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Directing an Opera in an Undergraduate Setting: Creating a Professional Atmosphere within the Confines of a Student Production

Gabrielle Traub

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As a Voice/Opera Performance major, I decided to take my love of opera and performance and familiarize myself with all of the aspects I had yet to understand: Production and Direction. Along with the creative and technical aspects, I also learned how to deal with many different emotional situations, including but not limited to being in a leadership position above my friends and peers.

My concept is as follows: produce and direct a full-length opera production in a foreign language. I decided to direct *The Magic Flute* in its original language because a) that was the composer's original intent, and b) because within my opera program we are never given the opportunity to perform in a language other than English, and it is very important for voice majors to have that experience if they wish to make a career out of performing. I also wanted to test both my leadership skills, and see if I enjoyed the "thankless jobs" of this industry so that in my future if I chose to deviate from my performance career I could still choose to work within the industry.

I produced and directed an opera called *Die Zauberflöte*, or *The Magic Flute*. The plot is convoluted and fantastical, consisting of many characters and plot twists, though at its core it is about good versus evil. Composed by the famous W.A. Mozart, the opera is a singspiel (both singing and spoken line) with music performed in German and dialogue performed in English (for the purposes of my production).

The first semester of this year was the preparation - finding funding, working with my Production Assistant and costume designer, researching various professional productions, making musical cuts and dialogue revisions, auditioning and casting a full cast of characters, and prepping for rehearsals that began in February.

This semester I took over the VPA class *Opera Workshop* for the spring semester, added to my staff, designed the set, continued my creative input on costume and makeup design, booked rooms, finished staging and choreographing all scenes and musical numbers and oversaw my staff put everything together.

Production duties consisted of:

- putting together a staff of 8 - the Conductor/Music Director, two Assistant Directors, two Production Assistants (one first semester and one second semester), Costume Designer, Graphic Designer, and Lighting Designer.
- creating the rehearsal schedule and booking the times and rooms in which we rehearsed, and coordinating schedules of the cast, staff and orchestra
- making sure my staff was content and worked together as a cohesive unit
- making sure the cast was content and worked together as a cohesive unit
- drafting and sending all important memos and emails about the production details
- marketing the show

The process was a very tiresome, frustrating, fun and rewarding experience. I very much enjoyed having the final say in all decisions, creative and otherwise. It was definitely a great final endeavor to conclude my undergraduate career.

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Friday evening, 8pm on May 6, 2011: the evening of the one and only performance of my producer and directorial debut. A year in the making, my full-length production of the opera *The Magic Flute* was more of a success than I could have ever imagined. Through the emotional and physical ups and downs, (and it was quite a journey) I learned a lot about myself, how I work with my peers, under pressure, and in less than ideal circumstances. Overall this was an undertaking on the grandest scale, and a learning experience that I wouldn't trade for the world.

This project, if you could call it that, is my statement to the music school which has given me so much, yet lacked in just enough to force me to take my future and training into my own hands. I firmly believe that there is no other school that would sit back and let me literally take over the Opera department for an entire semester and give me the freedom to do whatever I wanted. There were a few negative voices in the beginning of my process telling me that I was crazy to take on something of this caliber, and to them I say look at this final product, look at what I, a 22 year old college student, and my incredible staff and performers have accomplished.

My process started about a year ago. As a voice performance student we must give a recital as part of our senior year, and that recital can be a lecture recital if we so choose. However I wanted to do something I had never done before. Thus I took my love of opera and performance and turned it into a capstone project.

Many people asked me why I decided to take on such an endeavor. My answer to them was simply I didn't like the way my department was being run, and since I was lucky enough to be in good standing with the head of my department, I asked to take over for a semester and he graciously stepped aside.

To backtrack, every year that I have been here my program puts on one opera in January through a class called Opera Workshop. It is always in English and always a very small-scale production because of our budgetary issues. I felt that since I am a voice performance and opera major that my peers and I should have the same opportunities that other programs around the country do, so I chose an opera in another language to give us that aspect at the very least. (Professional performers are expected to perform in almost any language, though most often in German, French and Italian).

