

## **ENHANCING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: THE SETTING OF FAIRY TALES TO OPERA**

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**Abstrat:** Since the eighteenth century, composers have been inspired by fairy tales, leading them to write operas based on these stories. From German Märchenoper to Russian folklore, from Bo-Peep to Rusalka, from witches to water sprites, these timeless stories have inspired composers write in the operatic genre, one that is normally reserved for themes relating to existential concerns, dynastic power and tragic prerogatives. Indeed, a few of the more well-known examples have found their way into the canon. Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel* (1892), Dvořák's *Rusalka* (1900) and Joseph Vella's *Bo-Peep: A Little, Little Opera for Children* (1968) are all configurations of well-known fairy tales/nursery rhymes written by the Brothers Grimm, Erben/Němcová and 'Mother Goose' respectively. This paper will look at the world of these tales and the intrinsic musical quality inherent in them, and the differences between the German, Slavic and English style as indicated in the three chosen stories. It will then investigate the ways the three examples have been set to music as fully-fledged operas. The highly intriguing case with Joseph Vella's opera is that it was devised as a pilot test in a government school in one of the most deprived areas in Malta. The objective of this test was to see whether children coming from difficult backgrounds could learn through opera performance. More generally, the probing question of this paper deals with the nature of translating these tales into music, and how opera, generally regarded as an art form enjoyed by the older generations, enhances the genre of children's literature as well as being instrumental in the emotional and cognitive development of children, even of disadvantaged children.

**Keywords:** opera, fairy tales, education, literature, hope, Humperdinck, Dvořák, Joseph Vella

### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to foreground the unqualified importance that music has on a child's development, both cognitive and emotional. Critical debate has made it an unequivocal fact that children need books

with compelling stories that fire their imagination in order for them to develop into stable, mature adults capable of having a mind of their own. Case studies have also shown that a lifelong love of literature becomes one of a handful of points of reference when perhaps all else fails. Suffice it to say that only in February 2024, the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IAEEA) carried out a test across North America, with results showing that primary schools that produced the highest academic achievement are spending 20% to 30% of the school-day on the arts, with special emphasis on music.

Despite statistics and countless books affirming the validity of stories for children, the debate has not really extended to an appreciation of opera for and performed by children. Most recently, Bernadette Lamb's seminal book, *Read the Beat: Music in Children's Literature* (2023), while making use of visual aids together with music, does not bring opera into the equation. The emphasis largely stays on cultivating a visual culture, which, of course, is very appealing to a child's fledgling imagination. Exposing children from a very early age to beautiful songs, accompanied by pictures, opens up a completely new world for them, one through which children learn to cultivate an intellectual as well as an emotional relationship with. Studies in the field, most particularly but not exclusively those conducted by Kulikovskaya & Andrienko (2016) as well as Fler & Hammer (2013) and Sayer et al., (2018) show that when children are taught that the subjects and themes which fairy tales deal with are actually ones of universal concern, these stories contribute towards the growth of the child's cognitive development, enabling them to reflect on these matters and to speak about them. Reflecting on these aspects of the tales also helps with enabling the children to nurture their discernment with regard to social aspects that would serve them in good stead not only as children but also when they develop into adults. These points are made very clearly especially by Fler & Hammer (2013), referred to above, while Koutsompou Violetta-Eirini (2016), states that 'these classic stories, especially when set to music, may be said to encode patterns that enable the restoration of vibrant functioning' (213).

In this regard, opera, while heavily weighted on the visual, also combines the aural in equal measure. In order to have a more thought-provoking debate, this paper will focus exclusively on opera, a genre largely regarded as an elite art form aimed at a cultured audience of a certain breeding and pedigree. While reference to Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel* and Dvořák's *Rusalka* will be made, the main force of the argument will be brought on the Maltese composer Joseph Vella's

*Bo-Peep: A Little, Little Opera for Children*. This particular work was devised as a pilot study (Vella & Mallia Milanese, 1968), carried out in one of Malta's most uninspiring environments, namely, the small town of Żabbar in the south of the island. The majority of the children at the primary school there came from extremely difficult backgrounds. They were written off as hopeless cases, illiterate and unruly. Joseph Vella wrote this lovely work for them to test whether the genre of opera, that rarefied and sophisticated art form, can be made relevant and accessible to such children. He believed that music, specifically opera, is important in helping children find their voice, expressing thoughts and feelings they perhaps are not aware of even having. Vella also believed that the academic curriculum could not be implemented with any measure of success without access to music and the arts in general. Conceived and carried out in 1968, this pilot test is visionary, anticipating what the IAEEA is currently doing. Vella's test was not only successful, but it radicalised the education system in Malta with regard to the appreciation of the arts as a prerequisite in a child's emotional and cognitive development. It brought to bear not only on the fact that opera is important for children, but that children can make opera happen.

For a small island such as Malta, innovation comes with a dose of suspicion and trepidation, not least in environments which are firmly established and consolidated by decades of tradition. The pilot study carried out by Vella and Mallia Milanese involved all the children, from the ages of six to ten, at the Żabbar Primary School. In all, around a 120 children took part, with a robust roster established which enabled all children at this school to participate in this project. The Director of Education at the time, Ms Margaret Mortimer, fully supported the initiative and following the unprecedented success of the project, she made it mandatory that every child in government primary schools would have at least one music lesson a week. Music became integrated in the school curriculum, as an inherent core subject, contrary to it being sidelined as an extra curricular activity.

### **1.1 Aims and Theoretical Frameworks**

While research on the musical development of the child has been consistently plentiful and robust, the subject of opera as a key component of a child's education and development remains a largely untapped source. Even the latest publication, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Childhood Learning in Music* (2024) does not make reference to opera.

The research question that inspired this paper stems from the points made here, namely, that opera is not only a sophisticated art form aimed for responses from a discerning public. While it can be seen in this way, it can also be an artistic tool that could be used to mould a child's education in a more holistic and comprehensive manner. Specifically, reference is here being made to operas whose subject matter stems from fairy tales, stories whose protagonists are generally children themselves, thereby making them relatable and accessible to the intellectual and emotional intelligence of the child. Fairy tales stimulate the children's interest in social phenomena and challenge them to recognise what these fictional stories reflect in real life. Through fairy tales, children's social aspects develop as they become aware of various social and global problems and participate in the effort of collective problem solving and responsibility. As expressed by Koutsompou Violetta-Eirini (2016), the stories of fairy tales expressed through language by transfer and symbolic representations, facilitate the development of symbolic thought, the representative abilities and the mental processing of life events at a fantasy-level, which form the basis for the development of creative thought and emotional intelligence. This point, among others, is also clearly articulated by Sayer et al., (2018), as well as by K. Gallas (1994). At the same time, by experiencing the lives of the heroes through identification and imitation, children experience the universal values of friendship, solidarity, mutual respect, gender equality, and other values that are intrinsic to the well-being of both the child and the adult (Kulikovskaya & Andrienko, 2016).

When fairy tales are introduced via the medium of opera, the benefits are various and varied. Children are automatically introduced to a rich mix of multiple art forms. With music, the child learns to appreciate the power of melody to move and interact; rhythms and harmonies enrich these melodies not least because they also express different emotional states. With drama, the child develops the skills of storytelling as well as emotional expression (Bettelheim 1991). All this is expressed through the use of language which in turn is linked to history and culture.

Unlike other music genres, opera brings together voice training, acting, and stage presence. When a child learns opera, they gain confidence, improve focus, and build discipline. And when parents participate alongside them, learning turns into a shared adventure.

The three operas chosen for discussion and analysis in this paper all have their roots in a fairy tale or nursery rhyme: Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel* by the Grimm Brothers and published in 1812; Dvořák's *Rusalka*, based on a Slavic folk tale was first produced in 1900, and

Joseph Vella's *Bo-Peep*, a nursery rhyme popular with children, which was set to an opera for children and first produced in 1968.

Finally, what this paper aims to establish is that exposing children from an early age to opera is fundamental to their holistic education. It presents a holistic and experiential approach to music education, emphasising the integration of speech, movement, and instrument playing to foster a comprehensive understanding of music.

Given that the topic addressed in this paper has been to a large extent under-researched, music education researchers also need to derive original theories rather than simply importing or appropriating existing theories. This is a point made by Jorgensen (2009). In fact, no researchers have systematically investigated which theoretical/methodological frameworks have been so far employed in opera appreciation for children in particular.

## 2. The Magic of Fairy Tales

Einstein tells us that '[I]f you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales'. While Einstein is not renowned for being an expert on child education, he does have a point, one that is scientifically corroborated by, among others, Azamovich (2021), Pulimeno et al., (2020), Maricic & Stakic (2017), and Yong-Sook et al., (2015). These studies, although carried out in different social and cultural environments, all show that fairy tales are fundamental in the child's cognitive nurturing and development, not least because through relating with these stories, the cognitive and intellectual processes are facilitated and triggered to the child's benefits.

Together with the unqualified benefits of books for the well-being of a child, it is believed that music has an enduring quality that takes the book to limits one would not think possible. Music speaks a language beyond the power of words; it means when language fails, and its universality brings people of diverse cultures, race, and creeds together (Schmidt et al., 2018). Music appeals to the aural reception of words in sound, translating words to tunes that stick in the memory and are not likely to be forgotten once we have engaged with and responded to them. Active engagement with music helps not only in short-term moments of pleasure but also in long-term emotional, cognitive and intellectual development as the child matures into a young adult. As adults, we carry those memories with us.

Children are inherently musical: Natalie Sarrazin (2016) states that children show 'natural responses to music from even when they are still in the womb' (16), while Wangid (2018) claims that music serves a

mnemonic function in that children are more able to remember words through singing them. He goes on to argue that this mnemonic retrieving and processing of information leads to more concentration and focus which in turn nurtures the child's perceptual ability, reasoning and critical thinking. Music, thus, as Kulikovskaya & Andrienko (2016) confirm, helps in the development of the child's imagination and its creative powers, leading to stimuli related to positive feelings.

In an age increasingly governed by consumerism, stopping for a moment to linger on the view of a world lost to speed and materialism will help us appreciate a Blakeian utopia that is possibly recoverable through our engagement with music. When one reads fairy tales, one realises that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is also the core of fairy tales.

In her otherwise remarkable book, *Children's Literature Comes Of Age* (1996), Maria Nikolajeva seems to underestimate the power of fairy tales to trigger the imagination not only of the child, but also of the adult composer who uses these tales to compose what have become absolute standards in the musical canon. She writes:

Reading a collection of folktales is also different from reading a children's book. Instead of a writer – the sender of information in a simple communication model – we have in the case of folktales a mediator (the person who tells the story orally), a collector (the person who makes a transcript of the oral text), and an editor or publisher (the person who is responsible for the published version of the text). (14-15)

While Nikolajeva is making quite sound observations, she stops at commenting on how folktales set to music is also a performative publication whose impact on a child's imagination can be long-lasting. Such 'publications' also attempt to portray the cultural and stylistic differences of their original sources. Tales from Germany, Czechoslovakia, and England (as this paper will seek to investigate) are different not because they present three-pronged antithetical moral premises, but because they represent three original perspectives, or readings, of the same world, necessarily embracing unique, stylistic features. It is difficult to understand why Nikolajeva labels such stories as 'essentially not children's literature' (15). In my country, Malta, which is a tiny island in the heart of the Mediterranean, such tales are regarded, indeed accepted, as children's literature, as they are elsewhere. These are stories that children are told and read; children create relationships with the characters, they identify with their situations and they are brought up to believe that doing good is

ultimately good for you and for the world. This is perhaps the result of a tightly-knit community on a small island in the Mediterranean. Folk tales, legends, myth: these form part of the story-telling that children are brought up on in Malta. From an early age, the Maltese child finds himself/herself coming into contact with these tales even in the school curriculum, with re-enactments of traditional folk tales forming an integral part of the child's cultural education. To this effect, a good number of publications containing these stories are available, a few of which have been translated into English, Italian and French (Pisani, 2020, 1999; Fenech, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Charles Dickens, noted for his observation of children and childhood in his novels and in his writing in general, among other aspects of life he focuses on, responds to George Cruikshank in this way, when Cruikshank rewrote 'Cinderella' as a tract promoting equilibrium and temperance. Dickens replied with an essay entitled 'Frauds on the Fairies':

Fairy stories [were] nurseries of fancy [from which children could learn] forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force.... A nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun.(111)

### 2.1 Opera as the saving grace

Within this context, one that advocates a take on the child's threatened life and world as being potentially redeemable, this paper will dwell on three adaptations to opera from fairy or folk tales or nursery rhymes from different countries.

Opera is not an easy genre to negotiate. Given the fact that opera brings together so many different art forms and skills (music, literature, set design, costume design, props, lighting, etc), putting all these in one coherent and cogent art form can present problems with regard to ideas, conformity with the artistic director's plans for the production as well as the musical director's prerogative for artistic unity. While on the one hand it is a rarefied art form, traditionally appealing not only to adults but to adults of a certain breeding, on the other hand it is also a

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<sup>1</sup> See, Ġorġ Pisani. *Triqat il-Holm*. Malta: Progress Press, 2020. See also Ġorġ Pisani. *Għawdex johlom fil-leġġendi*. Malta: Midsea Books, 1999. Additionally, see Victor Fenech. *Old Legends of Malta and Gozo*. Malta: Miranda Publishers, 2017.

genre that has a universal appeal, and many tunes that we hum are likely to come from very well-known operatic sources rather than from symphonies or sonatas. So, how does one juggle a family night at the opera? The question here is not only whether operas are adaptable or good for children, but also what a child can do for opera. While quite a lot has been said about the former point, as already attested to by the test cases quoted earlier in this paper, most relevantly Kulikovskaya & Andrienko (2016) and Sayer et al., (2018), it is the latter one that is more intriguing and which this paper will attempt to address.

The theatre experience can be unforgettable for opposing reasons: either an exhilarating one that will nourish children and have them begging for more; or else a boring one that could see children being disenchanted with the experience the theatre offered them. Given that opera about children is a genre that children are likely to engage with, not least through their acquaintance with the story, it is also important for the adult/teacher to explain that opera is a mixture of diverse art forms. There is acting, singing, performing, a group of people playing different instruments together. Sometimes there is dancing, then there are stage designers, costume designers, stage props, lighting, and so much more. Operas can consist of funny stories, romantic love stories, or sad stories, just like the fairy/folk tales and nursery rhymes the child will be acquainted with. An opera is also sung poetry/poetic prose. Above all, the protagonists of such operas will be children and that, more than any other feature, will create a bond between the child on the stage and the child in the auditorium. Finally, the stage can look like almost any kind of place: it can be Cinderella's bedroom, or the tower in Rapunzel, or the forest in Hansel and Gretel. The child will know these places: she/he will have interacted with them, lived in them in their imagination. Adults should never underestimate the power of the child to relate. Opera, therefore, is an all-comprehensive experience and given its variety and multi-hued aspects it is more likely than any other musical genre to appeal to a child's imagination. As the famous conductor and educator Leonard Bernstein who, among many other things is famous for his 'Young People's Concerts' with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra between 1958 and 1972, states: 'I propose that the reading and understanding of music be taught to our children from the very beginning of their school life; that they learn to participate with enthusiasm in the study of music from kindergarten through high school. No child is tone deaf; every child has the natural ability and desire to assimilate musical ideas and comprehend their combinations into musical forms. Every child can be taught to read music as he or she is taught to read words; and there is no reason why both kinds of reading

cannot be taught simultaneously. Above all, introducing a child to opera from a young age opens up a wealth of imaginative riches like no other a child can experience at that age.'

## 2.2 Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel*<sup>2</sup>

Based on the brothers' Grimm fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel', Humperdinck's opera was first produced in Weimar on 23 December 1894, conducted by Richard Strauss. Since then, the setting of this dark tale, not least the 'gingerbread house', has been associated with Christmas, further extending the appeal that the story has to children. While this is a tale of horror inhabiting very dark spaces, like the majority of stories in this genre it ends with redemption.

In the hands of Humperdinck (1854 – 1921), the tale retains its emphasis on the perennial dialectic between good and evil. Of his three operas based on stories for children, it is his version of the Grimm fairy tale that has made Humperdinck immortal. It is one of the high points of 19th-century opera, a re-modelling of the language of Wagnerian music drama into a work that has the lightest of musical and dramatic touches, and never seems a moment too long. Exposing the child to such music drama needs careful preparation, and children have an infinite capacity for learning and absorbing. What is extremely interesting in this setting is that Humperdinck incorporates Germanic folk tunes into his opera, ones that had been transmitted orally down generations and which had become an integral part of the culture of his people. This is immediately noted right from the start with the beautiful melody 'Suse, liebe Suse', a German folk tune dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Weaving new tapestries with old thread, there is an uncanny affiliation here with Modernist poetics, namely, the influences of the past on the present.

Humperdinck sets the story in the time of fairy tales in the land of fairy tales. What could be more wonderful for a child's imagination? (Tatar, 1992). In fact, Märchenoper means an opera set in a fantasy

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<sup>2</sup> The opera of Hansel and Gretel by the German composer, Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921) is traditionally performed at Christmas. The celebration of sweets and food makes a seasonal delight. Or course, for those who know the story, you will realise that the section with the witch is spooky enough to listen to at Halloween too. The production I had worked on with the Manoel Theatre in Valletta (Malta) in 2002, was an adaptation of Humperdinck's opera which brought to the children and the audience the most charming and catchy tunes, with spoken narration and acting in between. While the story was adapted for children between 5 and 10 years of age, the singing was pure opera, with nothing from Humperdinck's score changed.

landscape. Retaining the name of the fairy tale as the title of the opera would inevitably create the necessary link in the child's mind and he/she would know the story prior to watching the opera. Adelheid Wette's libretto perfectly reflects that of the fairy tale, but she goes one step further to mitigate the impact that the horror of the tale undoubtedly has on a child's imagination. In her libretto, the mother is the children's real mother not a stepmother. She is not at all as evil as in the story but rather a lovely woman trying her best to deal with naughty children and the hardship that comes with being a broom-maker's wife. So, basically, this is a polished opera without the attendant disturbing elements one comes across in the fairy tale. Additionally, it would be likely that children attending the opera would know the story and while the horror of the fairy-tale is still present they will know that all will be well in the end. So, when the witch is shoved into the oven and all the previously baked children spring back into their own form there is the kind of redemption the child will be expecting and be happy about (Roseblatt, 1994). This is further consolidated by the final chorus of children and adults singing in harmony together, expressing not the tribulations they have endured but the inevitable step towards reward that that suffering leads to. This final chorus also attests to the harmony that is possible between adults and children.

The tale consists of universal truths and reflects the values of the time periods and societies from which they are derived (Koutsompou Violetta-Eirini, 2016). Many of these have still have a significant value, even nowadays. The characters, their actions and their reward lead to the development of moral issues. The good defeats the evil, justice triumphs, the non-arrogant is lucky in love, intelligence overcomes physical strength, while kindness, diligence and hard work leads to reward.

### **2.3 Dvořák's *Rusalka***

'Rusalka' is a tale whose endearing qualities inspired the great Czech composer, Antonin Dvořák (1841 – 1904), to compose what is arguably one of his most beautiful and haunting works. In Slavic mythology, a rusalka is something analogous to Celtic mermaids or Greek sirens. The concept of rusalki (the plural form of 'rusalka') originated from a Slavic pagan tradition where young women were symbols of fertility. These nymphs did not interfere too much with human life and mainly served to provide life-giving moisture to the fields and forests every spring when they came ashore to dance in the spring moonlight. The water spirits were believed to help crops grow plentifully and so were generally treated with respect. (This aspect of the tale has

affinities with the myth of Demeter in Greek mythology. In Roman mythology she is known as Ceres.) In the modern era, a large mythos mostly unrelated to fertility has sprung up around the beguiling young women of the water. By the 19th century, the main objective of a rusalka had transformed herself into harassing the human population.

The libretto for *Rusalka*, a tale that perhaps best addresses slightly older children than the story of *Hansel and Gretel* does, is based on the fairy tales of Karel Jaromir Erben and Božena Němcová. The opera was first performed in Prague on 31 March 1901. Jaroslav Kvapil wrote the libretto before he had had any contact with Dvořák, and the plot holds elements which are also relevant to *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen and to *Undine* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué.

Because Kvapil's and Dvořák's appropriation of the multi-faceted Rusalka tales dwells more on a kiss that leads to death rather than to life (unlike in 'Sleeping Beauty'), this fairy tale is known as a reversed type (Nikolajeva, 2002). The interplay and struggle between goodness and evil, the spirit world and that of the human, is beautifully balanced. Dvořák, unlike Humperdinck, does not deviate from the story to make it a happy one. Rather, true to character, he emphasises the Slavic spirit's 'cursed capacity for suffering', as Pasternak writes in *Doctor Zhivago*. The style is that of opera as we understand it. Leitmotifs abound, largely used for Rusalka herself, her damnation, the water spirit, and the forest. These leitmotifs occur frequently, and with each iteration there is a cumulative effect, one that augments and strengthens the emotional intensity in the listener.

The opera makes use of traditionally established theatrical devices, most notably, dancing, comedy (as in the interaction between the Gamekeeper and Turnspit), as well as pictorial musical depiction of nature, bringing the technique of word-painting to dizzying heights. There is an abundant wealth of melodies, dramatic in themselves with shimmering orchestration, as one expects from Dvořák. All said, this is a beautiful if profoundly disturbing drama which steers away from the expected 'and they lived happily ever after' ending so typical of traditional Western fairy tales. In this regard, this type of opera is more realist than idealist (Propp, 1991). Rather, the libretto, powered by wonderful singing, stages brave women who shun the constraints and boundaries heaped upon them by either family or society. Their attitude towards emancipation and, partially, towards gender equality, is tremendous. Yet, in this reversed fairy tale, the rebellion of these women is fatally determined to fail, 'for so the story runs', we are told in the libretto. It presents a more realistic take on life, one that moves away from the utopia that conventional stories generally harness. While

this is disturbing it is also firmly anchored in real life where, regrettably, the 'happily ever after' ending is not as common as one would desire. Yet, it cannot fail to captivate a child's imagination in our contemporary times. While the ending is a sad one, the child will be able to understand that even if one loses, one will not go down without a fight.

#### **2.4 Joseph Vella's *Bo-Peep: A Little, Little Opera For Children***

Moving much further south, a contemporary composer, Joseph Vella (1942 – 2018) was a Gozitan-born composer, conductor, researcher, university professor, and, above all, a humanist. There is an honesty and an integrity about Vella's work that endow it with a permanent validity. Certainly not as well-known as the two composers discussed in this paper so far, yet this does not make the man or the composer less valid in his contribution to a child's experience of literature through music and vice versa.

Some background to the composing of Vella's opera for children is relevant here. In his multi-faceted life, Vella was an Education Officer of Music for a number of years, and this made him responsible for overseeing music education in primary and secondary schools all over Malta and Gozo. Under his guidance, the islands witnessed dramatic changes in this regard. For a long time, experience of music only entailed the organisation of concerts at Christmas and Prize Days. Vella revolutionised this limited experience, and music became integral to a child's regular education, with a minimum of one music lesson a week in all government schools.

In a survey on literacy (Malta Literacy Survey and Statistics, 1968) carried out in the late 60s in Malta and Gozo, it was established that the town of Żabbar in Malta had the lowest literacy rate on the islands, with some 78% of the population there unable to read and write. Joseph Vella set his sights on this town and embarked on a project (Vella & Mallia Milanes, 1968) which would prove that the teaching and the experience of music education go above and beyond the regular engagement with canonical subjects such as Maths, languages, science, and so on. He also set out to prove that in such difficult situations, it is Art in its various formats that would be the catalyst for the learning of academic subjects. In short, Vella wanted to bring music to the same level as standard academic subjects; he wanted to affirm that music is not an extra-curricular subject but one which is integral to a child's holistic educational process (Sayer, I., Kristiewan, M., & Agustina, M. (2018). In order to test this idea, he took the story of *Bo-Peep*, a well-known nursery rhyme which around 90% of students at primary level in Żabbar did not even know about, and developed the tale into an opera for children.

Vella first advised the music teacher visiting the Żabbar Primary School every week to create activities for the children which would see them not only learn the words of the nursery rhyme, which in itself is a kind of miniature fairy tale, but to also help the children identify with the parts and take turns in acting them in ways that the children could relate to. Then, in collaboration with Prof. Victor Mallia Milanes, Vella fashioned a libretto in English which became the text that Vella then set to music. The final result was *Bo-Peep: A Little, Little Opera for Children*, scored for 2 young soloists (not older than 10 years of age), a children's choir (largely in unison but occasionally in two-part ensemble), together with a small ensemble consisting of strings and piano. This work of approximately 35 minutes' duration is in one act.

The opera was finished on 6 June 1968 and the teachers, to include those responsible for drama and dance, got busy rehearsing with children from the Żabbar Primary School. Soloists were chosen from the upper classes of the primary level, while the choir, some 60-strong ensemble acting the part of the flock of sheep, included all the children from the remaining classes. In one way or another, all children from the Żabbar Primary School took part. Costumes were made by the needlework teacher, props were in the hands of the drama teacher, and so on. Everything was home-made, as it were, and the children were encouraged to help even in these other areas of opera production. It was a Żabbar Primary School production, a school which for decades had been dismissed as the pits, one that was branded a 'hopeless case'.

The premiere performance took place on 2 July 1968, with the composer conducting the performance, some two months after the completion of the work, during a prize-giving ceremony. It is good to also note that prize-giving ceremonies had been abolished for many years at this school largely because there was no motivation for them. The reinstated ceremony was attended not only by parents and relatives of children but also by dignitaries including the Director General of Education, the Minister for Education, and so on. To say that the performance was a resounding success is an understatement not least because most of those attending were understandably sceptical that anything good could come out of Żabbar Primary School. Not only did something good emerge but the 'little, little opera for children' was produced to a very high level, polished and stylish in execution and, most importantly, the children loved it, proving that there is an aspect to education that goes beyond the strictly academic (Nodelman, 1992). This project confirmed that music, opera is relatable to all levels, that children written off as unteachable could actually show others how it's done.

As Chesterton reminds us: 'Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist.' The Žabbar Primary School children were facing dragons in the shape of a hostile environment and a wretched reputation, they were written off as hopeless cases. To appropriate Chesterton, opera told the Žabbar Primary School children, and the authorities, that dragons can be killed. This is a truth that, in different ways, the three children's operas discussed in this paper confirm, that music is a preeminent subject in a child's education, that music cuts across boundaries and overcomes obstacles in a way that perhaps other subjects cannot accomplish (Nodelman, 1992; Yong-Sook et al., 2015).

### **Conclusion**

What this paper has attempted to demonstrate is how music education, specifically exposure to opera from an early age, vastly enriches the child's holistic education and is in itself conducive to a healthier interaction with other people and life in general. There are many situations in schools worldwide where music appreciation and performance are relegated to a side issue on the curriculum, if at all. Introducing a child to opera is an even rarer occurrence, but in the long term, it is one that comes with both benefit and privilege with regard to the child's emotional and intellectual development.

The narration or reading of legends, myths, and fairy tales through the medium of opera is a way of nurturing the child's soul and humanism (Beckett, 1997). The understanding of the world grows as children understand the early cultural traditions, learn about the culture and read a variety of myths, learn to appreciate the culture and art of other people, according to Donna E. Norton (1991). Without the spiritual knowledge that music gives, children-readers may not realise the dissemination of the culture. The similarities found in texts of traditional children's literature shows that all people have the same needs and the same problems. In fact, some tales are almost the same. At the same time, traditional myths encourage children to imagine that people from all over the world care about the good, the courage, the benefaction and the industry.

Above all, one should never underestimate the power of music to move, to enhance and to enrich a child's life in a way that is neither measureable or quantified in strictly scientific ways. There is a measure that transcends calculation, one that speaks to the spirit in profound ways that result in the cultivation of the well-being of the child. Having imagination means enjoying inner wealth, a relentless and spontaneous flow of images that enables the child to view the world in its entirety

(Winnicott, 1996). In the dreamy world of the fairy tale, where everything unfolds in an intermediate space between fantasy and reality, the child's magic thought finds an appropriate mode of expressing itself. The structure of fairy tales as shaped by the operas discussed in this paper (and there are more) allow children to move into a dreamy world without restrictions and cancellations. At the same time, through the mechanisms of identification and projection, the child has the ability to identify, express his/her negative feelings, to give importance to personal traumatic experiences and, ultimately, to look for and find a meaning in his/her life (Von Franz, 1996). Additionally, in a comprehensible and clear manner, the fairy tales set to opera answer the fundamental questions of children as they transfer important knowledge and information about life.

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**INSEBBHU L-LETTERATURA TAT-TFAL: L-ISSETTJAR TAL-ĦREJJEF F'OPRA**

Din il-prezentazzjoni tipprova tikkonferma l-istat importanti li l-mużika għandha fl-edukazzjoni tat-tfal. L-opra mhix biss forma ta' arti għal nies sofistikati u eruditi, imma tista' tkun aċċessibbli anki għal tfal li ġejjin minn ambjenti diffiċli. Dan l-esej jipprova juri li t-tfal jirrelataw ma' sitwazzjonijiet anki koroh u japprezzaw li minkejja d-diffikultajiet, fl-aħħar mill-aħħar, it-tajjeb jegħleb lil hażin. B'eżempji minn tlett ħrejjef magħrufa, jiġifieri ta' Hansel u Gretel, Rusalka, u Bo-Peep, li ġew magħmulin f-opra mill-kompożitur Ġermaniż Engelbert Humperdinck, il-kompożitur Ċekoslovakk Antonin Dvořák, u l-kompożitur Malti Joseph Vella, din il- prezentazzjoni tikkonferma li l-opra mhix generu t'arti li jappella biss għal tip ta' nies biss, imma anki għal tfal. Każ pertikolari li din il-paper tagħmel huwa dak ta' Joseph Vella, bl-opra tiegħu *Bo-Peep: A Little, Little Opera for Children*. Dan kien studju pilota li Vella għamel f'sitwazzjoni partikolari immens. L-iskola primarja ta' Haż-Żabbar, fin-naħa t'isfel ta' Malta, kienet magħrufa għad-diffikultajiet tremendi soċjali li kienet tiffaċċja. Tfal kellhom reputazzjoni hażina, kienu magħrufa bħala illitterati, bla kontroll, li ma riedux jafu b'tagħlim. Joseph Vella ried jipprova/jikkonferma li l-opra tgħin lil dawn it-tfal isibu l-vuċi tagħhom, ittihom kunfidenza u tama mhux biss għat-tagħlim imma għal ħajjithom.

**Keywords:** opra, ħrejjef, edukazzjoni, litteratura, tama, Humperdinck, Dvořák, Joseph Vella