

THE CAPACITY OF YOUTH OPERA TO ENHANCE
THE EMOTIONAL SKILLS OF YOUNGER ADOLESCENTS
*POTENCIAL MLADINSKE OPERE ZA RAZVIJANJE ČUSTVENE
KOMPETENTNOSTI PRI MLAJŠIH MLADOSTNIKI*

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Abstract: The study examines the impact of the youth opera *Kekec in škrat Skovik* on children's emotional competence through engagement with musical and performing arts. Observations indicate that children demonstrated strong empathy for the characters, particularly in scenes of conflict resolution against a villain. Participants noted the quality of the performance, including vocal clarity, tunefulness, and rhythmic precision, highlighting their capacity for critical appreciation of the arts. Additionally, children exhibited a keen awareness of inappropriate behaviour in the auditorium and actively engaged with the opera's underlying messages, critically evaluating characters' actions. Our research shows that children and adolescents enjoy aesthetic experiences.

Keywords: youth opera, emotional competence, younger adolescents, well-being

Izleček: Raziskava preučuje čustvene odzive mlajših mladostnikov na opero *Kekec in škrat Skovik* skozi osebno vključenost v kompleksno glasbeno in gledališko umetnost. Rezultati so pokazali, da so udeleženci izrazili močno empatijo do likov, zlasti v prizorih reševanja konfliktov proti zlikovcu (Bedancu). Udeleženci so opazili kakovost predstave, vključno s čistostjo glasu, z melodičnostjo in ritmično natančnostjo, kar poudarja njihovo sposobnost kritičnega ocenjevanja umetnosti. Poleg tega so pokazali dobro zavedanje neprimerne obnašanja med občinstvom in se aktivno angažirali na podlagi osnovnih sporočil opere, kritično ocenjevali dejanja likov. Pričujoča raziskava poudarja pomembnost umetniških izkušenj pri oblikovanju čustvenih odzivov otrok in spodbujanju celostnega razumevanja sebe.

Ključne besede: mladinska opera, čustvene kompetence, mlajši mladostniki, blagostanje

ARTISTIC opera production for children is becoming increasingly appreciated and researched and is an indispensable form of activity that supports the well-being, creativity, and development of children.

Among many musical genres, it is opera that can interest a child not only in the art of sounds, but also in the twists and turns of the plot, dramatic play, dance, and decoration. However, an indifferent or negative attitude towards musical theatre often develops under the influence of certain psychological factors, among which the conventionality of expressing the feelings and relationships of the heroes plays an important role. The same applies to young spectators (Kuzmina, 2022, p. 424).

The meaning and value of youth opera performance for spectators and young participants is gaining public appreciation and scientific confirmation. In the work of Fredrick Burrack and Carla Maltas (2006), the authors highlight the research demonstrating the need for children to participate in performing, hearing, and observing genres of music to improve their skills in analysis, evaluation, and perception (Burrack & Maltas, 2006): 'Research about participation in the arts as a child and preference for opera have indicated that children should be provided with experiences viewing live performances to become adult patrons and audience members' (Burrack & Maltas, 2006, p. 82). The benefits of being involved in performing and listening to opera works spreads far beyond mere enjoyment and is now also visible on the level of brain development, since from the Polyvagal theory developed by S. Porges, it is known that higher brain functions, such as learning, communication and attention, are dependent on how well we are able to process incoming information at the sensory and motor levels (Porges, 2022). Involvement in complex music theatre is thus one of the most promising environments (except nature) that promotes those processes.

Based on these findings, we decided to use the example of a new opera for children, *Kekec in škrat Skovik* by the contemporary Slovenian composer Tomaž Habe, to investigate which elements of youth opera appeal most strongly to young audiences and how young listeners perceive opera. The Slovenian opera *Kekec in škrat Skovik* is intended for children aged 5 to 15 attending primary school and as a work in which the children also perform.

DEFINITION AND KEY FEATURES OF YOUTH OPERA

Youth opera, or music theatre designed for children and adolescents, represents a specialized genre that engages young audiences through the integration of music and narrative. This art form is characterized by performances orchestrated by either professional or amateur adult performers, specifically tailored for children and their accompanying adults, as well as productions in which children themselves perform, aiming to captivate both their peers and adult spectators (Pantouvaki, 2012).

In examining the foundational components of youth opera, Jayakumar (2020) identifies three pivotal elements: relevance, appeal, and comprehension.

