

The Chewing Gum Goddess in the Opera Lab

On Participatory Devising Processes in Opera and the Courage to Fill Gaps

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Intro: Get Up and Go

Receiving, discussing, and co-creating music theatre and dance, combined with the curiosity to initiate individual, societal, and organisational transformation processes (even if only on a microcosmic level), forms the core of the outreach work at the Vienna State Opera. Since 2020, under the leadership of Dr. Bogdan Roščić, this work has been carried out a dedicated department for the first time. One of the various project formats developed since then is the *Opera Lab*, a participatory devising project in cooperation with Superar, a Europe-wide NGO that offers free music education for children and youth. In weekly rehearsals, around 24 teenagers and young adults between the ages of 14 and 24 develop their own music theatre performance, critically engaging with personal and contemporary societal issues. This performance is presented at the end of the season, accompanied by professional musicians, such as the stage orchestra of the Vienna State Opera, in front of an audience at the Kulturhaus Brotfabrik [Bread Factory Cultural Centre]¹ in Vienna's 10th district. There are no auditions or expectations regarding the participants' prior knowledge. The project is free of charge, and everyone is welcome. Some participants are reached through social media posts, while others are recruited proactively in nearby schools and youth centres, or through the relationship-building efforts of the cooperation partners. At an initial kick-off rehearsal, the project idea and philosophy, artistic methods, and goals are introduced to potential participants.

1 The Bread Factory Cultural Centre is a former industrial building that belonged to the Austrian bakery Anker. Since 2009 it has been transformed into a cultural space, housing galleries, ateliers, restaurants, and performance venues. See <https://brotfabrik.wien/en/home.html> (accessed April 7, 2025).

The following text critically examines the transformational potential of participation within the various phases of creative and collective group process or co-creation, taking the *Opera Lab* production *The Chewing Gum Goddess* as an example. It explores the artistic-aesthetic, strategic, and organisational challenges and limitations, providing insights into the realities of outreach work at a state funded cultural institution. These projects are grounded with one foot in a large, routine-based institution and the other foot firmly placed among our cooperation partners and parts of the urban community. Furthermore, a question arises about the direction which the effects of the metaphorical split-take. Moreover, how can one move from the split to a stable stance or a new movement?

The Project of the 2022/23 Season: *Welcome to Poseidon-Escape!*

After consulting with the Opera's dramaturgical department, the co-leading team, consisting of the musical director of Superar and the project leader from the Vienna State Opera, decides on the initial piece and thus the initial thematic framework. While previous years focused on Verdi's *Macbeth* and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, the opera *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* by Claudio Monteverdi, which premiered under the direction of Sergio Morabito and Jossi Wieler at the Vienna State Opera, served as the starting point and point of friction for the theatrical devising process of the 2022/23 season. Each year, the *Opera Lab*, as well as its dance counterpart, the *Dance Lab*, focuses on very different works from the opera or ballet repertoire. Although most participants change annually, the project aims to introduce various musical languages and staging styles to the project members. Another criterion for the selection of the piece is the relevance of its inherent societal themes, i.e., the potential felt in the original material to bridge to life in today's world and inspire artistic processes on local and/or global issues. It should be noted that this is not intended to defend, justify, or rework the opera repertoire but rather to serve as a starting point for a critical, society-focused discourse. The chosen source acts as a creative stimulus from which the young ensemble members creatively diverge through their own aesthetic-artistic practice. At the start of the project, no one knows what the final product will look like. It is only certain that it will not be a shortened or adapted version of the Monteverdi opera but something entirely new. Also known from the start is the premiere date, which allows for the structural embedding required by the institution through long-term scheduling and planning, involving the in-house trades and the musical and technical departments.

In June 2023, after seven months of creative work, the music theatre performance *The Chewing Gum Goddess* emerged. It tells the story of three goddesses – the Goddess of Chewing Gum, the Goddess of Facts, and the Goddess of Sarcasm – who have been demoted from Olympus and now exercise their last remnants of power by running an escape room titled *Poseidon Escape*. Here, the audience witnesses how three different groups – a family, a company outing, and the self-proclaimed ‘expert nerds’ – navigate the escape room, facing challenges akin to Odysseus’s journey home. The piece raises questions such as “Is home always a place or concrete location?” or “What voices sometimes lead one astray?”, and “Do all people have the same opportunities and conditions to determine and pursue their own path?”