Two years ago a friend of mine put something very similar together for her thesis: she directed scenes from various early 20th century operettas. I was lucky enough to be her assistant director, and learned a thing or two about how productions should be run within the opera program. I guess you could say she inspired me to take matters into my own hands.

Then this past summer I spent 2 months in Graz, Austria, doing a performance program studying German Lied (German song performance). I fell in love with the German Language and German opera in general, and of the German operas I know *The Magic Flute* is the most well known and well liked. Before I could make the final decision however, I had to make sure the performance students could fill the roles I needed. This year in Crouse College

we were lucky enough to have an extremely talented pool of students, ones that could sing the majority of the roles even without my knowledge of the incoming freshman class. When I returned to the US I had made my decision to produce and direct *The Magic Flute* by W.A. Mozart, in its original German.

One of the first things I did was contact Tim Westbrook, a senior fiber arts major in VPA. We had worked together on his fashion show in the previous year, and I knew of his love of the opera and his incredible skill as a designer and creator. I'm not sure why he was my first call, or why I thought of the costumes first, but it was the best decision I could have made because our collaboration on this project made it what it was. He immediately responded with resounding enthusiasm, and we began what was to become an extremely fruitful collaboration, not to mention friendship.

When I first got back to campus in the fall, I immediately began planning logistics. I did not anticipate the amount of planning and decision-making that would have to be done, and as more things began piling up I continually questioned my decision to take on such an undertaking. I began with meeting with my department head, Eric Johnson, and making sure I could take over his class *Opera Workshop* and use the class times as rehearsal times, which we have done in the past. I told him of my decision to direct the opera in German and he looked at me like I had five heads. He told me flat out that I was crazy to do such a thing. I accepted his judgment, but having spoken to the rest of the faculty about it and getting support, I stood my ground and simply acknowledged his doubt with a smile and a nod.

It amazed me how little faith he and other faculty members had in their students. I know they are simply trying to be realistic, and maybe have tried and failed before, but I personally felt that we as a student body should be given a chance to either fail or succeed at something that would potentially affect our professional lives. So I guess in a way I took it upon myself to do what I felt the faculty would not.

The biggest fear I had about performing the opera in German was that we had no super-title machine, which meant basically the audience would have no translation in front of them. I solved that with a very in-depth synopsis, and as time went on I realized that though the project was about the performance, it was more about the learning experience for myself and the performers, my friends and peers. Plus, unfortunately, it's hard to understand even English operas when they are being sung.

I then booked Setnor Auditorium for the performance date and whatever rehearsal times I could get. Originally I booked the performance for April 30th, but due to ensemble conflicts I had to change it to May 6th, and then got more grief for moving it because the performance was during finals week. That was one of the first challenges that arose: simply trying to book the performance and trying to make everyone happy is almost impossible. This problem arose again when trying to create the rehearsal schedule during the spring semester.

A lot of my inspiration for the way I wanted this production to be run can be attributed to the student organization First Year Players. I spent four years in the organization, the first year performing, and the next three being a staff

member. Though we have grown to be a group of over 50 staffers and I am only one person, I love how there are so many creative and administrative outlets, and through being on their staff I learned just how much attention needs to go into every aspect of a show. Thus I tried to emulate, in much smaller scale, the way they run their shows and staff.

Next I started asking around for a staff. I knew I needed a music director, conductor, and an assistant director/producer. One conversation with Sam Emanuel and I knew he was the right guy. Also a senior music student, he music directed, conducted and played piano for the production. He is an aspiring coach and conductor so this job was perfect for him. Overall he worked very well with the singers, helping them a lot with the musical nuances of Mozart and with German pronunciation. He organized and rehearsed the orchestra as well. However, he was also one of my biggest challenges. He is not the easiest person to get along with, and although extremely talented his social/professional skills and patience leave something to be desired. Working with him tested my professionalism, forced me to compromise, and really helped me to assert myself, as I usually try to avoid confrontation if at all possible.