Relevance refers to the thematic and contextual significance of the opera's content to the experiences and realities of young audiences, thereby fostering a sense of connection and understanding. Appeal encompasses the aesthetic and emotional aspects that attract children to the performance, including engaging melodies, vibrant staging, and relatable characters (Brdnik Juhart et al., 2023). Comprehension underscores the necessity for clarity in narrative and musical elements, ensuring that the young audience can easily grasp the story and its underlying messages (Brdnik Juhart & Sicherl Kafol 2021).

Moreover, Zadnik et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of developmental alignment between the narrative and musical content of youth operas. This alignment is crucial for fostering cognitive and emotional engagement, as it ensures that the complexity of the themes and the sophistication of the musical elements correspond to the developmental stages of the audience (Lin, 2019). The integration of age-appropriate content not only enhances enjoyment but also facilitates deeper learning and personal growth among young listeners.

Youth opera serves as a dynamic and impactful medium that not only entertains but also educates and resonates with young audiences, highlighting the importance of relevance, appeal, and comprehension in its artistic execution. The continued exploration of these elements is essential for the evolution and efficacy of youth opera as a vital component of children's arts education.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH OPERAS

Youth operas offer a multifaceted array of psychological benefits that can significantly contribute to the development of children and adolescents. These benefits can be categorized into four primary domains: physical, emotional, cognitive, and social (Savage, 2021).

Participating in youth operas provides a unique opportunity for the enhancement of vocal and dancing skills, particularly when individuals are actively involved in the performance. Research indicates that engaging in musical and theatrical activities promotes fine motor skills, coordination, and body awareness (Stevens, 2018). The physical demands of singing, acting, and dancing in a performance context encourage participants to develop greater control over their bodies and voices, fostering not only technical proficiency but also overall physical fitness.

Youth operas create a supportive environment that facilitates emotional expression. This is crucial during the formative years, as children and adolescents often grapple with complex feelings and experiences. According to Cohen (2019), the arts serve as a valuable outlet for emotions, allowing young participants to explore and articulate their feelings in a constructive manner (Levitin, 2013). The act of embodying characters and narratives can help

individuals process their own emotional landscapes, fostering resilience and emotional intelligence.

Engagement with youth operas stimulates cognitive development by igniting curiosity and encouraging creativity. The complexity of operatic narratives and the richness of musical composition challenge young audiences to think critically and imaginatively. Research by Dullea (2019) suggests that participation in the arts enhances cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills, as children learn to navigate the intricate interplay of story, character, and music. This creative engagement not only supports cognitive development but also nurtures a lifelong love for the arts.

Youth operas also play a significant role in enhancing social skills, identity exploration, and inclusivity. Collaborative performance fosters a sense of belonging and community among participants, as they work together toward a common goal. According to Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, social interaction is fundamental to cognitive development, and collaborative artistic endeavours provide rich contexts for peer engagement. Furthermore, participation in youth operas encourages exploration of diverse identities and perspectives, promoting empathy and cultural understanding among young individuals (Burrack & Matlas, 2006; Denac, 2002).

These benefits underscore the importance of integrating youth opera into educational and community settings, as they contribute significantly to the holistic development of young individuals (Kovačič, 2019). Further research and practice in this area are essential to fully realize the transformative potential of youth operas in fostering well-rounded, emotionally resilient, and socially engaged future generations.

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE OPERA *KEKEC* IN *ŠKRAT SKOVİK*

The youth opera *Kekec in škrat Skovik* was created by composer Tomaž Habe and librettist Milan Dekleva. The story takes place at the time of the winter solstice, when, according to the beliefs of our ancient peoples, the cycle of life ends, and a new one begins. The villagers celebrate this miraculous turn of nature, which works in perfect harmony and balance. People should follow and respect this transformation of nature. The story follows the original idea, but it has been modernized. We have the mischievous Kekec who helps everyone, the blind Mojca who hopes for a cure for blindness, and the clumsy and cowardly Rožle. At the centre of the action is the Bedanec, who scares the children, kidnaps Mojca and has no respect for nature. He believes that the girl will be saved by Kosobrin, and that he himself will be able to get his hands on the healing eye drops. He would make a fortune from them and invest the money in a Swiss bank. Here we see the corrupt mentality of today's mad world, but also the loneliness of this impoverished man. His opposite is Kosobrin, who is

loved by everyone; he lives in nature and believes that nature heals. Kekec follows his heart and, disguised as the elf Skovik, scares the Bedanec into retreating. The story is left open, so we do not find out if he really leaves the village or if he stays.