On the Phases in the Process of Devising the Performance

Typically, the devising process of an operatic music theatre performance is divided into various phases, which I will discuss in detail below. It should be noted beforehand that the duration of each phase varies from project to project, and these phases do not always proceed linearly; they can loop back or jump forward.

Ensemble Building and Material Collection Phase, or: “Who voluntarily waits 20 years for a guy?”

In the first project phase, the so-called “ensemble building and material collection phase”, themes derived from the reference work are artistically explored. In this case, the themes revolve around Greek mythology and deities, or address more associative questions related to the *Odyssey*, such as “What does it mean to return home after a long time?” “What does home mean?” or “How long is it worth waiting for someone?” Methodologically, this strength- and interest-oriented approach alternates between elements of scenic play, vocal experimentation, and movement improvisations.

Here is a small example from scenic role work and an introduction to experimenting with absurd theatre: the deities of the *Odyssey* are known for their power plays among themselves and towards humans, as well as their unpredictable use of superhuman powers to advocate for or against certain things. In addition to superhuman powers, they are characterised by distinctive behavior, appearance, and unique props and symbols. Participants were invited to develop their own absurd deities with distinct physicalities and modes of movement and articulation, who use superpowers to intervene in everyday events

to advocate for specific causes. For this, the participants used the role profile principle, thinking about concrete personal characteristics and peculiarities of the character (e.g. biographical details, deepest desire, formative childhood experience, a typical phrase and posture, relationships with others, a characteristic feature, a favourite activity, etc.). Subsequently, improvisations followed, where participants immersed themselves in the role of their self-developed absurd deities, interacting in scenic play, and learning more about their roles' particularities through improvisations, which they then collectively reflected upon and further developed.

The ensemble building and material collection phase also involves discovering the participants' creative resources and strengths, their interests concerning their involvement in the final piece, and their attitudes towards the project's content. This phase reveals whether the initial questions posed by the project leaders resonate with the young ensemble members, or if entirely different topics are coming to the forefront. In the case of *The Chewing Gum Goddess*, the latter was the case. Initially, the focus was on the question of the meaning of home, but after visiting the reference work, the young people were more interested in: "Why does Penelope wait 20 years for a guy? Who does that?" Instead of being impressed by Odysseus' wanderings and adventures, a significant portion of the ensemble was more occupied with Penelope's seemingly unbearable waiting situation, surrounded by suitors while waiting for her husband, Odysseus. They also questioned how she truly felt upon seeing someone who was once close to her after a long time, exploring the authenticity of feelings combined with societal expectations. The theme "How long would I wait for something?" thus became an unplanned but very important part of the project for the later production. In addition, the ensemble's discourse on society's structural problems intensified, questioning whether all people even have the opportunity to shape their paths independently, or which external voices (in the context of Odysseus' wanderings) or (systemic) obstacles lead them astray or keep them from their desired goals.

Another part of the ensemble building and material collection phase includes rehearsal and performance visits to the Vienna State Opera itself. Reflections on and experiences of different staging approaches to opera and theatre aesthetics can influence the participants' own development process of the project performance. While the financial resources of productions in the large house differ significantly from the *Opera Lab*, insights derived from familiarising themselves with different approaches to staging or handling props can still inspire the participants' own ideas. In the case of the *Opera Lab*, for example, stage towers from the production *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* [The Master-Singers of Nuremberg] were standing randomly on the

backstage, sparking the ensemble's idea to work vertically. This was eventually implemented in *The Chewing Gum Goddess* (albeit with much smaller heights) using scaffolding and helped solve a previously insurmountable staging problem by establishing a spatial separation between the gods (escape room leaders) and humans (escape room visitors).