My assistant for the first semester was a graduate music education student who had previously gotten her bachelors degree here as well, and she had directing experience from the preceding year with First Year Players. Though she ended up only helping me for the first semester, she was a great support system in terms of planning, helping to make the rehearsal schedule, auditioning the cast,

and helping to make tough decisions on casting and making musical cuts (since I decided to do a slightly shortened version of the opera).

I made this decision because the full opera is over three hours long, and for an unfamiliar audience that can get very tedious and boring, especially when they do not know what is going on. I cut a few musical numbers because as I will reference later, some of my cast was not equipped to sing it. Opera in a professional setting is meant to be performed by professionals, and some members of my cast of 18-22 year olds are too young to sing even Mozart. Many of them had never even performed in an opera before, let alone one of this length and in a language other than English.

In the opera world, depending on what voice part and classification you are, the age at which your voice matures varies. But the youngest mean age is usually mid to late twenties, and that is for lighter sopranos (high voices). Other voice types may not fully mature until 30s or later. In addition, ages 18-22 are the prime years for the biggest vocal changes and development. This means trying to put on a full-scale professional opera with students of this age is difficult just in terms of singing, not even including the acting, choreography, entrances, exits, languages and memorization that also comes with any production.

Finally later in the spring I also hired a graphic designer, photographer and two lighting designers and acquired three more assistants; two assistant directors and a production assistant to replace the first, rounding out my staff to about eight.

Throughout the semester I had promoted auditions for the opera through VPA and the various student organizations I was affiliated with. We had one day of auditions towards the end of the semester in December and I was pleasantly surprised at the turn out. Just like any director I had preconceived notions of who I would like to cast, though I tried very hard to base my decisions solely on auditions. What I wasn't anticipating was the amount of talent that walked into the room. Roles that I thought I would cast with certain people turned out to be the hardest to cast because two very capable singers auditioned.

Coming from just having the show and looking back, everyone ended up fitting their parts perfectly, but at the time of casting I did second guess myself a few times. Unfortunately there were a few people who were upset with my decision to cast them in the chorus, but since I did base most of my decisions solely on the auditions I didn't feel too guilty. I didn't want to alienate anyone, but at the same time as Director I had to make the hard decisions. And within the professional world there is a lot of disappointment and negativity that you deal with on a regular basis. This is yet another example of me learning the lesson that you simply cannot make everyone happy. Casting new freshman - fresh out of high school - is challenging as well. As much as they may be talented, they are further behind in their musical development than their fellow upperclassmen. Then trying to throw them into German language on top of that is a struggle. Those who were cast in a role had a bit more individualized attention, but those in the chorus really had to step up and learn their music on their own. Their discernable progress was definitely a testament to their work ethic. However

many of them got frustrated very easily, and the learning and perfecting process took longer than their fellow upperclassmen. I've come to understand that in order to progress, you must give up getting it right every time. I finally figured that out this year. So I'm sympathetic to my dear underclassmen who have not yet figured out that little life lesson.

The next step was creating a rehearsal schedule for the semester; figuring out exactly how much we needed to rehearse, and how much time that would take in each rehearsal. I ended up with a cast of 23, and what I have come to realize is trying to make 25 people's schedules work together is near impossible. Creating the schedule was quite a feat, but it did get done. There were of course many last minute cancellations, no shows and accidental tardiness, but for the most part the schedule worked. A few weeks before the performance I started adding extra rehearsals so that the staging would be done two weeks before the performance, thus giving us more time to run and perfect scenes. It was a very smart decision as many things were forgotten between the initial one music and staging rehearsal and the first run of the show. Timing was such an issue that every musical number and scene only got one rehearsal to learn and perfect, and in many cases it was weeks before the cast ran that scene again. It was a good test of who had reviewed and practiced outside of rehearsal and who didn't.