The music in the opera is based on contemporary musical practices but is accessible and suitable for young audiences. The composer has combined operatic elements with folk tunes and elements of the musical, bringing them closer to today's children.

Based on the theoretical backgrounds we formulated the following two research questions:

RQ1: What are the elements of youth opera (YO) that promote high attentiveness (curiosity and interest), emotional captivation, identification and empathizing?

RQ2: Do children have the ability to recognize musical aesthetics, defined as the structural and emotional qualities that contribute to a composition's perceived beauty and appeal?

METHODOLOGY

In our study we will present the musical characteristics of the work and the depth of experience it offers to children and adults. We used qualitative and quantitative data. First, we observed the immediate response to the opera *Kekec* during a live public performance of the opera in a cultural centre in Ljubljana. After the performance we gave teachers questionnaires and instructions on how to apply them with children in the following week. Children gave their feedback through drawings and responses to a simple questionnaire, and teachers gave feedback by answering the survey as well.

PARTICIPANTS

In our study 77 primary school children from 3 schools were included. We included two different primary schools, one urban and one suburban, and one music school. The age of children was from 9 to 14 years. We got complete responses from 3 music teachers, one from each school.

RESEARCH DESIGN

First, we observed the children's behaviour during the performance and created anecdotal records where we were mostly focused on the children's

involvement, the emotional atmosphere in the hall and the presence of boredom, chatter, anxiety and other signs of children's behaviour that could help us understand if the operatic work managed to grasp the children's attention and allowed identification with the characters on the stage. The focus was on understanding if the power of the work was strong enough to emotionally touch children and trigger their curiosity and identification.

The second part of the data gathering was held in the schools, during music lessons held by teachers who accompanied children at the performance. Approximately one week after the performance, the children were asked to draw a picture and answer some simple open questions about the performance.

The third part of data gathering was the teachers' questionnaires, composed of closed and open questions, which were answered at the same time as the children's.

Teachers sent all the questionnaires and drawings to researchers who then analysed the data.

All teachers provided parental consent and the personal information of the children was coded.

Table 1

Research methods and types of data obtained

METHOD	Type of data
Observation	Anecdotal record of children's behaviour during the opera performance
Analysis of Children's drawings	Basic elements of drawings
Questionnaires (qualitative data)	Children's and teachers' answers

RESULTS

Observation of children's behaviour: anecdotal record

The children were pleasantly excited when they entered the auditorium and were eagerly awaiting the start of the performance. They easily found their way around the hall, and the teachers did not have to restrain them.

The very beginning of the show, with the arrival of the night watchman, drew them in and they fell completely silent and let the action on stage take over. They followed the action closely, and in places some of them lost focus, started to look around or become restless (kicking legs, disturbing other kids). But they sat quietly, maintained eye contact with the stage, and moved to the rhythm of the music whenever one of the main characters sang a song (Mojca especially caught their attention).

The set gave the show a very good focus; the change of the scenery on the stage brought just enough change to allow the children to re-immense

themselves in the story and follow it through to the end. They had verbal reactions as: ‘wow’, ‘oh’, ‘look, it is snowing’ and they remained still and quiet after the changes, establishing focused eye contact with the stage.

It was also felt that they were following the plot twists and turns, which were resolved with a song of the whole choir and soloists at the end, which managed to tie the whole action on stage and in the hall together with harmony.

During the performance, the children were mostly quiet, occasionally moving to the music and sighing audibly. At the more tense moments of the story, some of them ‘stiffened’ a little and leaned forward. Occasionally they became a little restless, especially during the longer scenes. Most of the children were smiling, occasionally looking at each other and commenting on the action on stage. There was also some restlessness and chatter, but most children were observant and focused on the performance on the stage.

Analysis of children’s drawings

(drawn in the school approximately one week after attending the opera).

Immersion and attention

To understand the level of immersion and attention from the children’s drawings we looked at the number of main characters, elements of the scenery, elements of the performance (the presence of the orchestra, snowing, surtitles, the hall full of children watching, the conductor). We were also curious if the elements of songs would be present in the drawings.