Filter Phase: About the Dramaturgical Lens, Frustration, and New Questions

In the so-called “filter phase”, artistic outputs from previous discourses and artistic experiments are selected or discarded in the form of dramaturgical approaches, narratives, newly developed characters, and musical soundscapes. These negotiation processes are not straightforward and are influenced by various factors. A primary criterion for these decisions is the group's resonance. After many themes are tested during the material collection phase, it quickly becomes clear what truly moves the group and what does not. The ensemble has significant input rights here. Their stance is gauged by the workshop leaders in weekly feedback rounds at the end of each rehearsal. Each rehearsal ends with: “What did you like today?”, “What do you wish to be different for the next rehearsal or the emerging piece?”

Another framework for the filter phase involves viewing the piece through the dramaturgical lens, where many previously developed impulses are woven back together. In the case of *The Chewing Gum Goddess*, the decision was taken to set the story in an escape room² run by three goddesses. From the workshop leaders' perspective, this decision offered the potential to coherently incorporate many of the previously developed characters and texts. The decision to use the dramaturgical lens is less participatory compared to other devising processes. It is made by the workshop leaders, based on the accumulation of inputs, and taking into account the framework conditions and an artistic vision. The participatory element here almost coincidentally depends on individual inputs from a few participants. In the case of *The Chewing Gum Goddess*, one participant randomly mentioned an escape room during an improvisation, and the workshop leaders found this image fitting, and a suitable way to integrate many previous impulses.

2 An escape room is an interactive adventure game where participants must solve a series of puzzles and tasks in a themed room in order to escape within a set time limit. The games require teamwork, communication, and creativity to succeed.

The filter phase process is socially sensitive and can occasionally contain the potential for conflict and misunderstanding among participants, as an initial project promise – that all ideas are welcome and equally important – may seem to clash with the goal of devising a coherent and dramaturgically consistent artistic product. While the workshop leaders act more as moderators of various impulses in the first project phase, their additional function of making conscious decisions becomes visible in the filter phase. Frustration and questions can arise among participants if some content and stories make it into the final work while others do not. This disappointment-prone phase is counteracted with transparency, emphasising that idea selection is a natural and important aspect of the creative process. However, this argument does not entirely negate the potentially legitimate critique that, theoretically, these steps of the creative process could continue to be democratically negotiated within the group.

Deepening Phase

The deepening phase provides space to delve deeper into retained impulses and give them more focus and attention. In this phase, the *Opera Lab* project also collaborates with guests and external partners who, without having participated in the previous process, bring new creative inputs into the rehearsal space. In this year's *Opera Lab*, once it was decided that the story of the music theatre performance would be set in an escape room, the theatre company Looters reg. soc., who have designed several escape rooms themselves, was invited. They offered inspiration for developing the characters, musical features, and conflicts and mishaps of escape rooms by sharing their experiences from observing and running escape rooms with the ensemble. The invited guests stimulated creative games, encouraging participants to consider their challenges in relation to the *Odyssey* material and previous societal discourses (such as exclusionary societies). In the deepening phase, the process of thinking more concretely about the stage design also begins, as the opera's technical departments need final information about the financial and temporal resource requirements several months before the performance. The guests' visit ultimately led the ensemble to use shield elements with neon writing and signal colors in their final production, commonly found within escape rooms and when exiting them. While scenic decisions are made in the deepening phase, the musical direction also makes initial casting decisions and deepens the musical training on already developed musical components. For example, various combinations of singing voices are tested for multi-part music pieces, such as duets or trios. In every phase, but especially in this one, the content and scenic devising process is strongly interdependent with the

musical development, as decisions on both sides (which cannot be separated in participatory music theatre work) always influence each other.

The Condensing and Validation Phase

In this phase, the elements of the developing musical theatre performance are condensed and ideas are validated. It becomes clear where cuts or deeper elaborations are needed to convey the desired content or to achieve certain atmospheres, whether theatrical or musical. For *The Chewing Gum Goddess*, it became apparent during this phase that among the characters navigating the escape room, there was a need for some who would manage the transitions between the various challenges faced by the participants. These characters would also rearrange stage elements, as the open stage setup at the Brotfabrik did not allow for curtain changes. During this phase, previously gathered material from the initial phase was revisited, and a creative idea that had been discarded in the filtering phase was reintroduced into the piece.

