us by proposing a story for the libretto.

In the fourth year, in light of budget problems and workload on students and teachers, we considered halting this demanding project and settling for a special evening performance dedicated to instrumental works by individual composition-workshop students. But then we encountered a massive protest from the students, who demanded continuing what they called “the music majors’ traditional annual project.” Since the program’s inception, we have produced 15 original operas on the stage of the Raanana Municipal Auditorium, composed and performed by the students and complete with sets and costumes, for an audience of their classmates, teachers, and parents plus special shows for younger and older audiences at venues in the community (see below: Community outreach). During the first nine years we produced an original opera every year, then every two years as a more manageable compromise.

The text

About a year before the premiere, the process begins with choosing a text and adapting it for the opera’s libretto. In the early years, students wrote the libretto by themselves, but we subsequently modified the process for two reasons: this significantly delayed the production schedule, and it was found that students were not always able to write at a

suitable linguistic level. Therefore, we decided that the text would be chosen and adapted to a libretto by the teaching staff with the participation of students.²

The composers

The composition workshop is an elective for students in Grades 11 and 12. Since this project takes place once every two years, twelfth graders have usually experimented with composing pieces that were performed in the previous year’s special concert. For eleventh graders, however – apart from composition exercises in their tenth-grade course, in which some of them demonstrated a special talent for writing music – this is their initial experience in composing.

The composition process involves the following stages:

- 1) After reading the libretto, the composition workshop students attend a group meeting with the composition teacher, who assigns their tasks and presents the schedule with a deadline for each stage of writing. After a discussion of the dramatic characters (roles), the students are requested to compose a leitmotif for each character. These leitmotifs will be developed later as arias or ensembles in which the characters appear or in orchestral interludes. The overture is the last task to be assigned, as the operatic overture presents thematic musical material that appears throughout the work.
- 2) From this point on, beside group meetings, the composition teacher holds individual meetings at the piano with each student, to which they bring first drafts of their musical ideas.
- 3) Songs are developed as a piano/vocal version (see Appendix I), and a piano version is written for the instrumental interludes.
- 4) The orchestration is written for the production’s orchestra (see below: The orchestra; also Appendix II).

The vocal soloists

The vocalist students given solo roles are 11th and 12th graders selected in a casting audition from among the female and male vocal ensembles’ members. In addition to vocal skills and role type, we also consider how the students have functioned in their ensembles: their attendance, seriousness, investment in learning their parts, etc. So, although everyone wants to be a soloist, they must first of all have demonstrated their motivation and excellence in the choral framework.

² Ms. Aya Gal, a member of our music department’s teaching staff, has in recent years contributed of her talents in writing several of the libretti.

Casting the vocal roles takes place immediately after the text is ready, even before the composition process begins. When the composers get their composition tasks, they know who will be performing the arias and ensemble passages so can take into account each singer’s range and vocal qualities.

As the composers complete the piano-vocal version of a song, the soloists commence working on it. Their study process is guided by their stage-singing teacher (the author) in a workshop setting, with the support of a member of the teaching staff serving as piano accompanist and voice rehearsal coach. The vocal soloists are also requested to attend those orchestra rehearsals working on their roles.

The chorus

The Metro-West high school music department has a female choir composed of about 26 girls and a male vocal ensemble of about 15 boys, both including Grades 10 through 12. During the first semester these two musical ensembles, each with its own conductor, work on preparing the annual concert held at the end of January, the midpoint of the academic year. Their repertoire includes classical music, pop music, Israeli music and more. After this, the two groups combine as a mixed choir and begin working on the opera’s choral passages, rehearsing first with piano accompaniment and later with the student orchestra.

The orchestra

The chamber orchestra for the opera project comprises the music-major instrumentalists in Grades 10, 11 and 12. Consequently, its makeup changes from year to year, presenting another challenge for the young composers – such as a lack of string players or a disproportion between the number of players in each of the orchestra sections. Occasionally, graduates are mustered to fill in on needed instruments during rehearsals and for performances. The composition teacher also guides and conducts the chamber orchestra. During the first semester they rehearse classical repertoire for the annual concert, after which their rehearsals are dedicated to the opera project. The orchestration being the last stage in the composition process, this puts the orchestra musicians on a tight practice schedule, sometimes requiring rehearsal marathons in the two weeks leading up to the premiere.

Props and sets

The sets and props for the production are designed and made by students with special needs from the high school’s design department under the guidance of their teachers. This cooperation adds further educational and social value to the opera project.

The production team

A significant contribution to the success of the opera comes from students who volunteer to help in any production element that may be necessary: coordinating the rehearsal schedules; costume fitting and alterations; printing parts and scores; setting up music stands, chairs, and percussion instruments; stagehands to shift sets during the performance, etc.

This production crew is often composed of students performing in the opera, but also students who don't participate directly in the opera will volunteer and help. This is a tradition that carries important educational value, and we emphasize their contribution by expressing gratitude, personal and collective, as an integral part of the opera: inviting them onstage at the end of each performance, to take their bows to applause from the audience.