In the drawings the main characters of the opera were prevailing (Kekec, Mojca, Bedanec, Nightwatch, Kosobrin, the children). The emotional expressions of the characters were evident and clear. Children were able to recognize the main attitude of each of them. The characters in the drawings were mostly static; only one drawing shows movement. Many drawings show the whole hall, the stage, the curtain, the seats for the audience, the orchestra, the conductor, even the surtitles. Besides the main characters and the set, there were also many scenery details in the drawings such as mountains, houses, and snowflakes. On some drawings the characters from the song about ‘Pehta’ and the bee were also present, even if ‘Pehta’ in person was not present at all in the opera. It was evident that the children noticed many details and that the whole experience got their attention.

Emotional expression

For capturing emotional expression from the drawings, we observed colours, intensity and the power of the stroke. We also observed the position of the drawing on the sheet of paper and the composition. The overriding emotion is one of joy and interest, which is felt through the details of the story depicted in the drawings by strong strokes, use of clear and bright colours, and large and detailed figures. The drawings are drawn on the whole sheet, the figures

are large, clearly identifiable and drawn mostly in red, blue, yellow, brown and green colours.

The impact of the show

The evidence of lasting impressions from the performance was clear because the drawings were made one or even two weeks after attending the show. To remember the experience so thoroughly the child must be relaxed and attentive during the performance. If not, the details would be forgotten. The main criteria for seeing the impact of the show in the drawings was the presence of elements that were not present (the character from the poem), the details of the concert hall, and the clearly expressed characters and storyline.

Analysis of children's answers to open questions in the questionnaire
(filled in at school approximately one week after attending the opera).

Table 2

Children's answers to the questionnaire

What did you like best?	'singing', 'when Mojca sang' (45), 'the scene', 'when the snow started to fall', 'when the stage spins' (8)
What you disliked, did something bother you?	'people chatting', 'someone taking photos', 'rude people sitting in front of me' (33), 'sometimes the orchestra was louder than the soloists', 'I didn't like Kekec's high voice', 'I didn't like Bedanec's singing', 'bad microphone', 'hard seats', 'lights from behind', 'murmuring', 'that the text was forgotten' (17) 'when Bedanec was bullying people', 'when the Kekec was fooling Rožle' (3)
Who sang the most beautifully?	'Mojca's song, which was chosen as the most beautiful by most of the children' (46), and 'Kekec' (44)
Which song did you like best?	'Mojca's sad song about her blindness', all of the songs', 'the first song of the night watch', 'Bedanec's song', 'choir of the villagers, children's choir', 'Kekec's song about Pehta and the bee'

The children were impressed by the singing and the story, as most of them (57%) who answered the question: 'What did you like best?' spontaneously mention that they liked the singing the most ('that they sang', 'singing', 'when Mojca sang'); 58% of them mention the characters or scenes from the story ('when Kekec saved Mojca', 'when Rožle scared Kekec'); a few children (10%) also mention the scenery ('the scene', 'when the snow started to fall', 'when the stage spins').

Of all the musical elements, the one that spoke to them the most was Mojca's song, which was chosen as the most beautiful by most of the children (59%), and the song of Kekec (57%), but the fact that the boy who sang the role

was a classmate and friend of theirs was also a strong factor in this. Both songs are very melodic and were vocally very well performed.

The entrance song of the night watchman and the final song sung by the whole choir of performers were also mentioned as beautiful by 10% of the children.

The opera captured the attention of the children and, from their answers to open-ended questions, they were able to empathize with the characters. This is shown by the fact that most of them were not distracted by anything, they liked everything (43%); however, they were very disturbed by the inappropriate behaviour of some people in the auditorium (14%), (they answer the question: 'Was there anything that bothered you?' by the following: 'people chatting', 'someone taking photos', 'rude people sitting in front of me') and also by the behaviour of the characters on stage that children found troubling ('when the Bedanec was bullying people', 'when the Kekec was fooling Rožle'). Performance errors were also noted and were disturbing to them (22%) ('sometimes the orchestra was louder than the soloists', 'I didn't like Kekec's high voice', 'I didn't like Bedanec's singing', and three children answered that they did not like the more scary moments of the story ('when Bedanec caught Kekec', 'when Bedanec kidnapped Mojca').

Children mentioned also some technical issues: 'bad microphone', 'hard seats', 'lights from behind', 'murmuring', 'that the text in captions was not the same as in the singing'.