Outside the rehearsal room, the production process reaches its peak. Fittings are conducted, transportation for additional instruments is arranged, programme texts are written, and ticket sales commence. This process, except for fittings, occurs without direct involvement of the ensemble. This phase is also one of the most intense interactions between the various departments of the Vienna State Opera and the project, as differing realities and needs often clash. While the Vienna State Opera typically plans its operations up to three years in advance, ideas in participatory projects emerge with much shorter lead times. Initially, this caused significant misunderstandings within the organisation. Thus, at the beginning of building the outreach work at the Vienna State Opera, intensive efforts were made to collaborate with the technical department heads (especially stage and costume), in order to evaluate existing production processes and explore how long-established routines and structures could be slightly adapted to support future participatory projects and performances. Nowadays, ways have been found to react to project ideas with five months' notice instead of three years, though this requires sacrificing certain resources and forming alternative working groups and project teams. The differing timelines and flexibilities still hold potential for conflict. However, this is not due to unwillingness on the part of the departments but often related to maintaining quality standards. The internal artists and responsible parties are accustomed to (and wish to continue) equipping artistic works as securely and professionally as possible, without overburdening their teams or disadvantaging other projects. With mutual understanding and ongoing negotiations and evaluation, the collaboration with the departments remains

in a phase of continuously finding new synergies between internal and external teams.

Weaving and Staging: Getting into the Room

A limit of participation emerges in the context of weaving together the existing musical elements, especially regarding the final overall composition and orchestration. While decisions for the overall musical framework are consulted with the ensemble, the final decisions are made by the musical director and the co-leader of the devising process, the stage director. The same applies to orchestration and final staging in the performance space.

Reflecting on the *Opera Lab* project, external observers often express the thought: “I can imagine young people coming up with stories and characters, but how do you compose with young adults who may lack a background in music theory or voice training?” Especially in the context of musical work, reservations like “Who can or should compose music?” become louder. The musical director of the *Opera Lab*, Andy Icochea Icochea, works with vocal improvisation, collecting themes and melodies generated purely through reading and experimenting with the sound of self-written quotes. This does not mean the elements found are bound to the theme of the original improvisation or the person who developed those sounds. Later on, they might be rearranged or newly organised (similar to the developed text elements) – of course, in consultation with the original creators. Additionally, a significant aspect of musical theatre is the convergence of various creative disciplines. For instance, an aria can be written by someone who feels more comfortable in the process of creative writing, while another person, who enjoys improvising a solo, might set that text to music. Both creatives are equally important for the creation of that aria. The fact that the author of the libretto can provide feedback on whether the musical development aligns with their vision or suggest tonal changes closes the circle of that creative thread.

In the so-called “weaving and staging phase,” the devised piece is brought into the actual performance space, meaning the ensemble and team begin working with all associated departments (lighting, technology, costumes, props, and orchestra) for the first time. Although the piece itself, primarily text and composition, is finished, there are many silent moments that still require staging ideas and solutions. Often, it becomes apparent during this phase that ideas which worked in the rehearsal room no longer function in the new space, scenes do not carry the intended weight, or new staging solutions need to be found for certain scenes. During this phase, ideas and theatrical or musical elements from earlier phases are often revisited and utilised.

The presence of the orchestra also continues to influence creative processes until shortly before the premiere. While running through the piece during final rehearsals, it becomes clear where additional transitional music is needed or where a spoken monologue might benefit from musical commentary. Here, the orchestra remains open to trying out spontaneous requests and suggestions from the participants or the director.

