



Let's Make an Opera & The Little Sweep

Music by Benjamin Britten

Libretto by Eric Crozier

First Performance 14th June 1949 Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh, England

Opening Night March 2nd 7:30pm

Sunday Matinees March 3rd & 10th at 1:30 pm. Evening Performances March 8th & 9th at 7:30pm

School Performances March 5th, 6th & 7th at 12:30pm

At the Belfry Theatre, 1291 Gladstone at Fernwood.

The performance is approximately 90 minutes, plus one intermission.

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

Rowan.....	Charlotte Corwin
Miss Baggott.....	Rebecca Hass
Clem/Alfred.....	Michael Colvin
Foul Frank/Tom.....	Giles Tomkins
Juliet.....	Mary-Ellen Rayner
Miss Baggott Understudy.....	Rebekah Janzen
Sam.....	Jared Reis
Geoffrey Brook.....	Jacob Holloway
Geoffrey Brook Understudy.....	Anthony Wagner
Sophie Brook.....	Molly Lydon
Sophie Brook Understudy.....	Antonia Neatby
John Crome.....	Riccardo Fabris
Hughie Crome.....	Christian Turpin
Tina Crome.....	Tori Farkas
Tina Crome Understudy.....	Abigail Bowering
Conductor.....	Giuseppe Pietrarroia

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Director.....	Rachel Peake
Set and Costume Designer.....	Patrick Clark
Lighting Designer.....	Mark Eugster
Dialect Coach.....	Adrienne Smook
Stage Manager.....	Peter Jotkus
Apprentice Stage Manager.....	Sarah Watson
Piano.....	Csinszka Ré dai
Piano.....	Robert Holliston
Violin.....	Lindsey Herle
Violin.....	Jiten Beirsto
Viola.....	Sarah Tradewell
Cello.....	Jacinta Green
Percussion.....	TBC

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INTRODUCTION

Let's Make an Opera!

In 1946 the modern English composer Benjamin Britten composed a set of orchestral variations (ending with a fugue) based on a theme by the English Baroque composer Henry Purcell. This is more commonly known as *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, and it immediately joined Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals* and Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* as one of the most important and enduring pieces of music that introduce the instrumental families of the modern symphony orchestra to young audiences. Since both the composition of opera *and* the musical education of children were so important to Britten it is not surprising that only a few years later, in 1949, he gave us an operatic counterpart to the *Young Person's Guide*, *Let's Make an Opera!*

The first two acts of *Let's Make an Opera!* are in the form of a play and illustrate the preparation and rehearsal of *The Little Sweep*, a children's opera which is performed in Act III.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

The drawing room of Ms. Hass' house

The various characters are grouped around Ms. Hass as she tells them a story which was handed down to her by her own great-great-grandmother, the Juliet of the opera. Everybody comments on the story as it unfolds, and there is some discussion about whether it would be best to present it as an opera or as a play. The outcome is never really in doubt, though, and the main concern is if the opera can be written and rehearsed in time for performance during the Easter holidays. The second scene illustrates the early stages of rehearsal and the successful auditioning of Michael Colvin (of the local building office). Snatches of the music, which is later heard in the opera, are introduced here.

ACT II

The stage of the hall or theatre just before the dress rehearsal of The Little Sweep. The conductor helps the audience prepare the four songs they are to sing, first with piano and then with orchestra.

The Little Sweep has no overture, but opens with the first of the four audience songs, the "Sweep Song." This song introduces its performers to the intricacies of 5-in-a-bar. Rowan, the nursery-maid, is covering everything in white sheets to prepare for the chimney-sweeps. Miss Baggott, an elderly, sharp-tongued housekeeper, brings in Foul Frank, a brutal sweep-master, who is heard singing the "Sweep Song" with his son and equally brutal assistant Clem. They drag in little Sammy, their apprentice, a small clean figure struggling with an armful of buckets and rope. While Miss Baggott gives instructions, Rowan is shocked by the wretchedness of the little boy, and begs the sweeps not to send him up the chimney. The sweeps only mock her, and with wicked relish drive little Sammy up his first chimney, to be transformed into a dirty "chimbley-stack" boy. Rowan runs from the room in distress, and Sammy is given a further, unambiguous instruction: "Scrape that flue clean, or I'll roast you alive!"

