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Our Kids Love Opera, But Not Because We Force Them To

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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My wife and I are not what you might call opera fans. Most of my knowledge on the subject is limited to pop culture references: Bugs Bunny singing Wagner, Homer Simpson in *La Bohème*, and Julia Roberts crying when watching the finale of *La Traviata* (which was apparently the source text for the plot of *Pretty Woman*, a fact not clear to me at the age of 12).

When our daughters (ages 8 and 5) expressed interest in the "ultimate art form," we were stumped. Our eldest daughter started asking questions about a reference in her piano book to a child prodigy by the name of Mozart. So after quickly summarizing the plot of *Amadeus*, we used YouTube to fill in the gaps. There is literally a Watch Mojo video called "Top 10 Opera Songs" for us newbies.

They fell in love with *Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen*, the Queen of the Night's aria from *The Magic Flute*, written by Mozart. The vocal gymnastics in this piece (something called *coloratura* in the opera world) by soprano Diana Damrau left our kids with their mouths hanging open.

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The Metropolitan Opera Live in HD, which streams operas from The Met to movie theatres across North America, combines music of the highest quality with extravagant costumes and close-ups of expressive faces. The Met has posted clips from all their performances on YouTube, exposing the music to a new set of opera fans, including my wife and I.

We got to make sense of our vague pop culture knowledge in real time as our children were exploring their new passion. Usually, parents are the voice of authority and knowledge for their kids, but on this we knew little more than them. Our kids loved watching us experience new songs, knowing that our reactions were as genuine as theirs.

So when the Met in HD screened an opera in French (our home language), we decided to take the kids. Their *grandmaman* had seen it before and assured us it would be appropriate (no one dies of tuberculosis or stabs themselves in the heart, for example). *La Fille du Régiment*, which premiered in Paris in 1840, is a comedy with a pretty simple plot: a woman, raised by an army regiment from infancy, must choose between two men.

Other patrons glared at us. Their disapproval continued as I gave the girls a bag of chips, which, in glaringly obvious hindsight, is not the best snack to consume at the opera-in-a-movie-theatre.

It

will be of no surprise to anyone who has tried to wrangle children that we arrived late, pretty much the worst sin an opera-goer can commit. We snuck through the dark of the movie theatre to the sounds of the overture (the opening song played by the orchestra before the curtains rise — thanks, Wikipedia); the vibe a strange cross between a movie-going experience and a high-theatre outing.

Other patrons glared at us. Their disapproval continued as I gave the girls a bag of chips, which, in glaringly obvious hindsight, is not the best snack to consume at the opera-in-a-movie-theatre. But by then I was feeling defensive, so we stubbornly ate our chips. The two women in front of us actually moved to the other side of the theatre.

When the singing started the children's eyes grew round. Watching the singers' throats warble with vibrato, or seeing a full-sized tank rumble on stage, caused them to cry out with joy. After some particularly good arias, we clapped and cheered "bravo" along with the audience in New York, even if we knew the actors would never hear us. When the opera buffs in the movie theatre saw the enthusiasm with which my children responded, their iciness, for the most part, disappeared.

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The tenor who performed the main male role, Javier Camarena, wowed the audience with his performance of the aria *Ah! mes amis* which is famous for having nine high Cs in a row (pretty much the highest note a tenor can sing). He received an extremely rare encore request from the audience in New York, and, with tears streaming down his face, and a nod to the conductor, did the whole thing again.

Later, the girls struggled to explain to my wife what they had just experienced. Sonia focused on the plot, while Elizabeth was drawn to the physical comedy.

"Was it long?" asked my wife. (It was. Over 3 hours.)

"No! Just the break in the middle when the lady wouldn't stop talking," said Sonia.

"What was your favorite part?" she asked.

"When the girl rolled her eyes at her Dad," said Elizabeth.

"Do you want to go again?" I asked.

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"Yes!" they both replied.

So we went back to YouTube, trying out selections from *Carmen*, *The Barber of Seville*, and *Cats* (which, while not exactly opera caliber, is pretty fun to dance to pretending you're a cat).

I'm grateful that our kids have discovered something that is new for us. We can explore as a family, discuss what we like, argue about what we don't, and, when the stars align, get side-swiped by emotional performances like the ones we saw in *La Fille du Régiment*.

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