



NOT JUST AN EXPERIENCE

The children's opera 'Kiravanu' as a medium for learning

Composer and educator JAMES HUMBERSTONE outlines the possibilities for opera in schools as a music learning activity—and invites collaboration in refining his ground-breaking children's opera.

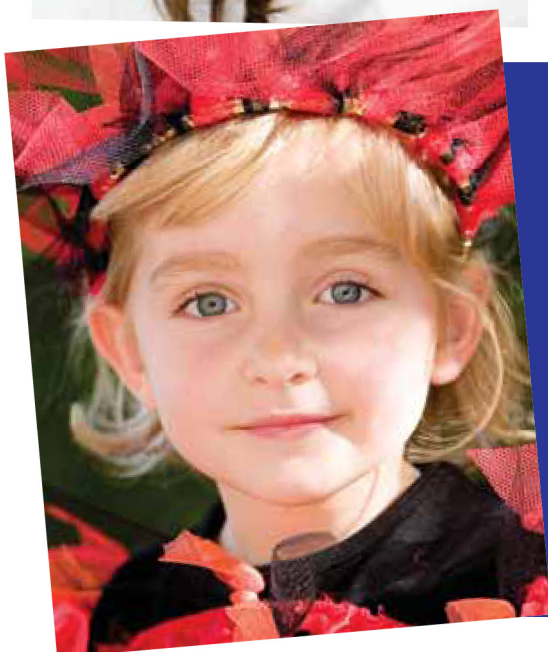
There are a great number of school musicals available these days, but many tend to be experiential rather than educative. Children who participate certainly experience music, dance, acting and other aspects of theatrical production, but their music learning is incidental rather than integral to their participation. Is this as much as we should expect? Would it be possible, I asked, to create a children's opera that, undertaken as a whole-school experience, *could incorporate all of the music and other subject learning outcomes normally achieved over a six- to twelve-month period?*

That idea underpins the resulting children's opera *Kiravanu*, and my associated doctoral research. The opera was completed and premiered in 2008, and since then I've been refining it and cutting it down to a more manageable length, so that it may be taught by non-specialist primary teachers having very few resources.

A further objective of my research is to not just document the development and application of *Kiravanu* as a form of music education, but also to provide a guide for other composers entering the field of composition for children and specifically children's opera. If we look back to Elizabethan times, composers such as Thomas Morley, John Dowland and

Henry Purcell concerned themselves not just with composing music for children to enjoy through listening or performance, but also produced works from which children could learn *about* music for themselves—for example, Dowland's (1597) *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke*. My research will therefore look at what practical approaches composers have taken in composing for children, and will attempt to separate the majority of children's operas that have been written for already well-trained young musicians from those written for all children to perform—regardless of their music backgrounds. (The best known example of the latter category is Benjamin Britten's Noye's *Fludde*.)

An analysis of these (what may be called) educationally-oriented children's operas—where factors such as the vocal abilities and ranges required, and the tonalities, metres, rhythms and so on will be examined in terms of their educational intent—will be considered in relation to the prevailing theories of music pedagogy of the time. In turn, these operas and their educational intent will be compared with the development of *Kiravanu*. This should enable a hierarchy of musical knowledge and skills to be assembled that will be useful as a guide for composers of children's operas and will hopefully support my belief that composers



can and should be writing children's operas that are eminently performable, as well as having the potential to provide genuine pedagogical outcomes for children.

About 'Kiravunu'

I began to conceive this opera with the idea for a fantastical, magical story set with a colourful and perhaps even tropical backdrop that would capture the imagination of primary school children. I developed the main themes with librettist Mary Elizabeth, who has had extensive educational experience, having been a teacher and lecturer, and who is a published author of literacy and music books.

As the story developed, we worked on two sets of materials. The first were the artistic ones—Mary Elizabeth developed the libretto and I composed the musical score. The second were teaching resources—I worked on extensive lesson plans that I knew would map to all of the NSW music syllabus outcomes, while Mary Elizabeth worked on cross-curricular ones in the areas of English, maths, science, arts, human society and its environment (HSIE), and personal development, health & physical education (PDHPE).

To create lessons and repertoire that would cater for all our students, we divided up the characters of the story by age group. In the opera, kindergarten (preparatory) level to Year 2 students play the *Elements* of fire, earth, water, air and wood. Their singing parts are simple and they have opportunity for movement appropriate to their parts, as well as playing some simple untuned percussion. There is a video recording available of the 'Introduction of the Elements' (see Resources).