Anyone who has seen *Mary Poppins* will remember the character of Bert, a kindly chimney-sweep. In reality these people were likely to be very brutal, and the least envied child workers of Victorian London were the chimney-sweeps, or “climbing boys,” as they were also known. They started earlier, worked harder, and died younger than any other group. Most began their short careers at the age of five, though records give the age of one boy as three-and-a-half, an age at which even the simplest tasks must have been confusing and frightening. Little boys were needed because flues were tight and often wildly convoluted. It was brutal work. One method of encouraging boys not to slack was to light a pile of straw in the grate to send a blast of heat up the chimney after them. This is what “I’ll roast you alive” in the above quote is referring to.

Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*

The door opens and Juliet enters furtively, then climbs into an armchair and covers herself with a dust sheet. The children are playing hide-and-seek. She is soon discovered by Jonny, who promptly hides with her. Before the others arrive, they hear sounds from the chimney: “Help! I’m stuck!” They call the others (in this section the dialogue is spoken) and together all take hold of the rope and start to pull. During this rescue mission the children sing the shanty, “Pull the rope gently.”

Sammy comes tumbling out of the chimney, and like Rowan the children are horrified by the little boy’s condition. The children quickly decide that they must hide Sammy in the nursery while faking a line of footprints to make it appear that he has escaped through the window. “Sooty tracks upon the sheet,” they sing in unison as they lay the false trail.

Miss Baggott and Rowan return with the sweeps; noticing the footsteps, they sing a flabbergasted, breathless version of “Sooty tracks.” Clem and Foul Frank yell for Sammy; when there is no answer, they launch into a furious vengeance trio (“Wait until we catch him”), at the end of which the sweeps run off in pursuit of Sammy, while Miss Baggott chases after them, insisting that they get on with the job.

Thinking she is alone in the nursery, Rowan sings an aria (“Run, poor sweep-boy”) expressing her wish that she could help Sammy run away. The children emerge from their hiding place and enlist Rowan’s help in freeing Sammy from the sweeps. All agree that the first thing to do is give Sammy a bath. Sammy’s ablutions are described in the second audience song, “Sammy’s bath,” a syncopated tune in three-quarter time that vividly describes the splashing and scrubbing which is happening out of sight.

The lights go up, and Rowan and the children, still to the tune of “Sammy’s bath,” sing: “O Sammy is whiter than swans as they fly.” Sammy thanks them, and they ask him how he came to be mixed up with such nasty employers. Sammy explains that his father, who was a waggoner, broke his hip and was unable to work; Sammy then had to be sold into apprenticeship with the sweeps because “there wasn’t anything to eat.” In a slow, sad ensemble, in which Rowan and the children try to offer Sammy comfort, even though he himself declares that it’s time for him to work because “I shall be nine next birthday.”

As things turn out, Sammy’s home is in the same village as Rowan’s, so Jonny conceives a plan to smuggle the little sweep in his traveling trunk when the visiting Crome children leave for home the following day. After some persuasion, Rowan agrees to leave a space in the top of the trunk.

Suddenly Miss Baggott is heard returning along the hallway passage. She is in a rage because the sweeps have accused her of hiding their apprentice. Sammy is quickly hidden in the toy-cupboard, the bath and utensils removed, and the children try to look as innocent as possible. Miss Baggott is shocked at the condition of the room, and approaches the toy chest, fully expecting to find it in utter chaos. To prevent her from opening it, Juliet pretends to faint. The stratagem is a success: Miss Baggott fusses around Juliet, who is carried to her room, and Jonny reassures Sammy, urging him to “sit tight, and tomorrow you’re a free man.”