It was surprising for us that 68 out of 77 children (88%) expressed their wish to go to the opera again, even though most of them did not attend the opera before. This was a positive surprise since research suggests that children who have never attended an opera performance and have never taken part in such a performance more often expressed a prejudiced opinion about this form of art (Kuzmina, 2022). Perhaps the lack of one's own aesthetic experience in such cases is made up for by the opinion of adults or peers, and seeing peers enjoying or even performing at such an event could help change opinions and give children permission to enjoy the experience as well.

Most of the children (71%) indicated on the questionnaire that they also wanted to read the story of Kekec after the opera, which means that the performance engaged them and awakened their curiosity as well as their interest in reading. The data is summarized in the following table (Table 3).

Table 3
Children's answers on the quantitative part of the questionnaire

Boys and girls (N=77)	YES	NO
Would you like to perform in an opera?	28	49
Would you like to go to an opera performance again?	69	8
Have you ever attended an opera before?	50	27
Do you attend music school?	18 (14 also sing in the choir)	59
Do you sing in the school choir?	25 (14 also attend music school)	52
Do you also want to read the story of the Kekec?	57	20

Analysis of the questionnaire for teachers

(sent to the researcher along with the children's drawings and completed questionnaires with open and closed questions)

All three teachers rated the performance as very good or excellent, particularly impressed by the quality of the aesthetic experience, the setting, the story and the message of the performance.

They felt that the children and adults got the message that good triumphs over evil and that relationships between people are important. They found it particularly positive that children were performing, which had an additional positive impact on the young audience's empathy, experience, imagination and understanding of the play.

They noted that the performance calmed and engaged the children, especially children who knew the boy who sang the role of Kekec. They found it particularly positive that children were performing, which had an additional positive impact on the young audience's empathy, experience, imagination and understanding of the play. They noted that the performance calmed and engaged the children, especially children who knew the boy who sang the role of Kekec. They felt that the children and adults got the message that good triumphs over evil and that relationships between people are important.

DISCUSSION

RO1: What are the elements of YO that promote high attentiveness (curiosity and interest), emotional captivation, identification and empathizing? The results of our study pointed out that the artistically, carefully created youth opera has a strong positive impact on children. We demonstrated how they respond to the work emotionally by evoking a strong affective response and identifying with the story on the stage, and cognitively by empathizing with characters. As Malloch (2005) points out, creative artistic expression often

enables the transmission of complex ideas and emotions by creating a story in several different modalities simultaneously, thereby evoking affect. The performance enhanced the children's curiosity and motivation to also read the book of the story of Kekec lately as they pointed out in the questionnaire, where 74% of children answer positively to the question of whether they would like to also read the story in the book. That is a clear sign that the effect of the artistic work was complex and could promote reading as well.

The effect that the dynamics of art have on us is difficult to describe, but when it is effective, listeners or viewers are moved when they experience the nonverbal messages of a painting, film, or performance. Something in the flow of music, dance or gesture directly communicates and evokes emotions and sometimes physical movement, accompaniment (Trevvarthen & Malloch, 2009, p. 83). What is this 'something'? How do we translate and share it? In our case it was clear that the narrative of the opera managed to meet the flow of children's emotionality and understanding and to broaden their understanding and curiosity. When we talk about creativity, art, and especially art for children, the question arises as to whether and why art for children is important, and what it is in the child's development that is most responsive to artistic language, and what it is in artistic language that has the most impact on the child's development (Kompan Erzar, 2015; 2016). The contemporary scientific view of child development emphasizes the importance of an emotionally safe, experientially calm (predictable, stable), yet rich (diverse and lively environment for the holistic development of the child's brain (Siegel, 2011). It is becoming increasingly clear that a child's direct contact with nature, its rhythm, art, free play, and improvisation, all within an emotionally rich and safe contact with an adult and peers, is essential for holistic and healthy development (Miranda, 2013). Contact with art and creativity is one of the areas that can provide indispensable experiences that help shape both mental and other cognitive abilities that would otherwise be impaired (Siegel, 2023).

RO2: Do children have the ability to recognize musical aesthetics, defined as the structural and emotional qualities that contribute to a composition's perceived beauty and appeal?

