

Sigurd and the Opera

Sigurd and the Opera was produced by Ramasjang / Danish Broadcasting Television based in Denmark. **Sigurd and The Opera** is the ultimate music distribution to the small viewers and their parents! In this programme Sigurd and 4 puppets stage the famous and beloved opera Carmen (George Bizet). The programme starts backstage, where the puppets have been instructed by operas professionals. The voices are warmed up before being tested in the concert Hall. And then the opera is staged in pomp and splendour with the DR Symphony Orchestra and an obvious puppet audience.

The enthusiasm always triggers additional numbers: It's great to sing opera!! **Sigurd and The Opera** contains Aida (Guiseppe Verdi), La Boheme (Puccini), The Mascarada (Carl Nielsen), The Ring (Wagner) besides Carmen.

Sigurd and the Opera was one of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2010 finalists in the "up to 6 non-fiction" category.

International experts' opinions



Figure 1: The puppet opera team prepares to perform Carmen.



Figure 2: The puppets rehearsed important songs.

The program evoked a lot of discussion, both positive and negative, amongst the international experts. The international experts had mixed opinion about presenting Opera in young children's programs. Some thought that it was a very innovative and unique concept for children. "I think it is very nice to show what opera is for the smaller children, because they are often very open for all kinds of music" (female expert, Sweden). "I loved the idea of introducing opera and orchestral music to this age group" (female expert, USA). "I think it is just a great thing that these kids are going to be exposed to these amazing stories of these operas, when in New Zealand you never get exposed to them" (female expert, New Zealand). They appreciated that the program was successful in bringing a classical form of music to the children through the medium of television. "It demystifies it a little bit. Opera is a mystery – even to a lot of adults. So, to present it at that age is wonderful, because it opens the door a little bit – so that when they get older they are not in fear of opera" (male expert, USA). They appreciated the idea of opera in a program for preschoolers in spite of its constraints. "I loved the idea of bringing opera to the kids. They love opera, and they wanted to get it. I know how hard it is to shorten a story and to shorten the beautiful music. I think you did a really good job" (male expert, Germany). "These children will know those great stories, which have

to do with passion and love, hate, and to be accompanied by that glorious music and fun characters. It is amazing, in it justifies the means, as far as I am concerned" (female expert, New Zealand).

Some also praised specifically the quality of the music of the program and the way it was presented. "The interaction with the orchestra and the conductor was beautifully modelled to see how this conductor



Figure 3: The orchestra accompanies the puppets.



Figure 4: Carmen sings a love song to attract Don Jose.



Figure 5: Don Jose falls in love with Carmen and sings the famous flower song to her.



Figure 6: Carmen stops a duel between her boyfriend and Don Jose.

works; exaggerating that conversation I thought was really effective” (male expert, USA). “I think it is a very ambitious project. It is really to explain this to the kids – that they will be sensible about this kind of music” (female expert, Columbia). Others also noted that the program was successful in encouraging both parents and children to watch together which they suggested, should normally be an essential part of a successful children’s program. “If you have a program like this, it will be a wonderful program that adults would benefit and enjoy watching with their children—not only for the sake of the child but for themselves” (female expert, Israel).

However, many international experts felt that the program was inappropriate for pre-schoolers for a variety of reasons. “There were things about the way it was presented that I didn’t think were kid-friendly at all and how to really engage them” (male expert, Canada). There was particular concern over the violent theme in the opera. “I loved it though I did worry about the killing” (female expert, South Africa). They expressed their concerns over the use of knives, pistol, liquor, cigarettes in a program which was meant for preschoolers. “I was thinking what would a child think when he sees somebody killing another with a knife? I am worried” (female expert, Columbia). “I was particularly worried about the cigarettes” (female expert, Ghana). “The use of cigarettes and liquorish as a theme for preschoolers so constantly was questionable” (male expert, USA). “I think I would have liked to see it happen in a little bit more of a creative way so you don’t actually see a puppet do it to another puppet, because if a kid just put on the channel at that moment and only saw that, it might really make a traumatic impression” (female expert, USA). Experts from some countries, like USA and Canada, were certain that this program would never get aired in their respective countries due to its violent content. However, the female expert from Denmark who was also the producer of the program justified the use of knives and guns. “The knives and the guns are children things and anyone can buy them in a toy store. It is not made out as real things. They are toy things, so children will recognise them in Denmark as toy things. They know it is puppets; they will never get bothered, and they will never kill each other.” She continued to explain: “We chose to be true to the opera, and that is why the puppeteers are professional opera singers. We have to have it on a high level. In Denmark we can actually make programs with liquorish, cigarettes, and a murder.” She also shed more light on the use of puppets in the program, explaining that the puppets were operated by opera singers rather than trained puppet operators. The opera singers were sitting in the box operating the dolls and singing simultaneously. Though it is difficult to sing and operate puppets at the same time, the producers chose to do this to

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Figure 7: Don Jose kills Carmen because she decided to leave him.



Figure 8: The puppet opera team waves goodbye to the audience.

infuse the personality of the singer into puppet to make the whole process authentic.

But other experts continued to be concerned. They were worried about the very violent nature of most opera-narratives, and whether it is appropriate to introduce them to young children. “I think it was a very worthy and very laudable thing to want to do, but I don’t think it was really following through; because if you are going to do opera, and you are going to tell the actual stories apart from changing the cigarettes to liquorish, then you are going to have to confront that most of the opera is about trauma and death. In the best ones everybody dies. Where are you going with this?” (male expert, UK).

The international experts were not very happy with the narration of the program and found the story hard and difficult to understand. “I don’t know if kids would, certainly in Canada, spend time with it” (male expert, Canada). “It was also much too long and repetitive – just singing the same thing over and over again for no real reason” (male expert, UK). “Maybe the stories of the opera are a little bit too mature for this age group, or maybe this one was – *we could have had a good love* and then the stabbing scene” (female expert, USA). While appreciating the idea of bringing opera to young children, they were not convinced about the nature of the plot and the direction of the program. “It was a heavy subject matter. If you can pick a more kid-friendly opera I think it would totally work and get them interested” (female expert, USA). Some international experts also preferred to have more participation from the kids. “They could have had a song that even children can learn and sing along” (female expert, Sweden).

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