The third audience song evokes the passing of the night. The audience divides into four sections to describe the nocturnal habits of owl, heron, turtle-dove, and chaffinch (with appropriate bird noises at the ends of verses), and all combine for the last two verses.

The last scene takes place the following morning. Juliet is sitting in her dressing gown; Rowan enters with a breakfast tray. They feed Sammy while Juliet sings an aria to him: “Soon the coach will carry you away.” She gives him three crowns, a parting gift from her brothers and herself; Sammy tries to refuse this generosity but Juliet is insistent. The other children come in, the three Cromes ready to leave for home. Sammy is packed into Jonny’s trunk – with still more food!

A problem arises when Tom (the coachman) and Alfred (the gardener), find that the trunk is now too heavy to budge. Miss Baggott makes a great deal of fuss, but Tom and Alfred are adamant: “Either that there box is unpacked or we leave her where she lies.” The children and Rowan break into the escalating argument and offer to help lift the trunk. The extra manpower does the trick, and the trunk is triumphantly transported from the room. Miss Baggott follows it with her usual grumbling (“Don’t drop it!”) while Juliet, Geoffrey, and Sophie watch from the window as it is loaded into the coach.

As soon as the coach has departed, the entire cast returns to the stage for the Coaching Song. Together with the audience, they sing of Sammy’s journey to safety and freedom: “The horses are champing, eagerly stamping, Crack! goes the whip as the coachman lets slip!”

LESSONS FROM BRITTEN

Throughout Benjamin Britten’s operas we find him concerned with two particular subjects. First, the plight of the “outsider,” a character who does not fit in, who is different from everyone else, and who must cope – or not cope – with an indifferent and even hostile community. Second, as in *The Little Sweep*, the betrayal of innocence: when defenseless young children are treated brutally by adults or otherwise subjected to harsh environments beyond their control. Poor Sammy, the “little sweep” of this opera’s title, is thrust into a reality so ruthless and uncaring that his predicament hardly seems credible to an early 21st century audience. To us it’s like something out of the novels of Charles Dickens – if you have seen a production of *Oliver*, which is based on a Dickens novel, you will have been given a glimpse into the horrors of many Victorian childhoods.



Benjamin Britten

Is the treatment of Sammy, the “little sweep,” really so very far removed from what we see and read about all too frequently today? Although he may not have used the same terminology, Britten was clearly concerned about bullying and abuse, and the underlying message of *Let’s Make an Opera!* is as moving and relevant as ever: not only must we all protect the children in our community from exploitation and abuse, we must all – as the children in *The Little Sweep* do, every one – care for and look after one another.

ACTIVITIES

New Vocabulary

What do the following words/phrases mean?

Fugue
Overture
Aria
Shanty
Trio
Syncopated

Discussion questions

1. Music can be arranged in many different forms and styles. After defining the words above, discuss where you have heard examples of them in some of your favourite music.
2. What are other examples of bullying that you have come across in literature, plays, or film?
3. How do you define bullying, and what steps can you take to stop it from happening in your school or neighbourhood?

Group work

1. In groups of two, write a one-page short story about stopping an act of bullying. Then write it as a scene of dialogue between two people. Discuss how the two different types of writing were different.

HOW DO YOU MAKE A PLAY?

A play starts with an idea. Sometimes the idea has been adapted from another story, like a book, legend or myth. Sometimes the idea is constructed from what is happening in the real world, such as art, sports, politics or pop culture. Sometimes the idea is a thought-provoking question, something like “Are there more good or bad people in the world?” or “How much money does it take to convince someone to commit a crime?” Sometimes the question comes from the imagination of the creator, by simply asking “What if...?”

The idea leads to a script. No matter what the idea is, it must somehow grow onto paper so that the play’s creator (or creators) can try changing and experimenting with different elements in the play -- and so actors can eventually act the parts. Plays are written in a variety of ways. A single playwright might write a play by him or herself at home on the computer, much as an author writes a book. Plays can also be written by groups of playwrights, working together in a rehearsal hall by doing different writing and physical exercises to devise a script. There are also alternative playwrighting methods, such as verbatim theatre, where a playwright builds a play by interviewing people in a community and using what they say as the script.



on the edge was a new play produced by the Belfry Theatre in 2012. Susinn McFarlen in *on the edge* by Michele Riml. Photo by Emily Cooper.