One of the most surprising results was the precision with which children were able to detect even the smallest slips in performance, either musical ones or technical ones. They expressed disapproval when the performances were interrupted by other spectators or by mistakes made by performers or technicians. They also highlighted that the most beautiful thing in the whole experience was the singing, especially the song about the wish to see nature and loved ones sung by a blind girl (Mojca). The features of this song were the most melodic and written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. Nieminen et al. (2011) states that aesthetic processes are usually seen as pleasing and rewarding and are, thus, important and valuable experiences. The importance of aesthetic experience could be seen also at

the neuropsychological level (Barbot & Lubart, 2012). The multidimensional nature of aesthetic experience processes employs several brain areas and includes perceptual, emotional/affective and cognitive response. An aesthetic emotional response to music could be seen also in children. By the age of 6 or 7 years, familiar tonal music is preferred and considered to sound “prettier” than unfamiliar, atonal music. These findings propose that music preferences are affected by familiarity and prototypicality.

An investigation by Koelsch (2006) gives further support showing that similar brain structures were activated in 10 year-olds and adults by violations of harmony and tonality. The pleasure that children felt during Mojca’s song clearly shows that children from 7 years onward have a certain preference for tonal music and clear musical line (Hargreaves et al., 2006). Studies indicate that children aged 6 to 9 perceive music as beautiful, suggesting that the concept of beauty is significant in music judgments for both children and adults. This appreciation for beauty in music appears to develop around the age of 6, potentially linked to the acquisition of culture-specific knowledge about tonality (Nieminen et al., 2011).

Our findings are also in line with Kuzmina’s research (2022) where she discovered that:

The modern practice of the existence of the opera for children-listeners, which takes various forms and touches on a wide range of topics, testifies to its relevance, plasticity and versatility ... The presence of performances of this kind helps to conduct continuous training of new generations of young listeners, to foster their artistic taste and to form aesthetic guidelines ... Children engage in live communication, which promotes the formation of their own judgments and emotional experience, thus contributing to the growth and strengthening of the individual as a whole. (Kuzmina, 2022, p. 434)

CONCLUSION

The opera *Kekec in škrat Skovik* has clearly demonstrated how valuable it is for children to experience a high-quality, complex piece of musical and performing art. They were able to empathize very strongly with their peers singing on stage and quickly identified with the characters they were playing. They enjoyed it when their peers managed to conquer the villain and helped each other. The children clearly perceived a quality musical stage experience, spontaneously evaluating the quality of the performance, the clear, crisp tone of the singing, the accuracy and tunefulness of the performance, the balance between the lead voice and the accompaniment, the rhythmic and melodic clarity, and even noticed the little slips that distracted them. It is also interesting to note that they were very good at identifying inappropriate behaviour in the auditorium, that they were also attentive and able to perceive the underlying

messages of the opera, and that they also critically evaluated the behaviour of the characters in the story.

In thinking about the indispensable role of art in children's development, we would conclude that the way in which the adult and the child come into contact through art is the developmental space that most powerfully shapes and, later in adolescence, integrates the child's holistic understanding of self, relationships, rules and the world. The artistic creation that is meant to shape this space must therefore be both emotionally structured and regulated, which means that it must be attuned to the child's sensitivity and sensitivity to emotional stimuli, that it must follow the rhythm of the child's experience and not overtake it or rigidly shape it without contact with the child's actual experience. A structured work of art is one that is rhythmic, balanced and harmonized, not leaving unresolved emotional content but integrating it into a whole, whatever the emotional note of that whole (happy, sad, dreamy, wistful, elated, or angry). The 'story, the melody, the flow of action' that it weaves must resolve and integrate all the experiences that it has awakened in the child. Every emotional stimulus requires an emotional response, so it must have the appropriate intensity, duration and rhythm of repetition, and must allow sufficient time and space for the viewer or listener to respond emotionally (Kompan Erzar, 2015).

The clear musical structure, interwoven with a clearly presented story and elaborate, character-driven characters in the opera *Kekec*, allowed the children to understand, experience and empathize at the same time. This also gave them a holistic experience of relationships, kindness and loneliness, mercy and greed through their performing peers, which awakened their curiosity and interest. The attuned artistic creation allows the child to become emotionally involved in it, to attract their inner attention (physical, emotional response), to shape it and regulate it through meaning-making, and to conclude by creating a new emotional space together with them. This new emotional space is what drives development (Kolacz et. al., 2022).

