

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2023

Discovering Opera: A Guide for Young Learners

Sophie M. Bisson

What is this research about?

The aim of this research is to educate students via the discovery of Black individuals involved in the performing arts in Canada, specifically in the operatic field. Delivered in a curriculum guide format, this research also aims to improve Black students' emotional and psychological health via their inclusion and participation in new conversations and the discovery of positive role models. The lessons of this curriculum offer students the opportunity to learn about repertoire and artists as well as the ability to see themselves represented in the various spheres of operatic activity, from composer and librettist to singer of a principal cast on a world stage.

What did the researchers do?

The outcome of this research was the creation of a curriculum guide. Discovering Opera: A guide for Young Learners delivers a curriculum divided in 5 sections:

- (Introduction)
- 1. Instrumentalists
- 2. Librettist
- 3. Singers
- 4. Composer
- 5. Conductor
- (Bibliography)

Flexibly conceived for beginner, intermediate, and advanced students, each section is then subdivided to offer the following:

- 1. A resource page for teachers to guide activities
- 2. A page with definitions pertaining to each section
- 3. Activity pages for students
- 4. Listening lists (where applicable)
- 5. A featured individual

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The lessons contained in *Discovering Opera: A guide for Young Learners* were conceived based on years of personal experience as a musician and teacher, as well as current sources on curriculum development, community music, holistic teaching, teaching diverse populations, and the integration of multimedia in teaching music.

What did the researchers find?

The primary goal of this research was to develop a curriculum that focuses on Black opera in Canada. Originally envisioned as a two-part model that aims to reach all categories of learners of the Community Music Schools of Toronto, the first part of the model was meant to include lesson plans featuring Black opera companies, works, and artists, and the second part was meant to include virtual learning capsules.

As the research progressed, it became evident that, although African American operas exist, Black Canadian operas and opera companies still need to be discovered. Research also shows that Black Canadian performers are underrepresented in opera.

How can you use this research?

The creation of *Discovering Opera: A Guide for Young Learners* introduces several of the elements found in the creation of an opera as well as general music knowledge related to Western European classical music. Teachers of the Community Music Schools of Toronto can use this guide in several manners, such as the following:

- Teaching a specific session over several weeks and offering the subsequent parts in future sessions
- Teaching an expedited workshop of all lessons for more advanced students
- Teaching the curriculum in its entirety over the course of typical year-long school year
- Underneath the curriculum and activities, it is most important for students to see multifaceted representations of themselves in their curriculum. This will encourage and motivate them to learn more about this history, perhaps even research it further, and disseminate the knowledge proudly.

About the researchers

Sophie Bisson is an opera singer and a doctoral candidate at York University. A recipient of the Sunnuz Sarah Taheri Graduate Award in Fine Arts and a Helen Carswell Research Grant, she has written numerous reviews and articles featuring Canadian musical content and has presented several papers on topics related to Canadian opera and opera in Canada. She also presents on and guides others through the challenges and possible solutions for disseminating large-scale digital humanities projects in music and in the arts in general. Sophie is the creator and editor of the online *Encyclopedia of Canadian Opera* (forthcoming) and her dissertation examines the representation of women in nine twenty-first century Canadian operas.

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Keywords

Black, Opera, Curriculum, Music, Community, Classical Music, Western Art Music, Education, Guide.

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About the Helen Carswell Chair

[The Helen Carswell Chair in Community-Engaged Research in the Arts](#) is a partnership between York University's [School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design](#) and [Community Music Schools of Toronto](#). This partnership is dedicated to community cultural development in the underserved neighbourhoods of Toronto. We facilitate and conduct rigorous academic research which explores the benefits of community music programs and the links between music and learning. The goal of our work is to significantly benefit children from high-risk neighbourhoods and to fortify community music programs globally through publications and knowledge mobilization. We especially seek to engage and help drive new knowledge and practice to community-based groups serving children in the Jane and Finch community. researcher's previous research on Canadian opera is expansive. From this knowledge the researcher conducted extensive reviews of Black opera, singers, musicians, and libretto writers. Additionally, the researcher spent considerable time in specific archives to learn more about Black opera companies, works, and artists.