Facilitating Creative Synergy: An Analytical Approach to the Operatic Creative Process

EMMA JAYAKUMAR
Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University

This paper explores methodological challenges encountered during the initial practice-led research phase of the creation of an opera for children. The primary impetus underlying this project is an exploration of how the creative, theoretical and conceptual approach to children's opera could be reconsidered, increasing its relevance, appeal and comprehension. **Relevance**, **appeal** and **comprehension** are three categories of insight and guidance that selected areas of literature and theory can lend to creative development, including the teasing out of one main grand concept: the development (and adaptation within an operatic context) of what Jeanne Klein—widely published Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) practitioner and researcher—refers to as a "child's gaze." Klein's first use of the "child's gaze" concept appears in her 1993 article *Applying Research to Artistic Practices* in which she states:

> When adult artists ignore the meanings children make of theatre they exclude them from adult fictive worlds. Theatre means, "to gaze upon." To include young audiences in children's theatre, a theatre that implies their ownership, artists must understand theatre from a "child's gaze" rather than from "adult gazes" of what adults perceive or think children will or should know, enjoy and appreciate. Children think differently at various stages of cognitive development. Theatre producers should be aware of each stage's characteristics so that artistic intentions match or challenge cognitive abilities in appropriate ways.³

Drawing guidance from this conceptual underpinning and theoretical framework, the project ultimately entails the creation of a libretto (text) and the musical realisation of this text (score). Provision has also been made for feedback from industry professionals on the libretto and developing score, resulting in the eventual workshopping of the opera by singers and instrumentalists, and semi-staged performance.

---

¹ This involves an exploration of a broad range of secondary literature and research including: sociological concepts related to the presentation of dramatic material to children; social issues that may inhibit initial and lasting contact with the genre; the defining structure and elements of effective children's drama and study into psychological phenomena therein; and music processing elements and developmental implications specific to children's understanding of music. Developmental stage profiling is also utilized and developed using the above literature in line with Klein's comments regarding challenging cognitive abilities appropriately.


³ Ibid., 6.
There is often a tenuous line that creative artists tread between what is generally felt to be *instinctual* creative practice and the requirement as a practice-led researcher to demonstrate effective transference of theory into practice. The transference of these gleaned theoretical ideas into creative practice has presented numerous challenges to project design and methodology.

Also fundamental to the inception and development of a complex operatic creative work are the efficient performances of multiple roles: those of librettist, composer, performer and researcher. In this particular research project, these roles are assumed by the same person (the author of this paper), creating a further level of complexity beyond the already inherently intricate interactions between them.

This complexity of role-playing and creative design has necessitated the development in this project of various methodological reference tools. To date, this has entailed the analytical development of multiple design briefs that analyse and make a compendium of each of the primary creative roles, intended creative goals and their underpinning theoretical rationale. As well as discovering innovative ways to draw on different aspects of personal creative and performance skill sets, the development of these tools has brought about increased harmony within the performance of multiple roles, as well as providing clear and concise guidelines for the execution of sound creative writing and musical composition to follow.

### Where to Begin(?): The Libretto, and the Libretto Design Brief

Michael Halliwell's statement, "in any investigation into the nature of opera, it remains generally accepted that the verbal text is the starting point for the musical development,"\(^4\) seemed to support the decision to write the libretto first. However, the ferocity of the text versus music debate is perhaps never greater than where opera is concerned. Further reading and critical commentary, including Edward T. Cone's definition of opera as "a record of the varying resolutions of the conflict between the demands of the music for self-fulfilment and the needs of the text for projection and amplification"\(^5\) called the process into question, triggering a reflective journey of questioning for the research project. What really comes first: music or text, story or general shape, or dialogue? Is the process simultaneous? Should these roles be isolated from each other for clarity? What implications do music present to text, and vice versa?