Putting it all together

Gradually, all the pieces of the puzzle come together in an integrated whole. About five weeks before the premiere, we gather all the singers (soloists and chorus), the composers, and the production team, for the first full-length rehearsal of the entire opera as piano-accompanied vocals, without staging. About three weeks before the premiere, all the participants of the production, orchestra included, assemble for the first “concertante” (i.e., sitting) rehearsal of the full opera. During the last two weeks before the premiere, run rehearsals of the staged version (directed by this article's author) are held with all the participants: orchestra, soloists, choir and a stage staff, ending with a final, fully costumed dress rehearsal.

Community outreach

From the beginning of this project, we cooperate with elementary schools and kindergartens in the city, inviting their students to special shows in the morning. To prepare these young audiences, our students visited the schools and kindergartens in teams of two or three, to tell the opera's story, sing several of its songs, and also to teach the children one of the songs. Another collaboration takes place with Raanana's Municipal Department for the Welfare of the Elderly Population. Senior citizens from residential facilities and day activity centers are invited to a performance of the opera. An exciting encounter takes place with this audience, which strengthens intergenerational relationships.

After years of performances for the children of Raanana, when we began work on the opera “The Nightingale,” the department's production in 2013, we realized that our students were not coming into contact with populations outside their city; in order to make a real contribution to society, it would be necessary to “leave the incubator” of our home

town. At that point, we prepared an abridged version of the opera and designed a minimalist, portable stage set. Then, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education’s preschool education branch along with the support of the Raanana Municipality, we boarded a bus after having loaded all the musical instruments, the props, and the costumes, and traveled from one kindergarten to another in Israel’s geographic-economic periphery (Figure 1). The kindergarten teachers cooperated by preparing their pupils in advance: they read the story, illustrated and decorated their schoolrooms in Chinese style, and even wore Chinese hats (Figure 2). This was an extraordinarily empowering experience for both the young audience in the kindergartens and also for our high school students. That year we received the Israel Ministry of Education’s award as “Leaders in the Arts” for artistic excellence while educating for the values of contributing to the community.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Concluding thoughts and proposals for future research

Music majors studying in high school music departments undertake obligations beyond the regular duties of non-musician students. As do all their grade-level peers, they must fulfill all the requirements of core curriculum subjects (math, history, Bible studies, English as a foreign language, literature, etc.). In addition, they have the formal music subjects outlined above, participate in one or more performance ensembles, and cope with the ongoing demand of daily practice on their instrument or voice. These students spend many hours after the end of the school day in extracurricular activities related to the music department – and the opera project, with its intensive preparation process and complex production elements, adds an extra burden on these students as well as on the teaching staff. The time and energy involved in this project is immeasurable. So, we may ask: what is the source of the driving force that sustains what has become one of the flagship projects of the music department of the Mor Metro-West High School and is now a model emulated by other high school music departments?

Most studies dealing with extracurricular activities focus on the effect of these activities on students' attitudes and on their classroom performance (Cooper et al., 1999; Fredricks et al., 2002). But, as Pitts points out, evaluating such activities only by their apparent impact on academic achievement is in some ways to miss the point. She contends:

After all, adults who participate voluntarily in music do so for reasons of enjoyment, personal fulfilment, and pleasure at pursuing shared goals with like-minded people. They value their musical experiences for its immediate rewards: the respect and friendship of their fellow performers, the chance to develop both musically and personally, and the response of the audience to their final performance. (Pitts, 2007, p.149)

Further research is needed to elucidate issues such the contribution of projects like the one described here to a student's motivation to continue engaging in music activities, each student's musical personality, and their future involvement with music as adults.

Another notable aspect of this project is that it requires composition students to cooperate on one shared musical work. That creating and making music are often considered to be individualistic activities may be due to historical traditions and beliefs. However, as suggested by Burnard: “Our practices need to promote the power of relationships over individual minds, multiple worlds over singular realities, collaborative interdependence over individual heroism, and dialogue over alienation” (2012, p.333).

Opera is not the composition workshop students' only project. They also compose individual pieces during their years of musical studies, and students can submit a portfolio of their musical compositions worth an additional five units towards their high school matriculation, equivalent to a senior recital in performance. In an ongoing research that accompanies the composing and producing of the current (2016/17–2017/18) opera project

in Raanana, I intend to compare the students’ experience of individual composing vs. collaborative composing such as is done in the opera project. Collaborative composing, as Partti and Westerlund (2013) suggest, refers to “composing activities leading to a joint product that has been created by more than one person providing a musical contribution(s) to the process and/or to the end product of the collaboration” (p.3).

Dr. Michael Shenhav, composition teacher and himself a composer, affirms that the opera project leads to cooperation and mutual learning, including taking musical ideas one from another. What may be considered to be a limitation on their creativity, Shenhav actually regards as a positive aspect which carries additional educational value: “It makes [the composition students] ‘be a part of’ ... It develops modesty instead of ego, promoting collaboration instead of competition.”³

Hanley (2002) believes that the purpose of the composing experience is not only to create composers but also to bring students to better understand the music they hear. Therefore, composition lessons are important not only to those who intend to be composers, but to all music students. Some researchers refer to the contribution of general musical knowledge to the encouragement of creativity. Particularly emphasized is familiarity with music literature and analytical knowledge, which enables students to critique their own compositions.

