



# Who needs community opera?

Jonathan Dove

## Part One: 'Let's take over a whole town!'

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I have been writing community operas for thirty years. At first, it was co-creation, shared with hundreds and hundreds of people. Eventually it led to an ambitious attempt at a networked performance of a community opera on three continents. Along the way, my ideas of authorship and ownership have evolved, and my sense of what is useful.



'Let's take over a whole town!' I suggested to Glyndebourne in 1988. 'Everyone can be in an opera.'

We were considering ideas for outreach projects. I was not without megalomania. I had been inspired by working for Opera North on a community production of *West Side Story* with a huge cast of 200 amateurs, in a disused cotton mill in Bradford. The sense of audience involvement in the promenade performance, and the hunger of the participants for this experience, opened a door in my mind.

*West Side Story* is a New York story – but what would it be like if the community were telling its own story? What if the performers had written their own music?

Initially, my approach was quite rigid: each performer must have a hand in the composition of the songs he or she sings. In [Hastings Spring](#) (1990), this meant that some of the best songs were almost inaudible in performance: the highly inventive teenagers who had written the tunes with me turned out to have no great singing ability. I also realised that, in general, far more people were interested in performing than in composing. Most of our 200-strong cast didn't mind who had written the songs, they just wanted them to be good.

So I adopted a more relaxed approach in [Dreamdragons](#) (1993). Some groups helped writer-director Ali Campbell find out what story the town wanted to tell, a process that felt like a kind of divination. It wasn't based on reminiscence, but sometimes participants' expressions became part of the text. Other groups then helped me turn this text into songs, to be performed by yet more groups (although there was often overlap between them). The story itself would also be mainly about these groups, but there would be a handful of professional soloists for key characters, and a handful of professional instrumentalists to form the backbone of the vast orchestral forces.

I developed a more playful way of working, finding different ways of getting people improvising together in song (while stamping and clapping and even dancing), splitting into groups to try out different ways of singing just one or two lines of a libretto, then all gathering around the piano to stitch the fragments together: this process often led to surprisingly organic melodies. From the piano, I had a hand in shaping the music, but

there was always a sense of collective achievement, and shared ownership. I compared myself to a public letter-writer, helping people give voice to their deepest feelings.

I followed a similar process in a series of community operas over the next ten years. Working in this way gave me an insight into the kinds of musical material ordinary people have in their heads, and can get excited by. In each opera, having devised perhaps six or seven songs in groups, my task was then to weave their melodies into the score to make a musically and dramatically satisfying whole.

This is where things could get tricky. Even though my idiom sounds tonal, and I should therefore find it easy to integrate this new 'folk' material into a larger piece, there can be a tension between satisfying the needs of the community performers or co-creators, and satisfying one's own needs as a composer. The fun of the workshops often contrasted with dark private moments, when I did not feel personally satisfied with the work-in-progress, yet knew I had produced something that everyone would enjoy performing, with enough challenges and rewards to make them come back week after week for rehearsals.

In purely aesthetic terms, these operas were flawed in all kinds of ways; but the experience as a whole was always spectacularly worthwhile for a huge number of people who discovered that, *together*, they could make something way beyond their expectations, and take a pride in it – while making new friends and having a lot of fun.

Adults don't always get much time to play, and the explosion of energy that they release is a huge part of what an audience enjoys in a community opera. Individual voices may not be strong, but in big enough numbers, they can raise the roof. Harnessed by a skilful director, a crowd of non-professionals has amazing theatrical vitality. The conspicuous value of the whole endeavour, and the joy of feeling useful to my community, always kept me coming back for more.

What could be more exciting than helping a whole town to sing its story?



- 1990 [\*Hastings Spring\*](#), Glyndebourne's first community opera, in Hastings, East Sussex
- 1993 [\*Dreamdragons\*](#), Glyndebourne community opera in Ashford, Kent
- 1995 [\*In Search of Angels\*](#), Glyndebourne community opera in Peterborough
- 2000 [\*The Palace in the Sky\*](#), English National Opera and Hackney Music Development Trust community opera at the Hackney Empire
- 2001 [\*The Hackney Chronicles\*](#), Hackney Music Development Trust: not strictly a community opera, perhaps, as it was performed only by 9-year-olds, but used the same development process
- 2005 [\*On Spital Fields\*](#), Spitalfields Festival Community Cantata (staged)



Jonathan Dove, *In Search of Angels*, 1995

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## Part Two: Telling a universal story

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One drawback to co-creating operas with their community performers is that you can end up with pieces so precisely tailored to their communities, in the stories they tell and the forces they use, that no-one else will perform them. All that creative endeavour may yield just one glorious moment: a week of performances and it is over.