Every play has characters. These are the people (or animals, or other creatures) whom the audience sees or hears. Playwrights must develop their characters so that the audience is interested in who they are and what happens to them. Plays often have a storyline where the audience can follow the journey of the characters, such as the story of a girl’s life as she grows up. This is called a narrative. There are also non-narrative plays. In a non-narrative play the script jumps around in time or space, perhaps showing scenes from the lives of many different people. In any case, a play must have dramatic action. Dramatic action stems from a conflict that draws the audience into the story. The conflict can be between characters, or even between what the audience thinks is going to happen and what actually does. The dramatic action must continue to grow so the audience continues to be interested in the play. It is up to the playwright to decide how the story will be told and how he or she can create the dramatic action.

New plays are often workshopped, so that playwrights can hear and see their play come off the page. In a workshop, a playwright, director and actors meet in a rehearsal hall and try reading and working on the play. Workshops are very exciting, because new ideas are created and playwrights make changes to refine or clarify the idea of the play. Theatre designers (who design the set, costumes and lights) can also be invited into the workshop process. The director, designers and actors ask questions of the playwright about the world of the play. These questions help playwrights to understand what is clear and what isn’t. New plays usually have several workshops before they are rehearsed and performed.

Before a new play goes into rehearsal, playwrights write a final draft of the script. This is what the director, designers, actors and production team use as the blueprint for the performances that we see.

ACTIVITIES

New Vocabulary

What do the following words/phrases mean?

Devised theatre

Verbatim theatre

Narrative

Workshop

Designer

Dramatic action

Discussion questions

1. What is a play that you've seen? How do you think it was written/created?
2. What is an interesting story that you know? How could it be made into a play? Who would be the characters? What would happen in the first scene?
3. Although playwrights do have to write a script, the word *playwright* is spelled like *boatwright* (a person who builds a boat) or *millwright* (a person who builds a machine). Why do you think it is spelled this way, instead of "playwrite"?
4. A rehearsal hall is where new play workshops happen. What do you think a rehearsal hall looks like?
5. What is the "world of a play?" Describe all the different elements that make up the world of a play.

HOW DO YOU MAKE AN OPERA?

Throughout recorded history we encounter references to theatre of some kind. We also encounter references to music – at least song and dance. Putting music and theatre together also seems to be quite an old idea. Although there have been religious plays with singing – like Christmas Pageants and plays about Easter week – since the Middle Ages, what we call OPERA – i.e., a play that was sung throughout rather than spoken – was invented in Florence, Italy in the late 16th century. It caught on very quickly and has been a popular form of entertainment ever since, but it is still quite a young art form: about 400 years old, compared to theatre’s two and a half millennia.

An opera, like a play, starts with an idea. It can use a politically relevant story or a romantic one; an old one or a new one; a foreign one or a domestic one. The characters can be taken from a remote period in history or they can remind us of our next-door neighbours. Successful operas – i.e., those that last – must, like successful plays appeal to the audience’s hearts and minds. The only way they can do this is by presenting stories that we can believe, filled with characters that we can relate to. No matter if the story is set in ancient Rome (where we’ve never lived) and the characters are conquerors and queens (which we’ve never been), somehow the human side of the story must be real: the audience must believe in the dramatic situations and relate to the characters caught up in them.

These days, operas come in all shapes and sizes. There are one-person operas, hip-hop operas, mariachi operas, fringe festival operas, you name it! Operas, like plays, are as diverse as the ideas they are born out of. Here is one possible scenario dealing with the creation of an opera, from the first inkling of an idea to the opening night, complete with cast – not only of singers, but of creators:

1.Someone has an idea: make an opera out of a successful play! This is not unusual – very few operatic stories are based on original plots; most rely on novels, plays, history, or poems for their initial inspiration. In 2011, Pacific Opera Victoria produced an operatic version of the great Canadian play *Mary’s Wedding*.

