Music Composition - I

Using the Fundamentals of Music to Tell the Story

Objectives: The students will learn that music is one of the most important tools they can use to tell a story. They will learn basic music terms and fundamentals. They will use this understanding - at their level - to assist them in creating the melodies for the opera.

Tell the students that the wonderful thing about opera is it uses music to help tell the story. That is what makes it special and unique. A play only uses words, actions, scenery and costumes. Opera uses not only all of those, but music as well. Remind them of a movie they may have seen that used music to tell the story. They will remember that scary parts and funny parts are sometimes easier to recognize because of the music that comes just before or during the action. It is the same in opera.

The students will be responsible to think of ways to sing the words they have written to help tell their story. There are many different parts of music, but the as the students create their melodies they only need to think about rhythm, melody, harmony and dynamics. Those are big words for little children. Here are simple definitions for you to teach the students:

- **Rhythm**: the most fundamental element of music! In opera, it is the grouping of words by how long each one is spoken and how much stress is placed upon it. No music can exist without it. Rhythm is what makes you want to tap your toe, or clap your hands or snap your fingers. It also helps to tell the story. Demonstrate to the students that rhythm exists in all of our speech. Ask them to say a simple sentence, such as “I love to come to school because learning makes me happy.” Have them listen to the words that are naturally emphasized: (love) (school) (learn...) (hap...)

Ask them to gently pat their leg on those emphasized words or syllables. Next ask them to speak the same sentence as though they were robots! No emphasis, just evenly spaced syllables. They can quickly tell that the rhythm of the speech lets us understand it better. It is the same with music.

Ask the children to take turns saying different lines from their libretto placing extra stress on the important words, just as they would if they were actually saying that to someone. Have them find the rhythm of the lines by speaking, tapping and listening to see if they are really emphasizing the places that they would in normal speech. Ask them to think about whether there are some words that should or could be held out a little longer for more emphasis.

Ask the children to say another sentence: “Today I walked to school.” Have them say it the first time emphasizing the word “today.” They will notice that when “today” is stressed, it indicates that they usually do not walk to school; just today. Now have them say the sentence again, emphasizing “I”. Now the meaning is changed. Now it means that they are making a distinction
between the fact that they walked to school when perhaps someone else rode the bus. Next, they should emphasize only the word “to”. Now the sentence is making a statement that might indicate they only walked to school, but will be taking the bus home. When school is emphasized, we have a different meaning... indicating that they walked to school when there were possibly other choices of places to go.

Teach the students that when making up their tunes for their words, the stress and emphasis they put on the words by the rhythm they use can completely change the meaning in some cases and will always – if done well – assist in telling their story as they want to tell it.

A useful way to find the rhythm of a line of libretto is to clap hands and fit the words into a steady beat – stressing and emphasizing the important syllables. The stressed syllables should be spoken on a clap, not between claps.

**Begin to create melodies by establishing rhythm:** At this point it may be a good idea to divide the class into groups and give each group the assignment to work on one section of the libretto. They can do this during recess or after school individually, coming together into their groups for a few minutes before your next opera-time. Their responsibility will be to establish a rhythm for each section of the opera libretto.

They may (and likely will) discover that some of the sentences they have written just don’t work with any rhythm at all. In that case, they may make suggestions or get suggestions from the rest of the class on how to simplify. Frequently, a long word can be replaced by a shorter one; or a sentence might be eliminated altogether. This must come from the students, and not from the teacher. If students are given the power to edit the libretto using this tool - rhythm, they will learn a great deal and will still own the work.

If you have rhythm instruments in your classroom, use them as the children practice rhythm in the libretto. It will make it more fun for them to “beat” upon something for emphasis and assist you in getting your points across. *Active involvement is a better teaching tool than passive.* Now is a great time to involve children who may be struggling in other core subjects.

Always look for places during opera creation to validate and uplift all of the students; this is a good one.

**Melody:** Melody is the second fundamental element of music. It is a series of musical notes arranged in a rhythmic pattern. Melody is a universal human phenomenon, traceable to prehistoric times. The origins of melodic thinking have been sought in language, in birdsong and other animal sounds, and in the crying and playing of young children. (*The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music; Macmillan Press Ltd, London*).

It is important to explain to the children that music – especially singing – has been as natural to human beings in every age and in every culture as speaking, laughing or
crying. Tell them that people have been copying the sounds that they hear in nature – birds, wind, water flowing, animals, thunder, etc – and turning them into music for as long as man has been on the earth.

Singing is instinctive and natural, and in their opera there is no right or wrong way to do it. They will want to remember the rhythms that they developed for their libretto, but they should not be afraid to “break into song” using their voices to express the emotions of the words they have written.