As I began prepping for staging rehearsals, I researched a number of different productions to see how they had presented it, and two really stuck out to me: The Metropolitan Opera's kid friendly English production directed by Julie Taymor, and Covent Garden's full length German production. I loved both, and

really enjoyed fusing the two together to create what I perceived to be a very happy medium. The English dialogue in our scripts was a little outdated, so I took the Metropolitan's dialogue translation, put my own little twist on it, and used it during my production. I wanted to have English dialogue because a) it's much easier for the audience to understand the plot when at least something is in their language, and b) it is much easier to memorize and understand dialogue in our native language (English) rather than in German.

I really love Taymor's work; she is best known for her work on the Broadway hit *The Lion King*. She is an inspiration to me in that whatever production she works on she always has a say in all of the creative outlets, including music direction, costume design, makeup and obviously directing. She did this for the Met's production of the *Magic Flute*, and I believe that helped in its astounding cohesiveness. I really wanted to emulate that, also because I have a strong interest in all of those creative outlets as well. It was my intention from the beginning to have input in all of these facets, and I do think that it helped with the cohesiveness of my overall production. Thankfully my staff let me have that input as well.

As a director I was very lenient about character specificity and development. Many times directors have a specific vision in mind for each character, but as a performer I knew that I preferred to create my character on my own and build on it instead of being told how my character should think, feel and react. Therefore I was intentionally vague on how I wanted each cast member to see their character because I wanted them to develop their own ideas. This at first

didn't go over well with a few of my leads because they wanted me to specify what direction to go in. The girls playing the "three ladies" especially felt this way, because they had to both work as a unit and come up with their own unnamed individual characters. However once I forced them to work together and talk about how they felt about each other and what their relationship was, it seemed to come together. That was a fun lesson for all of us.

Through directing this production I've come to appreciate the whole process of developing a character so much more. Even as a performance major I didn't really understand how to both go about developing one and how to convey those emotions and relationships on stage. Now that I've seen it from the other side it makes a lot more sense. That was one of the coolest things about being a performer and throwing myself into directing; I got to experience the process of helping someone else create a character and know what a director would be looking for and how to give it to them.

One of the biggest things I've learned through this process is the distinct difference between producing and directing. Producing is much more logistical – managing the staff, booking rooms, managing the cast, taking care of people's needs and making sure everything got done in a timely and efficient manner. Being both the director and producer also meant that I had to take care of my own needs as a creative director. There wasn't anyone else for me to pass the responsibility onto, or to ask for help on the big decisions.

There were many more challenges that I encountered - one of the biggest being professionalism between my peers and I. The main problem was striking a

balance with my position of power over my friends and classmates. Many are my age, and for me to then put myself in a position of power over them in a professional setting is a hard adjustment. Finding a way to create professionalism in rehearsal, and then walking out of the room and going back to being friends was easier with some, and a lot harder with others. I dealt with a lot of disrespect both in rehearsal and outside of it, with both a few cast members and even my staff overstepping their bounds with me as their director and producer. These were things that I addressed once and for all in a group rehearsal, simply expressing my concern with people's work ethic and asking them to step up their level of commitment and respect to me. It seemed to have an effect – I didn't single any one out and the major disrespect dissipated soon after.

Another challenge: designing a set and performing an opera within the confines of a space like Setnor Auditorium. It is a beautiful space, but not in any way conducive to large-scale performances. With no backstage area, no wing space (for entrances and exits) and no fly space (for set storage) it was quite an endeavor to even have a set, let alone keep people ready and quiet "backstage" for cues. This is why I hired a talented lighting designer. Colored lights can do a wonderful job of simply changing the scene, and also the mood when necessary. The costumes also helped a lot – their intricacies and color schemes perfected each character's nuances and quirks.

Because I only had one night for the performance, it was bittersweet. My cast, staff and I had put in so much work that only one performance didn't seem to do it justice. However in contrast it both pushed the cast to make it the best

performance possible, and there was less fear of getting tired/saving energy because it was their only one. It also gave the performance a huge crowd because everyone had to come that one night. The audience was astounding; it was such an overwhelming feeling to see that many people in the auditorium for something that I put together and made happen. I felt and still feel an incredible sense of pride.