In an ethnographic study, Avital Gefen, choir conductor and head of Mor Metro-West’s music department, examined the teaching model of the composition teacher. She asserts that the pedagogical principles which nurture creativity in students emerge from the discourse between the teacher and the students in the composition teaching workshop. This discourse provides self-confidence to the young composers by giving them tools for problem-solving, and encourages the pursuit of their own, new musical ideas (Gefen, 2009).

Many music educators and pedagogues believe that creative work should be placed at the heart of the music curriculum. “Composing – even if it is done on a small scale and with available means only – is the best way to understand musical compositions in general, and to open up to them” (Assaf, 2001, p. 122; author’s translation).

Are composition studies supposed to be an activity reserved only for a select few? According to a Ministry of Education report, in the academic year 2015/16 about 4100 students – constituting just 1.3% of all high school students in Israel⁴ – studied in a high school music department. Moreover, the vast majority of music major programs don’t include composition studies in the intensive manner of Mor Metro-West. Or rather, should we ask: is music (and the arts in general) an elitist activity to be reserved for students who choose to major in music studies? For apart from some locally funded initiatives, those

³ Dr. Michael Shenhav, conversation with the author, 20 April 2017

⁴ From a document issued by the Knesset Research and Information Center, 18 June 2017.
www.knesset.gov.il/MMM

high school students in Israel who don't choose music as their advanced-study subject for matriculation (i.e., their major subject) receive no music education in their school.

These and other questions arise, indicating diverse directions for future research. Meanwhile, we witness the Opera Project initiative having an extraordinary impact on music students' lives, as we see its graduates returning years later to watch our music productions and share their heartfelt memories of those days of creating and making such music together.

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Appendices

Excerpt from the Opera “Through the looking glass” (2018), written by Metro-West High-school students. Music: **Itai Adelman** (Grade 10 student). Words: **Rina Litvin**.

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Appendix I: Piano-Vocal

14. האמפטי דאמפטי

The musical score is for a vocal quartet and piano. It is in 3/4 time and consists of 16 measures. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 60$ and the dynamics are *legato* and *mp*. The lyrics are in Hebrew. The vocal parts are Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The piano part is also marked *mp*. The score includes dynamic markings such as *legato*, *mp*, *dramatico*, *f*, and *subito pp*. The lyrics are:
Soprano: סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ...
Alto: סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ...
Tenor: סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ...
Bass: סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ... סטי - האם ...
Piano: *mp* accompaniment.

A Double Tempo

2

15 ♩=120

Alice

Hapti D.

S.

A.

T.

B.

Pno.

A

22 *p*

Alice

Hapti D.

Pno.

29 *mp*

Alice

Hapti D.

Pno.

Appendix II: Full score

14. האמפטי דאמפטי

The image displays a full orchestral score for the piece 'Ampti Dampti'. The score is written in 3/4 time and includes parts for various instruments and voices. The woodwind section consists of Flute (parts 1, 2, and 3), Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Alto Saxophone 1 and 2, Trumpet in Bb, and Horn in F. The brass section includes Trombones (parts 1, 2, and 3), Trumpet in Bb, and Horn in F. The percussion section includes Bass Drum. The vocal section features Soprano, Alto, Bass, and Tenor. The piano part is also included. The score is marked 'legato' at the beginning. The dynamics range from *pp* (pianissimo) to *mf* (mezzo-forte). The lyrics are written in Hebrew under the vocal staves. The score is numbered 14 in the top right corner.

2

6 *dramatic*

Fl. 1 *dramatic*

Fl. 2 *dramatic*

Ob. *dramatic*

Cl. *dramatic* *molto deciso* *p*

Bsn. *dramatic*

Alto Sax. *dramatic*

Ten. Sax. *dramatic*

Trpt. *dramatic*

Hn. *dramatic*

B. D. *dramatic*

S. *dramatic* *sfz* *sfz*

A. *dramatic* *sfz*

B. *dramatic* *sfz* *sfz*

T. *dramatic* *sfz* *sfz*

Perc. *dramatic*

Vln. 1 *dramatic*

Vln. 2 *dramatic*

Vla. *dramatic*

Vcl. *dramatic*

Cb. *dramatic*

12

Fl. 1-2, Fl. 3-4, Cl., Bsn., Alto Sax., Tpt., Hrn., B. D., S., A., B., T., Pno., Vln. 1, Vln. 2, Vla., Vcl., Cb.

ppp

ritmo ppp

3

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 12, for a symphony orchestra and choir. The score is written in 2/4 time and features a variety of instruments and voices. The woodwind section includes Flutes 1-2, Flutes 3-4, Clarinet, Bassoon, Alto Saxophone, Trumpet, and Horn. The brass section includes Trombones I, II, and III. The string section includes Violins 1 and 2, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The vocal section includes Soprano, Alto, Bass, and Tenor. The piano part is also present. The score is marked with a dynamic of *ppp* (pianissimo) and includes a tempo marking of *ritmo ppp*. The page number 12 is at the top left, and the number 3 is at the top right. The score is written in a standard musical notation with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature.