

Why You Should Take Your Kids to the Opera - ParentMap

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Why You Should Take Your Kids to the Opera

Seattle Opera's 'Hansel and Gretel' boasts wild spectacle, a modern twist on the fairy tale and a Family Day deal

By Gemma Alexander



Ashley Emerson (Gretel) wandering in the dark wood. Photo credit: Philip Newton, *Hansel and Gretel*

Even in our arts-obsessed region, there are plenty of people who think of opera like the minuet — interesting only for its historical importance. That's a shame, because opera is actually one of the most accessible forms of performance art, combining **music and theater with a level of spectacle that matches the Hollywood blockbuster**.

[Seattle Opera](#) is well aware of the stereotype of a fat woman in a horned helmet singing incomprehensible high notes — after all, the stereotype is inspired by Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, the series of operas that secured the company's worldwide reputation for quality. Seattle Opera has leveraged its stellar reputation to take risks that challenge not only artistic assumptions but social ones, as well. A particular target? The assumption that opera is elitist and irrelevant.

Seattle Opera for everyone

Recognizing that a two-hour performance in a foreign language is not necessarily the best introduction to the art form, Seattle Opera has made a special effort to create easier entry points for [kids and families](#). First, it has developed an extensive outreach program that reaches 400,000 people each year. For [schools](#), that includes field trips to dress rehearsals, musical story times in classrooms and classroom residencies, and even a [visiting production of a one-hour opera](#), complete with study guide and post-performance discussion (this year it's a bilingual performance of *Cinderella*).

There are also plenty of opportunities for families to engage with opera directly. Elementary school kids can [attend camps](#) during school breaks, and weekly chorus classes year-round. [Teens can take their singing to the next level](#) with a three-week summer intensive or a musical theater workshop. Those looking for less intensive commitment can attend one of Seattle Opera's annual open house events, [Frost Fest](#) in February or [Summer Fest](#), to hear opera performed in a casual environment amidst kid-focused activities.

Hansel and Gretel: A not-too-sugary first opera for kids

Seattle Opera dramaturg Jonathan Dean encourages families to take the plunge and try attending an opera. The stories of some operas are more family-friendly than others, but he says he loved *The Flying Dutchman*, with its pirates and zombies, when he was a kid.

That was the opera I took my 7-year-old to see last season, and she loved it, too. The next morning she told me that she dreamed the entire opera over again. She surprised me with her insights, distinguishing between the character of Erik, whom she disliked for his threatening manner towards the heroine, and the tenor who sang the role, whom she declared her favorite performer for the beauty of his voice.

Another excellent option for a first opera is [Hansel and Gretel](#), which opened at Seattle Opera on Oct. 15 and runs through Oct. 30. *Hansel and Gretel* is a relatively short, fast-paced opera featuring child protagonists (convincingly performed by adults) and ending with a youth chorus actually sung by children. Dean describes the themes of the story as "imagination, wish fulfillment and food" — all concepts dear to the hearts of children.

The opera was written by Engelbert Humperdinck: Not the British pop star, but the protégé of Richard Wagner that the British pop star named himself after. Humperdinck combined simple folk melodies with Wagnerian orchestration for a **beautiful, accessible score to accompany the familiar, timeless fairy tale**.

Grimm themes: Stranger danger and a witch's junk food cottage



John Easterlin (The Witch) returns to Seattle Opera. Photo credit: Jacob Lucas

Although it was composed in the 1890s rather than the 1960s, the Seattle Opera production is set in the modern day. My daughter gasped audibly at the **appearance of the witch's junk food cottage**. By placing Hansel and Gretel in a cardboard house and building the witch's cottage in a litter-strewn clearcut, the production adds a silent layer of social commentary on top of the classic fairy tale. The end result can be taken as an entertaining story about children getting candy, or **an entry point for discussions about economic inequality, stranger danger** and even the links between industrial food systems and obesity and environmental degradation.

The modernized evil witch (the role is performed by two men, John Easterlin and Peter Marsh) plays more to the fears of parents than children. The witch first **appears in a cotton candy-pink wig and Jackie O. suit**, ditching both to stomp around in slippers and a bloody butcher's coat once the children are captured. In a typical middle school response, my daughter was more concerned with the witch's visible bra than her collection of knives, but some younger children might find the witch as genuinely menacing as this mom did.

Most kids will find Hansel and Gretel's cardboard house humorous, but be prepared to talk about their poverty after the fact. **Scenes depicting the haggard, angry mother and inebriated father contain great music**, but none of the gloss of a fairy tale.

My 12-year-old was so excited for her first opera, she was ready to head to McCaw Hall three hours before curtain. So, to fill the time, we attended the pre-performance lecture. The audio and video samples helped her stay engaged throughout the 45-minute talk, which ranged from historical context through artistic evaluation of the opera. To my surprise, she said, "That was interesting!" at the end of it. I had to agree with her.

If you go ... tips for taking kids to *Hansel and Gretel*

- **Kids should know how to read.** *Hansel and Gretel* is sung in German with English supratitles; these are shorter and move more slowly than movie subtitles, which makes them easier to read. But kids who can't read at all will have a hard time understanding the story.
- **Read ahead:** Seattle Opera has a [first-time viewers guide](#) and [spotlight guide](#) that are helpful resources for reading ahead and preparing.
- **Prepare your kids.** Part of the appeal of opera is that there is a lot going on, but without a little preparation, it can be confusing. The [Spotlight Guide](#) on the Seattle Opera web page is a great place to start. Spoilers are welcome – learn the story and become familiar with the characters. Watch a [video preview](#) or the [Bugs Bunny Hansel and Gretel video](#) from the pre-performance lecture. Listen to recordings of the music, or even watch shows that have used the music in their soundtracks (Looney Tunes cartoons used a lot of opera). Kids love it when they recognize a song.
- **Family Day performance, Oct. 30:** Make it a special occasion (and save some money) by attending a [Family Day performance](#) on Oct. 30 at 2 p.m. Students age 18 and under **pay only \$15** for almost any seat, and intermissions are packed with special student-oriented activities.

- **Tickets can be purchased online.** Tickets are still available for the Family Day performance; there will also be a Family Day performance for Mozart's whimsical *The Magic Flute* by Seattle Opera on May 14.

More opera around Puget Sound

Although Seattle Opera is the biggest, it's not the only opera in the area.

- **Tacoma Opera** is a professional opera company located in the South Sound offering a three-opera season with local performers. This year they are performing Offenbach's *La Périchole*, a romantic opera bouffe set in South America. Families may enjoy this rare opera in which no one dies.

- On the Eastside, the fledgling **Bellevue City Opera Ballet** aims to do it all, with ballet, opera and some performances that combine both. This season's opera is *La Traviata*, one of opera's great classics with a plot that may not be suitable for younger kids.

- Although neither of **Vashon Opera's** shows this season are obvious choices for kids, location may be the deciding factor for Island families, and the tiny company does have a reputation for quality.

- Further afield, **Pacific Northwest Opera** (formerly Skagit Opera) presents local and visiting professionals. This year they are presenting *Ahmal and the Night Visitors*, a family-friendly opera Christmas tradition.

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