Years 3 and 4 play the *Creatures*, which are divided into groups of amphibians, insects, reptiles, birds and mammals. The *Creatures* have more challenging singing lines over a wider range than the *Elements*, as well as movement to different world music styles including syncopated South American rhythms and additive metres. Watch the *Call of the Creatures* via You Tube (see Resources).

Years 5 and 6 play the magical *Kiravanu* (spirit beings). They sing in parts and can also play in the on-stage ostinato-based *Kiravanchestra*, made up of xylophones, metallophones and a variety of untuned percussion instruments.

Join in an evaluation of 'Kiravunu'

If you would like to receive a set of free *Kiravanu* resources, I would be pleased to supply these to you, and I would be grateful for any feedback you can provide. You could help me to judge their effectiveness for primary school teaching throughout Australia. There is no obligation to perform the opera. I will make myself available to the first school in each state that would like me to help teach the materials and observe the learning that takes place. Should you choose to be involved, part of working with your school will be reworking the lesson plans to the outcomes required by your state.

—James Humberstone.

In addition to these parts which cover whole-year groups, there are short solo vocal parts for all ages in addition to the lead roles, and solo instrumental parts in all transpositions. The lead roles include students (3 or 5 in number) and teachers or parents (2 or 4), and can be extended to include high school students if the school has a 'feeder school' relationship with a high school or is a K–12 school. There is also a lead dance part that can be performed by one of the vocal leads or as a dancing double. The opera can be performed with as few as 50 students, or as many as 300 (as we had at the premiere, where MLC School combined with students from Broken Hill Central Public School).

The story of 'Kiravanu'

So how do these wonderful, colourful parts combine, and what is the story of *Kiravanu*? It all starts with Father Time (one of the adult parts), who is worried that time is running out for the inhabitants of the world. Librettist Mary Elizabeth describes the situation: 'Father Time is more concerned than he has ever been before. There have been a number of very dark moments in the history of the world, but this one is the most ominous yet, and Father Time knows that something must be done immediately if the destructive disregard of the world and its denizens is not to have the direst consequences for all. By now, there is no chance that a single hero or even a small group can do enough to bring us back. No, only the concerted effort of the many can address the issues of climate change, drought, famine, endangered species, poverty, and pollution with which the world is fraught. And so, Father Time takes the daring step of calling forth the Kiravanu—the spirits of each and every place in the world—to gather with him and see what might be done to save the world. But the Kiravanu cannot stay long from their homes without detriment to the world. Will they take the risk of answering Father Time's call? Is there enough time to accomplish anything before they must return home? And where can they find the help that is so sorely needed?'

Enter the twins, Pat and Molly, on a camping trip with their mum and dad. Exploring the woods, they discover the Kiravanu just as they are calling for the Creatures to come and help them. Brave (and sometimes brash) Pat persuades timid Molly to offer their help ('We're mammals!' 'So are camels!'), and eventually they persuade the Creatures that they should be allowed to help. Their next challenge is to settle differences between the Elements, who are battling one another instead of working in harmony. Once these challenges are overcome, Pat and Molly must decide, along with the whole company, what is the solution to the problem Father Time has described.

You can watch a video recording that summarises the whole story; there are some lesson plans and more information about the research side of this project at my website; and you can download some of the songs and lesson plans, as well as read about the premiere at the original performance website (all under Resources.)



Given the 'crowded curriculum', together with the pressure of school testing in numeracy and literacy by all concerned (students and teachers alike), and what many believe are the 'league tables' represented on the My School website, many schools are understandably reluctant to take on the annual school musical production. However, my approach—and the underlying contention of my research project—is that with careful planning of structured learning experiences in music and in other subject areas and their incorporation into a school opera or musical production, learning outcomes based on the current curriculum framework will not only be attained, but achieved across several domains—cognitive, physical, social, emotion and aesthetic—and with fun and enjoyment that provides motivation and a love for learning.

MIA

James Humberstone

James Humberstone is composer-in-residence at MLC School, Sydney, where he is coordinator for the composition programs in stages 1 to 5. James also lectures in music education at the University of Western Sydney. As a composer, he is interested in writing music with integrated programs of learning that can be easily embedded in schools' curricula: this is the focus of his PhD research at the University of New South Wales, and of the new children's opera *Kiravanu*.

Resources

Kiravanu website: www.kiravanu.com

Vimeo 'The Story of Kiravanu':

<http://vimeo.com/5533662>

Vimeo 'Introduction of the Elements':

<http://vimeo.com/6531848>

YouTube 'Call of the Creatures':

<http://vimeo.com/10140380>

James Humberstone website:

www.composerhome.com

E-CONTACTS

James Humberstone:

[<james@composerhome.com>](mailto:james@composerhome.com)