In the hybrid organism of opera, real difficulty lies in the isolation of components heavily reliant on each other for artistic clarity and success, or as Gian Carlo Menotti points out: "to read and judge a libretto without its musical setting is unfair both to the

---


librettist and the composer." Sandra Corse probes a little deeper, noting that "the characteristics by which language achieves its effects—contrast, repetition, symmetry, balance . . . are also the characteristics whereby musical structures are built." She also observes that "the composer reinvents, in a different medium, the ambiguity and multiple relationships of literary texts." Textual draft processes were ongoing and would inevitably be influenced by the ever-present musical realisation processes of the composition side of my brain. Less linear than the initial 'text first!' approach, the necessity to move the project forward creatively seemed to re-arrive at this textual point naturally. However, it became evident as reading progressed that there was a scarcity of scholarly literature regarding libretto-writing method, or indeed of literature treating the libretto as an independent literary form. The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians provides a possible explanation:

The study of librettos was for a long time neglected by historians of opera and oratorio, and it has generally been taken for granted that the vast majority of them are as literature beyond contempt.

Indeed, as Arthur Groos confirms, "libretto bashing has a distinguished tradition in the blood sport of opera," as he recounts the deleterious consequences, from the beginning of opera, for serious poets and writers involved in the writing of librettos. Sandra Corse adds that libretti lie "at the edge of literature," that they "emphasize the communicative function of language rather than its aesthetic function." Nor could much be found in the assumed closest relative genre of Broadway musical theatre. Only one book was unearthed that addressed the creation of a piece of musical theatre from the writer's perspective, also discussing the musical development in any depth, and this was Cohen and Rosenhaus's Writing Musical Theater. In the introduction the authors lament this lack of documented knowledge:

When we began to write our own shows, we often wished we could find a book that analysed musical theater from the writer's point of view, a comprehensive

7 Sandra Corse, Opera and the Uses of Language: Mozart, Verdi, and Britten (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987), 14.
8 By method in this context, I mean a step-wise approach to planning and developing the text of the libretto.
10 Ibid., 2.
11 Corse, Opera and the Uses of Language: Mozart, Verdi, and Britten, 14.
guide that presented the rules of the craft in a systematic and thorough manner. More recently when we started to teach musical theater writing at the college level, we were still unable to find a suitable book for our students.\(^{13}\)

As much as this manual seemed to promise at the outset, closer inspection revealed that the structure of a musical, as advocated by Cohen and Rosenhaus, was quite a different process from opera, requiring three defined roles in the creative writing process: the librettist (more akin to project manager, overseeing story design, stage directions and dialogue); the lyricist (the more poetic task of the creative writing of song lyrics); and the songwriter. Also revealed was the common use of an additional composer who writes the connecting music and orchestral interludes, also fulfilling orchestration duties. This musical theatre model was helpful but not overly precise and lacking a real focus on the techniques of operatic libretto writing and score planning. It only went so far in providing real solutions to the processes of operatic creative writing and planning.

The additional requirement of creating a work for children that would reflect the appeal, relevance and comprehension aspects mentioned earlier, led me to formulate my own design brief as a reference tool, and to utilise my knowledge of existing repertoire and style to guide me in the first draft process. This was achieved by combining many different areas of additional literature surrounding critical commentary and analysis of style and aesthetic, complemented by writings and interviews from composers and musicologists on the operatic creative process to aid direction. For example, composer Arthur Bliss notes that "even with good diction singers only succeed in making about seventy-five per cent of the text intelligible . . . the music must take charge from the first bar to the last."\(^{14}\) Paul Robinson pushes this point further when he discusses the "four great operatic enemies of intelligibility . . . [that] interfere with our ability to decipher the words."\(^{15}\) He calls attention to the dilution of textual impact when performers render text unintelligible. Michael Halliwell presents another related argument that the orchestra's "omniscient narrator" is "capable of providing the audience with information about and insight into a character that is not possible in drama."\(^{16}\)

All of these statements present implications not just to librettists, but also to composers in their large- to-small-scale creative decisions. Initial instincts were to strive to achieve quality in both language and music, echoed in Paul Robinson's statement: "in

\(^{13}\) Ibid., xi.


