

*'From the moment I came into contact with community opera, it was love at first sight. It is about the art of seeing and revealing. It is about how we live in the twenty-first century.'*  
Anthony Heidweiller

## Statement Peter den Ouden concerning 'Community Opera' at the Expert Meeting Yoh! Opera Festival in 2005 in Utrecht.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On the internet you won't find many hits about community opera. Therefore to define community opera is not so easy. In this statement I will try to present you an effort.

We've to deal with two words: 'community' and 'opera'.

I'll start with the conception 'community'. Communities in the former societies were places to live, you almost never left your community. Because of the globalization in our present time more and more we want to fall back on save and identifiable communities.

What can the term **community** means?

Community: a body of people having common rights, privileges, or interests, or living in the same place under the same laws and regulations.

The second conception **opera** isn't so hard to define:

- a drama, either tragic, lyric or comic, of which music forms an essential part;
- a drama wholly or mostly sung, consisting of recitatives, arias, choruses, duets, trios, etc.
- with mostly orchestral accompaniment, preludes and interludes;
- together with appropriate costumes, scenery, and action.

Because music forms an essential part we have to discuss the conception of 'community music'. But opera is also an interdisciplinary artistic form. Before to describe 'community music' and at the end 'community opera' I've to try to explain what we can understand under the idea 'community art'.

### Community Art

I can start from the narrowest view of community art as art for social change (activist art that intends to cure social ills) to the broadest view that includes public art (art installed outdoors that intersects with daily community life) and public arts policy (from arts funding to political involvement). Better maybe is just to say, as **Peter Renshaw** earlier mentioned in a personal discussion with me: 'Art that connects people'.

Of course community opera has a substantial place for music, so the term 'community music' has to pass.

## Community music

In an article concerning community music **Veblen** says: 'community music' is just another word for a wide range of 'music education' programs that take place 'outside' the boundaries and schedules of ordinary school music programs.

In the description of the master program community music of the **University of York** the term 'community music' covers a wide range of activities. It covers musicians working outside formal settings like the concert-hall in, for example, schools, prisons or hospitals; it covers the development of music in under-resourced areas and with disadvantaged people, and it covers the development of creative partnerships between people of different skills and cultures.

**Sound Sence** goes out of the most simplest definition: 'making music with people'. Everyone has been moved by music at some point in their lives. Music has the ability to communicate, inspire, excite, motivate and to express a wide range of feelings and experiences.

Community music involves musicians working with people to enable them to actively enjoy and participate in music.

This can happen anywhere and with anyone, because a 'community' doesn't have to be a geographical one. It can be a group of people who share common interests, experiences or backgrounds.

Community music ...

- produces **great new music**
  - is **powerful, exciting, inspiring, motivating**
  - puts music into the **heart of everyday life**
  - puts **creativity** into the hands of everyone
- it also ...
- improves **quality of life**
  - creates **positive attitudes**
  - helps people to **share experiences** and understand each other
  - contributes to **lifelong learning** and **personal development**
  - helps to build **confidence** and **self esteem**
  - assists in **health and social welfare**
  - opens up routes to **new opportunities, training & education**
  - helps to develop **community and social cohesion**
  - helps people to find positive means of **expression**
  - provides people with **skills** for music making, work and for life

Anyone can make music, but often people feel that they don't have the skills or they need to be talented. Sometimes they've simply never had the opportunity or the means to make music. Community music helps people to make music - on their own terms. It reflects their lives and experiences. And as well as providing an enjoyable and fulfilling experience, community music brings people together through music.

People benefit from music-making in other ways too. It can help people to express things, empower them, create positive attitudes, build confidence, provide skills, and open up routes to new opportunities.

In a nutshell: put simply, it is music work with people.

### **Community music**

... involves musicians from any musical discipline working with groups of people to enable them to develop **active and creative participation** in music.

... is concerned with putting **equal opportunities** into practice.

... can happen in all types of community, whether based on place, institution, interest, age or gender group, and **reflects the context** in which it takes place.

Put simply, community music helps to place music into the hands of everyone by creating equal opportunities for people to enjoy active and creative participation in music. This can involve musicians working in any musical discipline - classical, rock, jazz, jungle, folk, techno, world music, etc.

The important point is that community musicians create music with people rather than for them. It's not necessarily about creating a performance or producing virtuoso musicians, although outcomes might happen as a result. And as well as putting equal opportunities into practice through their methods or practices, community musicians also actively work to ensure that opportunities for music-making reach those who are traditionally excluded from them.

At the end of my paper we will come to the conception and my definition of 'community opera'. At first some examples from the praxis:

**1. The Birmingham Opera Company** works at the heart of its local community to bring great operas to life. The Birmingham Opera Company (formerly known as the City of Birmingham Touring Opera) is a new kind of company which, building on accumulated experience and success, plays an active role in the regeneration of its home city. Community involvement and involvement in the community is the basis of the company's policy. Local people have the chance to observe, comment and question the whole process of creating an opera production. Performed in English, the productions are specifically conceived to involve members of the community at every level, including performing alongside world class singers and musicians. Staging its productions away from conventional opera houses and theatres, the company offers opera at an affordable price without compromising quality.

### **2. Scrap Opera**

The Wyeside Arts Centre and Youth Theatre has enabled many young people aged between 14 and 24 to participate in challenging arts projects. The Scrap Opera program enabled young people to compose and perform their own music through a series of workshops focusing on rhythm, vocal sounds and body percussion. The project culminated in a performance at the centre and involved musicians from both classical and rock genres.

### **3. The Secret's Out**

In 2006, Canterbury Festival will open with performances of a large scale Community Opera involving up to 200 local performers. With support from Make It Real\* this huge project will take a full two years to develop. The process involves library and archive research, collecting family histories, writing stories from local scandal through to tales of individual bravery – all of which has been going on since the project began last year.

#### 4. Yo! Opera Festival

For the 2005 festival Yo! Opera found performers and opera composers who are passionately devoted to finding a language of their own. They present operas with new vocal sounds, combinations of different music styles, and performances that are developed with and by young people.

Because of my choice of the definitions of the terms community, opera, community art, community music and the chosen examples of community opera maybe you can already predict my definition of community opera:

‘An opera created by musicians and theatre makers **for and with a community with common interests**’.

In this simple definition I abandon intentionally the different kinds of music, the process of creating, the quality of the outcome, the backgrounds, the cultural diversity, the experiences and, if there, the social goals. In mine opinion you can reckon this among the ‘common interests’. For me the most important parts of my definition are: ‘for and with’ and ‘common interests!’

I thank you for your kind attention!