This was my experience with all the works I mentioned in Part 1. At the time, it seemed worth it – after all, life itself is transient. Even if those pieces only had one production, they left a legacy. They awakened an appetite for this kind of experience, and the community participants always wanted more. They would go on to commission new work.

But eventually I found it frustrating that so much energy went into pieces that had such a short life, however magnificent. On the face of it, at least one of them could have had further performances: *The Palace in the Sky* was not explicitly rooted in a London borough; it was a modern retelling of the Tower of Babel, and could have a resonance wherever skyscrapers were built. But I orchestrated it for the local forces in Hackney: in addition to eight professional players from the ENO orchestra, there were steel pans, a jazz band, a Salvation Army band and a Turkish saz ensemble. That's not a combination you find everywhere. How to make a community opera that could have a longer life?

The answer was to tell stories that could belong to any community, and accompany the singing with instrumental forces that are readily available.



*Tobias and the Angel* was informed by all those years spent co-creating, and tells a story of magical healing from the Biblical Apocrypha. This time there was no devising process involving the participants, but in writing for a community chorus and a children's chorus, I had the sounds of all those earlier workshops in my head, and felt easily able to write music everyone would enjoy singing. The opera has had more than a dozen different productions. One of these was a touring production, which worked with many communities. Choruses in each town would learn the music and staging and then be joined in the last week by the eight professional soloists and the nine-piece band.

*The Monster in the Maze*, based on the myth of the Minotaur, has turned out to be even more useful. Although only composed in 2015, it is now my most-translated opera. You can't expect young children to sing convincingly in a foreign language, so there have been productions in English, French, German, Portuguese, Catalan, Swedish and

Chinese/Taiwanese; (a Dutch production has been temporarily halted by Covid-19.) Its value is that it offers a means for symphony orchestras and opera companies to reach out to their communities. There are perhaps three hundred people on stage, but only three professional singers and one professional actor. Half the orchestra is made up of young musicians, sharing desks with their older professional counterparts. On stage and in the pit, the professionals raise the game of the amateurs, while the amateurs remind the professionals of excitement they first felt performing together, and give them a chance to encourage and bring on the young and inexperienced.

Co-commissioned by two symphony orchestras and a music festival, *The Monster in the Maze* is designed to be either semi-staged in a concert hall, with singers and orchestra sharing the stage; or fully staged, with the orchestra in the pit. Inspired by the example of Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde* (1958), the most prominent role is for teenagers. Younger children also play a part, while adults get to play both the grief-stricken Athenian parents and the bloodthirsty Cretans. Potentially, whole families can be involved. And thus the audience will naturally include plenty of family members too.

So a community opera based on a powerful myth turns out to meet the need of arts organisations to engage with their communities; the need of professionals and amateurs to engage with each other; the need of a composer and dramatist to feel useful to their community; and the need of all kinds of people to participate in a group artistic endeavour of which they can be proud, and which they can share with the people they know and love, on stage and in the audience. A particular strength of *The Monster in the Maze* is that the community performs in a high-status cultural venue, in a work that belongs there: no-one is being patronised.

My most recent community opera, *Search for Spring*, has another Greek myth under the surface. It too has been [a casualty of Covid-19](#), but will eventually involve a thousand amateur singers in each performance. It's designed to be performed outdoors, so it doesn't need a conventional performing space. If you are telling a universal story, the sense of ownership and engagement is there, even without a group divining and devising process, so long as the creative team have the right instincts and experience. The power of community opera comes from the huge number of voices, which, *en masse*, need no amplification. If a composer can tune in to the sound and capabilities of untrained voices, the results can be rewarding for everyone.



1999 [Tobias and the Angel](#), English Touring Opera and Young Vic Theatre co-production

2015 [The Monster in the Maze](#), Co-commission and co-production between Berlin Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra and Festival d'Aix-en-Provence

2020 [Search for Spring](#), Commissioned by the Lincoln Center and originally planned for the Mostly Mozart festival in August 2020





Jonathan Dove, *The Monster in the Maze*, 2015  
production by the Berlin Philharmonic, photograph by Monika Rittershaus,  
courtesy of Stiftung Berliner Philharmoniker

## Part Three: It could be a model of international collaboration

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I sometimes ruefully observe that, whatever I do, [Benjamin Britten](#) got there first and did it better: mainstage opera, television opera, church opera, children's opera, community opera. But he didn't live to see the internet - here was my opportunity to do something first!