the best operas of course, music and language achieve a degree of unity that makes
fatuous any mechanical separation of verbal and musical significances." 17 Similar
sentiments in essays on the subject by Richard Strauss 18 and, amongst other writings, 
*Opera and Drama* by Richard Wagner, 19 are notable on this point. A survey of similar
musings by composers and their librettists (both together and independently) was
illuminating. Mozart and Da Ponte, 20 Strauss and Hoffmannsthal, 21 W.H. Auden, 22
Stravinsky and Ramuz, 23 E.T.A. Hoffman, 24 Beaumarchais, 25 Sir Arthur Bliss, 26 Giuseppe
Verdi, 27 Jonathan Dove, 28 and Britten and Crozier 29 consistently reiterate that the text is
never drastically more developed than that of the musical score in the overall creative
development. These musings also seemed to suggest the resistance of reliance on text
intelligibility for the success of the opera. The music was to play an enormous role both
aesthetically and in narrative capacity. Virgil Thomson confirms this when he advocates
librettos that contain "poetic language. Not pompous language, not florid, not overloaded
with imagery . . . nobly plain, if possible compact." 30

The libretto design brief (Figure 1) developed further with the exploration of
literature encompassing developmental psychology relating to children's "story liking"
and perception, 31 as well as literature regarding musical comprehension relating to
children and their exposure to various contemporary vocal 32 and classical vocal and
instrumental music styles. 33 The children's opera genre is rather underdeveloped and

19 Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (London: University of Nebraska Press,
1995). The original book was published in 1869 in German; utilised for this paper was the 1995
edition/translation in English.
21 Ibid., 294-313.
22 Ibid., 354-60.
23 Ibid., 272-82.
24 Ibid., 166-79.
25 Ibid., 139-52.
26 Ibid., 362-66.
27 Ibid., 238-42.
28 Theresa Schmitz, "The Discovery of Children as a Worthy Audience for Operas," eds Mark Macleod and
31 Paul E. Jose and William F. Brewer, "Development of Story Liking: Character Identification, Suspense, and
32 More specifically: pop, jazz, folk and Broadway musical theatre vocal styles.
33 More specifically: opera, operetta or art song/Lied styles of singing and large symphonic and chamber
orchestral works.
underinvested in. Most professional companies (certainly in Australia) rely heavily on abridgements or adaptations of adult works such as Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*[^34] (Cinderella) or Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*[^35] (The Magic Flute) to form the bulk of their children’s opera repertoire offerings. There are exceptions to this, of course. More recent works in the genre have seen an increase in commissions of opera for children (or families), for example Jonathan Dove's *The Adventures of Pinocchio*,[^36] Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince*[^37] and Richard Ayres' *Peter Pan*[^38] (all in the last 10–12 years and all for houses in the United Kingdom and Germany). There are more historical examples of quality compositions in the genre. Benjamin Britten’s *The Little Sweep*,[^39] Gian Carlo Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors*[^40] and Seymour Barab's *Little Red Riding Hood*[^41] are three notable examples; there is, however, no creditable catalogue of works in the genre (a scant Wikipedia article containing approximately twenty opera titles cannot be seen as a reliable academic source). With some interviews to draw upon from Benjamin Britten’s[^42] work in the field, but with very little other documentation, it became necessary to look to related genres that might provide helpful examples, both dramatic and musical.

Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) literature and research was of interest, having a research history that already integrated developmental psychology literature—in particular the extensive work of Jeanne Klein[^43]. Other sources such as Sinclair’s *Six Lenses for Interpreting Theatre for Young Australian Audiences*[^44] and Wood’s *Theatre for

[^34]: Gioachino Rossini, *La Cenerentola* (*dramma giocoso* in two acts), libretto by Jacopo Ferretti (1816).
[^35]: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte* (*singspiel* in two acts), libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder (1791).
Children\textsuperscript{45} contained a wealth of practical experience invested in related genres (children's theatre and the kitschier pantomime genre) to complement the applied theory approach. Although Klein has called into question some of Wood's less academic and "arguable assumptions"\textsuperscript{46} in Theatre for Children, it is interesting to note that Wood's opinions about "what children en masse respond to"\textsuperscript{47} correlate clearly, and quite often, with Klein's objectives and opinions.