Using the techniques discussed in Chapter One, “Start with a Song”; sing with the children. Get them used to using their voices in the highest and lowest ranges. Let them feel the sensations in the throat and roof of the mouth when their voices slide up and down the scale.

Tell the children that a melody needs to have high and low notes. Tell them that high notes “feel” different to them physically as well as sound different to their ears. They may want to open their mouths wider and raise their eyebrows to “feel” a really high note. It should not feel like screaming. It is not louder. It is higher.

If someone in your class plays a stringed instrument such as a violin, ask that child to bring the instrument to class and demonstrate on it the different thicknesses of the strings. Let them hear how the thick strings sound lower in pitch than the thin strings. Show them how by putting your finger on a string, you can essentially shorten it and that will make it sound higher, as well.

Tell the children that their vocal mechanism is much like a violin string. It can be stretched out thin and made to sound higher. When it is completely relaxed, that is as low as they can sing. Low notes are sometimes sung very, very softly and high notes sometimes tend to want to come out more loudly because the body is working at stretching out the vocal fold (or cords, as the children will likely call them). It is harder to sing low notes loudly for this same reason. The lower the note, the more relaxed the vocal fold must be, and that affects all of the muscles of the body that need to be used to sing loudly.

Therefore, they should not expect to have lots of low notes in their opera. They will not be able to sing them as loudly and project them to the audience as well as higher notes. (A good rule of thumb for the teacher is to try to keep them singing in a range from Bb below Middle C to D an octave higher than Middle C. One or two notes a little higher than that are acceptable, but a young child’s range will generally not go higher than that.)

The most desirable way for the children to learn to produce pretty, singable, high notes without tending to scream or squeal them is to have them yawn and sigh. They yawn and sing a sigh as high and low as they can go. Let them feel that is as easy it is to sing in their high voices when they are relaxed, as it is to yawn and to sigh. Once again, singing is a natural physical and emotional phenomenon that should not feel like work.
Now that the students understand rhythm and melody and know how to make their voices go high and low, ask them to practice making up melodies by singing normal conversation to each other, and even to you, the teacher, throughout the day. It is quite delightful to spend part of the day singing everything, i.e. “Students, time to turn in your papers, now.” (Sung to the students, putting them at ease about their ability to do the same.) “Mrs. Wonderful, may I please erase the board?” (Sung to you with your smiling approval.)

Relax and have fun with the students. Do not refer to yourself as unable to sing, as they will adopt that belief themselves. Children are rarely able to attempt to do that which they see is difficult or scary for the adults around them! If you are nervous, keep it to yourself. Tell them it is fun. Tell them they can do it. When they try, tell them they are amazing! Play with the children.

This is another opportunity for you to build trust and community in your classroom with the group as a whole and with individuals who may have challenges or be struggling in one area or another.

**Harmony**: the third fundamental element of music. It is the combining of notes simultaneously, to produce chords, and their successive use to produce chord progressions. *(The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music, Macmillan press Ltd., London)* Explain to the children that when two or more notes are played or sung at the same time it creates a sound that we call a chord or harmony. Depending upon which notes you choose to play or sing, the chord will sound happy, sad, scary, mysterious, excited, worried, surprised or a lot of other emotions. When the chords are
combined with melody and rhythm, the music really becomes complete and will become a very important part of telling their story.

**Chords help to tell the story:**

- **Major** – happy
- **Minor** – sad
- **Diminished** – scary
- **Augmented** – mysterious

Young students do not need to understand all of the technicalities associated with chord structure and composition. If your class is older, junior or senior high level, this is a good opportunity to go into this more deeply. For our purposes, Opera by Children does not expect you to teach more than the basic understanding that the music can tell the story by the sound of the chords – the harmony – that will be written into the accompaniment by a professional music arranger.

However, the students do need to know that this is something that is up to them. As they are making up their melodies, they should indicate by the way they sing, or even by verbal or written instructions, that they want this particular place to sound a certain way. Then the musician who arranges their music into a score with accompaniment will know what to do to give them what they “heard” in their heads as they were singing their melodies.

The same principle holds true for **Dynamics and Tempo**. Dynamics simply means how loudly or softly the music is sung. It also assists in telling the story. If a certain section needs to be portrayed with action that happens quickly, the music should reflect this, as well. Children, as the composers, should also know that it is their responsibility to tell their arranger the desired Tempo, or when they want something to go fast and when they want it to move slowly.

**Dynamics** – How loud or soft

**Tempo** – how fast or slow