Britten also didn't explicitly write climate change operas, although you could make that claim for [Noye's Fludde](#). Like that ur-community opera, my first attempts to write operas about climate change had taken an allegorical approach: Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden (*The Walk from the Garden*, 2012); Phaeton, losing control of the chariot of the sun and causing the earth to heat up (*The Day After*, 2015). But eventually it dawned on me that a much more direct approach would be to write about climate refugees, people with dramatic personal experiences that could be sung.

Climate migrants' stories involve whole communities, so it should be some kind of community opera. But their predicament is an international problem, so the opera should somehow involve communities from more than one country. Perhaps communities from different countries - on three continents, say - could be linked simultaneously in a networked performance, using the internet and big screens, so that in each place an audience would experience a large group performing live, interacting with groups in two other countries appearing on screen. It could be a model of international collaboration, setting a good example of the vastly more complex international collaboration needed to tackle climate change.

I developed this idea with the Young Vic Theatre and Somerset House. We settled on Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town as locations on different continents where the time zones were not too far apart for a networked performance at a reasonable time, and a stable internet connection could be achieved. We met extraordinary musicians in Rio and Cape Town, and found partner organisations to co-produce.

An obvious musical challenge was going to be the latency, or delay, inherent in any audio-visual exchange that uses the internet. In a networked performance where the audience is in one place, this can be compensated for, but with a live audience in each location, the delay needed somehow to be integrated into the composition. With an ambient kind of music, or where there is no clear pulse, it wouldn't really matter; but I also wanted to be able to write fast, energetic, dramatic music. We made some experiments, simulating the effect of latency by purposely introducing varying delays into the wired connections between musicians in different rooms. At certain speeds, it was possible to improvise satisfying music, so long as the musical pulse was equal to the delay. I realised that if I could be certain that the delay would consistently be, say, half a second, I could incorporate this into the score by using a metronome-mark of 120bpm.



The piece would sound different in each location, but could still be exciting. So there seemed to be a way forward.

We knew there were many technical hurdles to overcome. Would we be able to achieve a perfect synchronisation between the singing and the lips on screen? The big screens themselves would have their own delay – another element to factor in somehow. Without perfect sync, the feeling of communication would dissipate.

Many minds were brought to bear on all the questions the project threw up. With conductor Brad Cohen and director Penny Woolcock I stood in potential locations in Cape Town wondering: how will the audience know the performance is really happening right now in those other two countries? How will they know it hasn't all been pre-recorded? How will they know those other performers are really in London and Rio?

We started to imagine a pre-show element where, for instance, the audience in Rio could ask questions of the audiences in London and Cape Town, and also – with roving cameras – be taken outside the performance venue to see distinctive iconic locations in those cities. *Look! You can see the London Eye!*

Because we could imagine it so vividly, it did not occur to us that we would be unable to realise this dream. Technical conversations with experts such as Alain Renaud challenged our understanding, but always felt illuminating and optimistic. So it was baffling and frustrating that our attempts at simple networked improvisations between singers and instrumentalists in our three chosen cities kept stumbling over technical obstacles.

Eventually, we had to admit that sending large amounts of visual and audio information continually, in all directions, between performers on three continents, to enable a networked performance, made impossible demands of the software then available. Our producer called a pause:

*‘Technical advisors in four countries have confirmed that sung music which is visually synchronised between three international nodes is the most challenging demand that one can make of a network... No one has developed the technology to achieve a suitable visual and musical performance over great distance... Precise replication of the technical, producing and artistic capacities at each node is needed.’*

Our investigations and experiments ran from 2010 to 2015. I wonder if anyone has yet achieved what we were trying to do?



Linking communities across the continents was a beautiful dream. Making connections is the great strength of community opera. An arts organisation *connects* to its community, celebrating and giving status to the communal achievement. Composers *connect* to their community, harnessing their imagination to create roles for the widest

range of abilities. And at the heart of it all, the community performers *connect* to each other, to the professional participants, and to the wider audience, who share their joy, and feel the wonder of seeing people they know transformed by the act of singing and acting out a potent story.

It's hard to say who needs community opera most: the organisations, the writers, the participants or the audience. But if you've ever witnessed the curtain-calls after a community opera, you'll know that everyone needs it.



2012 [\*The Walk from the Garden\*](#), Salisbury Festival

2015 [\*The Day After\*](#), Holland Opera

#### *Additional web-links*

[\*The Monster in the Maze\*](#), Berlin Philharmonic (semi-staged) here:

[\*Le Monstre du Labyrinthe\*](#), Aix Festival

[\*The Making of The Monster in the Maze\*](#), LSO Documentary

[Jonathan Dove](#) website