At all stages, and as a continuing process, literature was categorized and colour-coded for ease of cross-referencing within the literature, for example with regard to characterization, the need for clarity of themes, simplicity of storyline, and realism in language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style/form/conventions</th>
<th>TYA literature</th>
<th>Libretto Characteristics</th>
<th>Story lining/social psychology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I choose NUMBER OPERA</td>
<td>(Klein &amp; Schonmann, 2009) (Essential criteria)</td>
<td>(Weisstein, 2006) Libretto as literature</td>
<td>Essential criteria children's literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.Short duration of sections easier to grasp, simplifies structure to more exposed styles like musical theatre/drama/play</td>
<td>Not too familiar, not too unfamiliar (concepts) to prevent boredom or baffling</td>
<td>* Music lacks the speed and verbal dexterity of language, fewer words are needed in opera than in a play of comparable length...necessitating a simplification of both action and characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Noatre at present</td>
<td>3.Story schemas drive preferences for linear narratives as children search for cause and effect actions within plot structures</td>
<td>Emotions expressed in closed musical numbers occupying a large segment of the time normally reserved for the dramatic events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.No spoken word dialogue</td>
<td>Fast pace - not too fast paced &quot;tempo slow enough to make</td>
<td>(Schmidgall, 1977) Away from passages of complex discourse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.No chorus</td>
<td>4. Fast pace - not too fast paced &quot;tempo slow enough to make</td>
<td>(Halliwell, 2005) Narrative role of the orchestra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functionally tonal - neo classicism (Stavinsky, Britten) with compositional influences of whole tone/moodyness</td>
<td>1. Characterisation 2. Action</td>
<td>* Characterisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive with Harpsichord/keyboard</td>
<td>* Action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible songs as a little sweep?</td>
<td>2. Narrative of the orchestra</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1:** Libretto design brief sample page with colour coding correlations for cross-referencing

**Libretto Design Brief in Action**

One of the first demonstrations of the usefulness of the design brief related to the selection of a play text versus a story text. The design brief literature led me back to many libretto-specific characteristics, prompting gravitation toward the adaptation of a story text. For example, Gary Schmidgall asserts that a librettist "will naturally gravitate away from passages of discursive complexity and toward those that issue in psychological or


\textsuperscript{47} Wood and Grant, Theatre for Children, 15-61.
physical action." 48 Similarly, Weisstein comments that "Music lacks the speed and verbal dexterity of language, fewer words are needed in opera than in a play of comparable length." 49 Weisstein's comment reaffirmed the stylistic concerns I had about choosing or adapting from a more complex theatre source. When reflecting on a compilation and analysis of twentieth and twenty-first century operas (including those written specifically for children), I noted the trend to adapt from novels, stories, poems, paintings or picture books with strong visual narratives.

The short story, *The Selfish Giant*, by Oscar Wilde 50 was examined. On first viewing, this story correlated very promisingly with literature pertinent to components already investigated that reflected on the most unifying elements of children's successful 51 entertainment (child protagonists, straightforward linear timeline, elements of humour and fantasy are a few examples). It also possessed what I believed to have musical possibilities. ‘Musical possibility’ is a difficult concept to articulate fully and I use it to refer to how well a text or story presents itself to a composer/librettist for what Cohen and Rosenhaus refer to as "musicalization." 52 Cohen and Rosenhaus discuss this selection of idea for musical realisation in *Writing Musical Theater* when they state: "Stories that contain and evoke strong emotion, serious or humorous, are more suitable for musicalization than those that do not." They go on to note that “emotions must be strong enough that it feels appropriate for the characters to sing." 53 Prolific librettist W.H. Auden reflects: "No opera plot can be sensible, because people do not sing when they are feeling sensible." 54 The emotive nature of the text, coupled with the presence of magical characters—a giant, the elements anthropomorphised, a magical garden—suggested to me very musical possibilities relating to voice types (a bass baritone perhaps for the giant), the possibility of vocal virtuosity (coloratura) and experimental vocalisations for character effects, to name a few.