Betty Wayne Allison, Alain Coulombe, and Thomas Macleay perform a scene during a staging workshop for *Mary’s Wedding*. Photo by Jackie Adamthwaite.



Operas can be as diverse as the ideas that they are born out of. *BASH'd: A Gay Rap Opera* was presented at the Belfry Theatre in 2009. It featured two performers rapping to an original score of hip hop beats. Chris Craddock and Nathan Cuckow in *BASH'd: A Gay Rap Opera*, Photo by David Morgan.



2. Depending on who had the idea in the first place, a composer and/or a librettist are hired. The word *libretto* means “little book,” and is always used to refer to the text of a large-scale musical-dramatic work such as an opera. It is very rare for an operatic composer to also write the words. The transition from, say, play or novel to opera requires the ability to reduce the original to its bare essentials. For *Mary’s Wedding*, the playwright, Stephen Massicotte, also wrote the libretto. We were fortunate, as this is not usual.

3. Work on the material. As with new plays, there are often workshops – the first generally involving singers, writers, a rehearsal pianist who will play the orchestra’s music reduced for piano, and a conductor. The composer often learns valuable information from the singers about how to write for the voice so that the music is expressive *and* the words clearly understood.

4. Plan for a production. Sometimes there is already an opening night on the horizon when the first workshop takes place; sometimes the earlier workshops help determine whether or not the opera will actually receive a production. (In the case of *Mary’s Wedding* there was never any doubt that it would be part of Pacific Opera’s 2011-12 season.) But once the decision has been made to bring the opera into the theatre and play it before a paying audience, there is really no turning back.

5. Involve other artists. Every role in the opera – including a chorus if one is required – must be cast with appropriate singers (see the next section about voice types). Often, though not always, the artists who have participated in the workshops will be hired for the performances. A team of highly creative artists will also be assembled to design and create the sets, costumes, props, sound effects, and lighting – all the components that allow us to believe we’re really watching the world of the opera’s characters. This world may be similar to our own, or it may be very different, but it must ring true while we’re in the theatre – after all, we watch as well as listen to opera.

6. OPENING NIGHT! This is always an important event in the world of opera, but when the opera is a new one, it’s truly a Big Deal. Not only is it attended by a ticket-buying audience, critics arrive – often from all over the country – to appraise all aspects of the production as well as the piece of work itself. Often the response of the audience combined with the printed reviews will help ensure that the new opera will be produced again in other cities and maybe even become part of opera’s permanent repertoire, the way Shakespeare is part of the theatre’s. Word is out that other opera companies want to produce *Mary’s Wedding*, which is excellent news for everybody!



The same scene in the final production of *Mary’s Wedding*. Photo by David Cooper.

VOCAL TYPES

SOPRANO The highest of the female ranges (a boy soprano is usually referred to as a *treble*). The most common subdivisions are:

coloratura soprano – a higher range with the ability to sustain high notes and sing rapid passages brilliantly (great for evil queens and characters who go mad);

lyric soprano – possibly the most common operatic soprano voice; lower in range than coloratura and with a warmer, richer sound (most romantic heroines are played by lyrics);

dramatic soprano – the “biggest” sounding of these, capable of penetrating through the largest orchestras



Bass Alain Coulombe as the ghost of Banquo, Mezzo-soprano Rebecca Hass as the lady in waiting, and Soprano Lyne Fortin as Lady Macbeth in Pacific Opera Victoria's production of Verdi's *Macbeth*, 2012. Photo by David Cooper.

A couple of further distinctions:

soubrette – lighter than a lyric but not as high or as flexible as a coloratura (often younger girls and/or ladies' maids are soubrettes);

spinto – literally, “forced: - somewhere between a lyric and a dramatic

MEZZO-SOPRANO Literally meaning “half-soprano,” this voice type came into prominence only in the early 19th century. Its range lies midway between soprano and contralto, and the range of characters is very great (including mothers, witches, queens, and best friends). A mezzo-soprano with great agility is often called a *coloratura mezzo*, while one with unusual vocal power is often called a *dramatic mezzo*. The male counterpart is often referred to as a *countertenor*.