Through the rehearsal process there were many surprises that arose. Because of the level of professionalism I wanted to inspire, looking back I was surprised at how understanding I was in terms of rehearsal conflicts, and especially not meeting the memorization deadline I had announced. It was an interesting position to be in – I couldn't "fire" anyone for not meeting my standards because I didn't have any replacement options, and I needed to be understanding to the fact that we are all full time students and not yet full time professional musicians. We still have homework and classes and various other unrelated work to do.

My biggest surprise by far was that my peers did not always share my views of professionalism and work ethic. Yes, this was my project so I had the most invested in it, however I pride myself on always giving my all to everything I dedicate my time to. What I've come to realize is that some people are content to simply coast by, and that sincerely confounds me. I feel that you should always want to get the most out of every experience, because you only get out of an experience what you put into it. Apparently all do not share my views, and that was the biggest reality check and life lesson I learned this year.

The opera's costumes, created by Tim Westbrook, were his senior B.F.A thesis as well, so he had just as much incentive as me to make his portion the absolute best it could be. We put into practice something we had been advocating for our entire four years at this school: collaboration and using the incredible resources we have at our disposal. He and I still do not understand why those within VPA at the very least do not collaborate more often.

This is the first production through Opera Workshop that has included Musical Theatre majors. I cast them because they were the best for the part, no matter their major or background. This again demonstrates the professional qualities I wanted to emulate; with minimal politics, because at the end of the day in the entertainment business no one cares how you got to where you need to be, as long as you are there and are what those hiring are looking for. Tim and I hoped that after putting this together and showing everyone the quality of our presentation that it will get our respective colleges talking and thinking about what they could do to enhance each program in the future. We hope that it will especially inspire more collaboration within the arts, and hopefully within the whole university. The university offers incredible resources and with 12,000 students at the school there is no excuse why other departments cannot be contacted for support and/or collaboration to make every project the best it can be.

There are a number of people that I must thank, though a mere typed thank you does not even come close to the gratitude they deserve. First I have to thank Tim Westbrook, for without him this project literally would not have happened. He has been one of my biggest motivations since our very first "meeting" where

we discussed the possibility of this project on speaker phone during my drive back to Syracuse this summer. I could only hope to match his focus and drive to make his project the best it could be, and I am humbled by his professionalism and sincere will to make sure my needs were met before his.

A thank you to Eric Johnson, Janet Brown, James Welsch and the rest of the Setnor faculty for putting their faith in me, and giving me their support whenever necessary. Many of them have bent over backwards for me, and please know that I do appreciate everything.

A thank you to the Honors department for forcing me to pick a Capstone Project, and funding almost everything within said project. Nothing would have been possible without the financial and verbal support they have given me.

Sam Emanuel, an incredibly talented pianist, coach and conductor, who prepared this music and our singers in a way that Mozart would be proud. Everyone sounds amazing, both the singers and the orchestra, and that is all because of him.

Lisa Bondi, Marc Fisher, and Alex Rogers for the posters/photography and lighting, respectively. All three of them are so talented and have enhanced this production immensely.

To the cast: they are a group of insanely talented vocalists and actors, so much so that they have all become their characters (in the best way possible). They put their heart and soul into this performance, and I hope they took as much away from this experience as I did.

And finally to my assistants – Anna Lillikas, Caroline Santoro, Emily Zinski and Tori Randall. I cannot say express how much I cherish their hard work and dedication. They've put up with me and all of my organized chaos all year and I am pleasantly surprised they didn't go running for the hills after our initial meeting. Thank you for constantly keeping me on track and picking up after me, not to mention preempting many ideas I've had and making them happen. I will miss you so much next year. With girls like you I have immense confidence in the future of both VPA and this school.

The performance was a culmination of a year of planning, hard work, and many, many cups of coffee. When I first began researching *The Magic Flute*, I had no idea just how many intricacies weaved throughout both the plot and the music. This was one of the last operas Mozart composed and though it was composed in jest as a favor to his actor friend Emanuel Schikaneder (who wrote the libretto and premiered the role of Papageno) it is a readily apparent satirical commentary on society at the time. What is so great about the opera is that it has stood the test of time, is completely socially relevant in any time period, and is still one of the most well known operas out there.