---

49 Weisstein, "The Libretto as Literature," 9.
51 Successful is defined in terms of features common to entertainment models with very high box office/financial success (films and books) and ratings (television) as well as critically acclaimed film and literature titles.
53 Ibid.
Plot Development and Musical Form

Literature cited in the design brief assisted the formulation of a plot and scenes schema, as well as the chosen number opera components such as aria, ensemble, and orchestral interlude for example. This was greatly assisted by the development of a structured ‘map’ (Figure 2a), made in consultation with my doctoral supervisor, Dr Lyndall Adams. I chose the number opera format due to its relationship to more modern versions of musical theatre that are presented to children today, for example in Disney movies such as *Frozen*, *The Lion King* and *Aladdin*.

As the design brief shows, these film examples are not cited randomly, but rather are revealed to be some of the most successful (highest grossing and critically acclaimed) films for children of all time. Moreover, the musical focus is on the vocal line, akin to Broadway musical theatre in its stylistic origin. As Broadway musical theatre is the closest in style to opera, and is already a style children are exposed to through (primarily) Disney

---

55 Number opera can be defined in very general terms as an opera in which the sections (including ensembles, arias, recitatives and/or dialogue) are clearly separated from each other.

56 *Frozen*, directed by Chris Buck (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

57 *The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2011), DVD.

58 *Aladdin*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2013), DVD.
models, it seemed to be a natural choice to scaffold\textsuperscript{59} children's existing understandings or exposure from this area into the more formal and arguably more alien world of the operatic style and aesthetic.

The number opera format supports set pieces of shorter duration, in opposition to the continuous arioso format championed in the operas of, for example, Richard Wagner or Richard Strauss. In terms of narrative development, I compiled a list of unifying characterisation elements common to many films on the broader list. Further development of the storyboard map (Figure 2b) was made with an analysis of essential plot points from the original, juxtaposed with my alternate, broad story plan, which emulated the Wilde's story arc. High points in the drama were identified, along with points where the adaptation might be in danger of losing direction, and points where more in-depth characterization might be needed in an operatic adaptation/transcription process. Later on I discovered that this story arc approach was also advocated in Cohen and Rosenhaus's text, a very encouraging correlation to uncover!

Figure 2b: Rainmaker storyboard map prior to screenwriting guides application attempting to emulate story arc of Wilde's (see Figure 2a)

I certainly felt that my design brief included the essential components to make up an engaging libretto, although after finishing a first draft I felt rather clumsy about my general method. Missing from my design brief were clear and concise guidelines to the

---

\textsuperscript{59} Jerome Seymour Bruner, \textit{Toward a Theory of Instruction} (London: Harvard University Press, 1966). The concept of scaffolding is another conceptual underpinning of the research project and finds its origin in Jerome Bruner's various works in cognitive psychology and education.
creative writing process of a larger scale theatrical work. Certainly, I had not found anything in the literature to date that amounted to a libretto-writing instruction manual, with the exception of the Cohen and Rosenhaus text, which as mentioned earlier, was not ideal. After discussing these issues and receiving feedback from a professional theatre and opera director on the first draft libretto, the recommendation of two screenwriting books provided some excellent insights into the general story structure and characterisation that reiterated the director's professional advice and mandate to visualise the scene like a film unfolding (complete with soundtrack) and to take out as much extraneous text as possible. She mentioned the phrase "show . . . don't tell", straight from the pages of Robert McKee's book, *Story: style, structure, substance, and the principles of screenwriting*.60

Robert McKee writes: "The wise writer puts off the writing of dialogue for as long as possible because the premature writing of dialogue chokes creativity . . . writing dialogue in search of scenes, writing scenes in search of story . . . is the least creative method."61 He prescribes the formation of firstly, a step-outline (short descriptive statements plotted on index cards) and secondly, the treatment process. Treatment entails the "moment by moment of action, underlaid with a full subtext of the conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings of all characters."62 He recommends that only from this very defined point should the writing of dialogue then proceed. These principles, as well as similar ones including the formulation of a Storyboard63 and a valuable fifteen-point *Beatsheet* as prescribed by Blake Snyder,64 have been used to supplement my own storyboard, making allowances for musical characteristics and components particular to opera.65 This has resulted in a tighter, more minimal work without an interval and with fewer characters. The secondary story arc begins life halfway through the original text and presents a more continuous movement and natural peak in action, rather than two halves performing essentially the same pattern. The additional diagrams (Figures 2c, 2d) created to reflect the screenwriting literature are valuable additions to the design brief, and are assisting further in the libretto drafting process.