CONTRALTO The lowest female voice, characterized by a dark, rich tone quality. In earlier days all female voices were described as either soprano or contralto; during the 20th century, as categories increased and the mezzo-soprano flourished, true contraltos became rarer.

TENOR The highest of the male vocal ranges (outside of the treble and countertenor). At first used mainly for minor or comic roles, the tenor rose to prominence during the 19th century Romantic period, and has since been regarded as the voice type for heroes and lovers. Tenors are broadly divided into three categories:



Soprano Nathalie Paulin as Rodelinda and Countertenor Gerald Thompson as Bertarido in Pacific Opera Victoria's production of Handel's *Rodelinda*, 2010. Photo by David Cooper.

light – not greatly powerful but usually very agile and with exceptional high notes;

lyric – warm, rich sound (corresponding to the lyric soprano), suitable for lovers;

dramatic – heroic (again, corresponding to the dramatic soprano).

A couple of further distinctions:

character tenor – this voice does not have to be intrinsically beautiful, but the singer must be an excellent actor; usually cast in small comic roles;

Heldentenor – the most heroic tenor voice of all, suitable for great heroes of mythological proportions.

BARITONE This voice type falls between the tenor and bass in range, and can be light in quality or dramatic. Dramatic baritone roles began to flourish during the 19th century, with composers like Verdi and Wagner contributing significantly to their repertoire. Their roles range widely, from heroes and gods to best friends and even villains.

BASS The lowest of the male ranges. Between bass and baritone is a type of voice called *bass baritone*. The lowest of the basses is sometimes referred to as *basso profundo*; the more lyrical *basso lyrico* or *basso cantando*. The range of roles is exceedingly wide, from comic buffoons (sung by a *basso buffo*) to great kings and gods.



Baritone Andrew Greenwood as Zuniga, Mezzo-soprano Allyson McHardy as Carmen, and Tenor Eric Fennell as Don José in Pacific Opera Victoria's production of *Carmen*, 2012. Photo by David Cooper

ACTIVITIES

Discussion questions

1. Who are some famous singers from each vocal type? Are there any major similarities between singers in the same vocal range?
2. If your favourite book or movie became an opera, what vocal type would all of the characters be, and why?

IN CLASS COMPONENT

Pacific Opera Victoria and the Belfry Theatre are excited to offer, for the first time, an in class extension of this study guide!

Ellie Higginson, a music teacher from the Victoria Conservatory of Music, has created a 40-minute in class workshop that will allow your students to engage with the piece at a deeper level, both before and during the production. Ellie and a small team of talented performers from the Pacific Opera Chorus will facilitate these workshops.

This workshop is broken down into three major components:

- 1) An introduction to the production (For younger grades, in the form of story-telling; for older grades, in the style of a brief story and discussion of major themes)
- 2) An Actor's Warm Up (Facilitator-led discussion about what it means to be a performer, leading students through a vocal/physical warm-up)
- 3) Vocal Coaching (Facilitator will teach students the Audience Sing-a-long parts from the production; Teacher will need to supply a CD player in their classroom for the workshop)

In class workshops can be booked to take place from February 12th through March 4th inclusive. To arrange your complimentary in class workshop, please contact Nicole Olszewski at Pacific Opera – 250-385-0222.

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

After the Show

Draw a picture of your favourite scene in the opera.

What is happening in this scene?

What characters are depicted?

Create a production design.

Design and draw a stage set for a scene from your favourite novel.

Design and draw costumes for the characters in the scene.

Write a review of the show.

What did you think about the sets, props and costumes?

Would you have done something differently? Why?

What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations?

Talk about the singers. Describe their characters. Describe their voices.

Who was your favourite character?

What was your favourite visual moment in the opera?

What was your favourite musical moment in the opera?

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