The work of art that emerges as a creation in which adult virtuosity is intertwined with childlike immediacy and flexibility is therefore the one that will co-shape the development of children, who will become the audience whose spontaneity and reactions will make new creations and works of art possible. The living interpersonal contact of the adult creator with the world of children and adolescents allows for the emergence of art that is alive and that opens new spaces of integration and understanding of our everyday world as placed in a deeper and broader space in which new possibilities open again and again.

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Povzetek

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Otroška opera *Kekec in škrat Skovik* je bila podlaga za raziskavo, v kateri smo preučevali, kateri elementi opernega dela najmočneje nagovarjajo osnovnošolce, v kolikšni meri so slednji občutljivi na kvaliteto glasbene izkušnje in kako jo vrednotijo.

Odzive mladostnikov, starih od 9 do 14 let, na opero *Kekec in škrat Skovik*, smo opazovali na javnih uprizoritvah opere za šolsko populacijo. Po predstavi smo učiteljicam razdelili vprašalnike zanje in za učence. Učenci so v posebej za to namenjeni uri glasbenega pouka najprej narisali sliko na temo opere, potem pa še odgovorili na nekaj preprostih vprašanj. Učiteljice so prav tako odgovorile na vprašalnik in vsa gradiva poslale raziskovalkam.

V raziskavi je sodelovalo 77 učencev z dveh različnih osnovnih šole, ene mestne in ene primestne, ter z ene glasbene šole. Ob operi *Kekec in škrat Skovik* se je jasno pokazalo, kako dragocena je za otroke izkušnja kvalitetnega, kompleksnega glasbenoscenskega umetniškega dela.

Analiza risb je pokazala, da so učenci predstavo pozorno spremljali, tudi po tednu ali več od obiska predstave so risali detajle scenografije, dvorane, izraze na obrazih likov. Prevladujoče čustveno doživljanje so izražali skozi moč potez, intenzivnost barv in risanje po celem listu.

Iz odgovorov na anketna vprašanja je razvidno, da sta otroke najbolj nagovorila petje in zgodba, saj jih je večina (41) na vprašanje »Kaj ti je bilo najbolj všeč?« spontano navedlo, da jim je bilo najbolj všeč petje (»da so peli«, »petje«, »ko je Mojca pela«). Zelo močno so se lahko vživeli v svoje vrstnike, ki so peli na odru, in se hitro poistovetili z liki, ki so jih igrali. Motilo jih je neprimerno vedenje nekaterih v dvorani. Bili so pozorni in sposobni zaznati tudi temeljna sporočila opernega dela ter tudi kritično vrednotili vedenje likov v zgodbi. Kljub temu da večina učencev ne poje v zboru niti ne obiskuje glasbene šole (50 od 77), so vsi razen devetih izrazili željo, da bi še obiskali operno predstavo. Velika večina (55) učencev si je po ogledu opere želela tudi prebrati zgodbo o Kekcu, kar pomeni, da jih je predstava pritegnila in prebudila njihovo radovednost ter tudi zanimanje za branje.

Glede sposobnosti prepoznavanja elementov nas je presenetil bogat odziv učencev na glasbene elemente. Učenci so prepoznavali kvalitetno (točno in natančno) izvedbo, čist, jasen ton petja. Najbolj jih je nagovorila Mojčina pesem, ki jo je kot najlepšo izbralo največ učencev. Opazili pa so tudi spodrsrljaje, zmotile so jih tehnične in izvajalske napake (17 učencev): »včasih je bil orkester glasnejši od solistov«, »Kekčev visoki glas«, »Bedančevo petje«, »slab mikrofoni«, »trdi sedeži«, »luči izza«, »šumenje«.

Učiteljice so predstavo ocenile kot zelo dobro oz. odlično, prepričali so jih kvaliteta estetske izkušnje, scena, zgodba in sporočilo predstave. Opazile so, da je predstava učence umirila in pritegnila, še posebej tiste, ki so iz glasbene ali osnovne šole poznali fanta, ki je pel naslovno vlogo Kekca.

Jasna glasbena struktura, ki se je prepletla z jasno podano zgodbo in izdelanimi, karakternimi liki, je učencem omogočila, da so hkrati razumeli, notranje doživljali in sočustvovali s posameznimi liki. S tem so preko svojih nastopajočih vrstnikov in čustvenega odziva, ki ga je prebudilo glasbeno delo, doživeli tudi celostno izkušnjo o odnosih, dobroti in osamljenosti, usmiljenju in pohlepu, ki je v njih prebudila radovednost in zanimanje.