---

61 Ibid., 417.
62 Ibid., 415.
63 Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat!:The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005), 97-117. The Storyboard includes the utilization of a large pin board, which is divided into three acts in four sections (see Figure 2d) on which all of the beats are laid out on index cards with short scene descriptions.
64 Ibid., 70.
65 For example the inclusion of set pieces such as an aria, recitative, dialogue, ensemble or orchestral interludes. These things are particular to an operatic work, as opposed to a film from which the literature originates.
Figure 2c: Screenwriting method model of Robert McKee\textsuperscript{66} displaying the influence of David Fenton’s double-loop learning models\textsuperscript{67}, as adapted from the Argyris and Schön 1974\textsuperscript{68} original.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act 1</th>
<th>Beat</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opening Image</td>
<td>First impression, tone and mood</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme Stated</td>
<td>A question posed or statement made of thematic premise</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Set-Up</td>
<td>Including “6 things that need fixing”. Things ‘missing’ from hero’s life. (facilitating call backs and repeated motifs in body of work)</td>
<td>1-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catalyst</td>
<td>Inciting Incident (McKee)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debate</td>
<td>The pros and cons of participating for the hero. It must ask a question of some kind</td>
<td>12-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 2</td>
<td>Break Into Two</td>
<td>The hero makes a decision to move</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B Story</td>
<td>Sub-plot, “gives us a breather”, reiterates thematic premise</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fun and Games</td>
<td>“The promise of the premise” Bulk of set pieces (example: a chase scene)</td>
<td>30-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 2</td>
<td>Midpoint</td>
<td>Peak or crash. Stakes are raised</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad Guys Close In</td>
<td>Forces align against the hero</td>
<td>55-75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All is Lost</td>
<td>Opposite of midpoint – “whiff of death”</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dark Night of the Soul</td>
<td>Finding a solution, soul searching</td>
<td>75-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 3</td>
<td>Break Into Three</td>
<td>Everything culminates to present a solution. Adding up clues</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finale</td>
<td>Lessons learned are applied</td>
<td>85-110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final Image</td>
<td>Opposite of opening image. Proof that change has occurred and it’s real</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2d: Table outline of Blake Snyder ‘Beatsheet’ and summary of beats and process\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{66} McKee, \textit{Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting}, 410-17.


\textsuperscript{69} Snyder, \textit{Save the Cat!: The Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need}, 67-114.
With a clearer sense of the importance of story design and anatomy over text/dialogue in shaping the drama—"writing from the inside out"70 as McKee advocates—further note was taken of one of his other frequent statement: "show don't tell."71 Musical realisation leads inevitably to textual change. What if the story were approached three-dimensionally by placing less emphasis on text and more on the sonic and visual worlds, thus allowing for the storytelling abilities of the score and performers to follow? Perhaps it might provide ideas that could act as catalysts for both text and the intertwined musical score and drama as the next libretto draft was undertaken.

Experiments began with different approaches to the overall creative process, ones that found genesis in my performance experience and vocal abilities. This involved integration of the influence of the action research cycle,72 adapted action research models,73 creative web models74 and a broader influence of ideology particular to the Six Thinking Hats of Edward de Bono,75 as adapted by Hilary Collins.76

After discovering a short 1956 interview transcript with Benjamin Britten,77 which set out his process of planning and compositional idea formation, I reflected on the components of my own process. I noted that my composition process takes place with the voice clearly in mind. It is sung at the piano, refined, harmony is built around the melody line, then refined, and so on. Rather than trying to discount this voice and focus solely on the writing of the libretto, which is admittedly a less experienced field of creative endeavour for me, I decided that approaching the story/drama from a performance perspective could lead to more authentic creative results. It also helped to kick-start the creative processes throughout periods of creative writing paralysis (or "writer's block!").