Through the many hours of research, rehearsal and immersion I have come to love every single note and moment of this opera, and cannot wait to be able to perform it one day in my professional career. Although, I cannot promise I will not shed a tear of nostalgia for this performance that is so near and dear to my heart, as it has taught me many valuable life lessons along with giving me a window into the many aspects of the opera world I had yet to experience.

Citations Referenced

- 1) The Metropolitan Opera. *The Magic Flute*. Julie Taymor. 2006. DVD.
- 2) BBC. Covent Garden. *Die Zauberflöte*. Diana Damrau, Simon Keenlyside. 2003. DVD.

Summary

As a Voice/Opera Performance major, I decided to take my love of opera and performance and familiarize myself with all of the aspects I had yet to understand: Production and Direction. Along with the creative and technical aspects, I also learned how to deal with many different emotional situations, including but not limited to being in a leadership position above my friends and peers.

Opera is an interesting field: it is well known only to those already involved in the world of classical music. Since I have been immersed in this world for the past 4 years, I decided to take on the one aspect of performance that I had no training or experience in. I had seen how my own director directed our opera productions, and I always had things I would change and/or do differently. So my senior year, this capstone gave me the chance to do it my way.

I produced and directed an opera called Die Zauberflöte, or The Magic Flute. The plot is convoluted and fantastical, consisting of many characters and plot twists, though at its core it is about good versus evil. Composed by the famous W.A. Mozart, the opera is a singspiel (both singing and spoken line) with music performed in German and dialogue performed in English. I decided for the purpose of this project to use the original German for the music, and have the spoken dialogue in English for the ease of the performers and audience. Within the opera there are many different characters, enough that I was able to cast almost everyone that auditioned.

At the beginning of the year I contacted all of the necessary people in order to make sure the project got off the ground: I spoke with my department head to make sure I could use the class Opera Workshop during the spring semester, which meets every Tuesday Thursday from 5-630. I enlisted the help of an assistant, a musical director/conductor and a costume designer about halfway through the semester. Then as the year went on I also hired a lighting designer and a graphic designer to make the promotional posters. The conductor, my assistant and I met to do the music cuts necessary for a production of this size, and at the end of the semester I held auditions. I was able to cast for every role, and though I was lacking in male chorus members I was still very happy with my outcome. I was also able to enlist some music theater majors and a lot of outside majors, something that hasn't happened in awhile between specifically the two programs (music and musical theatre) do not normally collaborate. Right before winter break I had a meeting with everyone explaining how I wanted the process to go, how and when music should be learned and what my expectations were. I wanted this to be a very professional style production – as in being run as if this was a professional company, so that my fellow performance majors could have the experience.

The basic concept was as follows: produce and direct a full-length opera production in a foreign language. I decided to direct *The Magic Flute* in its original language because a) that was the composer's original intent, and b) because within my opera program we are never given the opportunity to perform in a language other than English, and it is very important for voice majors to have

that experience if they wish to make a career out of performing. I also wanted to test both my leadership skills, and see if I enjoyed the “thankless jobs” of this industry so that in my future if I chose to deviate from my performance career I could still choose to work within the industry.

The costume designer was a fiber arts major and through working together we established an inter-college collaboration – something we’ve been advocating for our entire college career but could not get the means to do until now.

As director and producer I wore many hats and had many jobs. I learned the differences between the two, and the responsibilities that go along with both positions. I also found that I loved directing – developing characters and their relationships to each other, and showing that through staging, movement, singing and acting.

I encountered many challenges, surprises, and rewards along the way – the biggest one being figuring out how to deal with professionalism and work ethic within the production, and how to deal with different staff and cast’s ideas of it, especially if it was radically different than my own view.

The process was a very tiresome, frustrating, fun and rewarding experience. I very much enjoyed having the final say in all decisions, creative and otherwise. It was definitely a great final endeavor with which to conclude my undergraduate career, and a great way to show my department, friends and family all that I have learned, and all that I can accomplish with sheer talent and determination.