Some visualisations of this process (Figure 3) were formulated, with attempts to define relationships between four distinct roles, plotted in an iterative circle diagram. I posed three questions. What is the theory relationship (information)? What is the creative relationship (inspiration)? Which elements perform both of these functions? The

70 McKee, Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting, 415-17.
71 Ibid., 334-35.
77 Britten and Kildea, On Music, 139.
information/inspiration arrows indicate the single or multidirectional flow of these two elements.

The first model takes on the basic action research cycle model, and was influenced by Jane Davidson's adaptation for use by composers. It highlights the relationship between roles, providing clarity of influence, information and responsibility. This model was then expanded into a cyclic web, indicating each role's background of experience and knowledge, and situating the origins of creative ideas together with the formulation of elements (text, music or dramatic concepts)—as in Figure 4. This model displays an influence of the Smith and Dean "Iterative Cyclic Web." This larger scale model was then utilised in the breakdown of individual role responsibilities in the formulation of another design brief, this time for the creative process (Figure 5). Colour codes were again used to identify correlations in literature and concepts, and arrows were added to indicate connections between the various components.

Figure 3: Preliminary conceptualisation diagram of creative process

---

80 Smith and Dean, *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, 20.
Figure 4: Cyclic web

Figure 5: Individual roles design brief
An example of the practical application of this exercise involved beginning the process with my own voice type (the singer role). I developed three non-textual vocalisations/vocal "identifiers" or "calls" (Figure 6). These vocalisations certainly reflect the influence of John Cage's Aria\(^1\) and Luciano Berio's Sequenza III,\(^2\) both in their use of graphic notation and in the experimental nature of the vocalisation. Oliver Knussen also used concepts like this for the beast characters in the opera Where the Wild Things Are,\(^3\) and Kate Bush vocally imitates birdcalls in her An Endless Sky of Honey.\(^4\) These are points of interest for further exploration. With three different and interesting characterisations taking place, these vocalizations suggested musical motifs, which I developed further (Figure 7).

---

83 Oliver Knussen, Where the Wild Things Are (fantasy opera in one act), libretto by Maurice Sendak (1983).
Figure 7. Excerpts of realised vocalisations developed from experiments

Whilst maintaining a sense of otherness in their more formal speech patterns and in their use of character identifier vocalisations, the elements (Red Dirt, Sun, Wind) seemed to become additions to the sonic world of the orchestra, with limited dialogue. This focus on sound, as opposed to text, correlated with the "show don't tell" ideals of the screenwriting literature; the textual role need not always be primary. Allowance for the sonic world of the orchestra and voice was made, or as Sandra Corse explains, the composer reinvents "in a different medium, the ambiguity and multiple relationships of literary texts."85 I suspect that the reduced focus on textual intelligibility and emphasis may facilitate flexibility in more musical ways. I also suspect that it is perhaps not as big a stretch for a young person to digest the seemingly exaggerated nature of the operatic sound when it is employed for fantastical or descriptive effect.

Results and Future Direction
"In my experience, the shape comes first," says Benjamin Britten.86 My own experiments provide shape and encourage a three-dimensional approach to the creative process by not adhering to a linear view of the process of operatic composition. A linear model could be seen as a rather narrowly drawn journey from text to music to performer. In my experiments, this journey can start at any one of three creative points, consciously drawing upon an informational source originating in the researcher role (see Figure 4), but also drawing upon the background and embodied knowledge of all four roles (see Figure 5). Additionally, although paying heed to research goals and criteria at first seemed to threaten the flow of creative process, this attention resulted in an analysis of the barest elements of the opera's design, as well as an increased efficiency in performing multiple roles, both creative and research-related. A more cyclic mode of simultaneous

85 Corse, Opera and the Uses of Language: Mozart, Verdi, and Britten, 14.
composition, experimentation, analysis and edit-and-refine was suggested and generated, along with the formulation of essential referencing and design briefs in order to maintain control over an extensive array of theory sources.

As this paper ends, the libretto has been developed to the point of the first piano draft. From here the piano score will continue its cycle of refinement, expanding into the orchestration and then to semi-staged performance, when the opera will continue to be refined. The experiments and methodological tools developed to date are not only informing the process of composition, but are also providing a template for the development of a critical, reflective, exegetical voice.