The “Premiere Pizza” Phase

Celebrating the success of the ensemble and the musicians is a crucial part of the process. Even though this does not affect the actual piece in terms of content or form anymore, celebrating together impacts personal reflection on the experience. Shared meals or toasting with a soft drink are among those unplanned moments that facilitate genuine and direct interactions between ensemble members and, especially, between the young performers and the orchestra musicians or staff of the Vienna State Opera. In the context of the *Opera Lab* project, such moments, where the community celebrates a shared experience, create a sense of *we* (Matarasso in this volume). It is not uncommon for a participant to show an orchestra musician their favorite Spotify playlist during the premiere party at the Brotfabrik, or for the orchestra to dance to the young people’s songs. Similar moments include rehearsal breaks where spontaneous group games might occur. In these encounters, project participants and State Opera staff get to know each other not only in their roles, but also as people sharing a moment, a quick pass, or a slice of pizza. This might lead to a conversation about opera or something entirely different. While in the first year of the project, few could imagine this practice, some musicians now proactively ask if their instrument group can be included in the *Opera Lab* compositions so they can be involved again. Apparently, these new opportunities and contexts are also appreciated by the professional musicians. This creative enthusiasm is felt by the ensemble, making them – and the leadership team – bold enough to continue incorporating their ideas.

On the Goals and Qualities of the *Opera Lab*: Process Orientation as a Challenge for All

In line with the concept of “Artistic Citizenship” (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2023), the *Opera Lab* provides a space to artistically address socially relevant themes for the creative practice of the city’s youth and young adults, in co-creation with their ensemble members and professional artists. Both through the

process itself within the primary group – the newly formed ensemble – and through presenting the final product to a secondary group, namely the audience, discussions and reflections are encouraged.

The project is designed as an extracurricular, voluntary-based initiative, and its diverse ensemble composition welcomes people from various backgrounds, motivations, desires, and attitudes or interests. However, the project distances itself from social engineering attitudes and the assumption that it can or should actively change participants or teach them to love opera. Of course, social processes are inherent to the project, and positive individual and group developments are welcomed. The team and funder are also pleased when participants discover new strengths within the project or develop an interest in something that was previously less accessible, like opera, and even bring their friends and families to a performance. While the project aims to engage people in music theatre, audience development is just one of many possible side effects, not the primary goal, and only partially predictable.

The focus is more on creating a creative process and ultimately an artistic product that, with and through the qualities of music theatre, provides space for exploring current societal issues and new narratives from young people, which may lead to changes (even if on a micro-level), though these changes are also not fully predictable. Furthermore, the project's participatory approach, of considering co-creative processes, challenges existing understandings of music theatre's qualities and shifts focus to the path towards the final product. What (new) theatrical and operatic forms, aesthetics, and dramaturgies emerge when young adults, involved in interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary and performative approaches, shape their own narratives and musical languages? How does music theatre sound when it is based on improvisation, creative exercises, experimentation with individual and group sound, and further developed and performed with professional artists? What thematic tensions arise when engaging with opera repertoire and the current lives of participants? What new perspectives on repertoire, society, and artistic practice emerge when young creatives co-determine and shape major elements of the process and product? How does the perception and impact of the Vienna State Opera change in a different location and with traditional (stage-)orientations disrupted?

These questions often evoke not only curiosity but also fears, skepticism, or misunderstandings within the cultural institution and among project participants. Especially the process-oriented approach, where the outcome is not known at the start, requires not only openness and trust from participants and facilitators, but also a strong commitment and curiosity from the Vienna State Opera as an institution. For departments unfamiliar with this kind of work, or unable to form their own picture of it, concerns were raised at the beginning:

“But we are the Vienna State Opera!”, “We stand for quality! How will it look or sound if suddenly everyone can participate in an opera project here?” The idea that people with untrained singing voices might perform alongside professional musicians, or even be professionally equipped, seemed impossible and insulting to some at first. Yes, we stand for quality, but the question is what quality means in the context of an outreach project and participatory music theatre. Confidence can be partially conveyed by transparently showing which pillars can be integrated into the creative process to make a high-quality product more likely, though not guaranteed. These include assembling diverse project teams with various artistic signatures, employing trained staff with a participant-centred and strengths-based pedagogical approach, artistic expertise, societal, personal, and institutional relevance, rehearsal spaces and policies that support child welfare and creativity, cooperation partners and guests providing expertise the opera does not have, a code of conduct, and a stance agreement outlining the values of the project (acceptance and embracing of diversity and controversial views, respect and equality, anti-discrimination, equal opportunities), a positive failure culture, courage, risk-taking, and boldness in new visions, to name but a few. In short, finding a common language and mutual understanding is as crucial as seeking and finding new institutional processes.

The examination of participation and co-creation moments within the different phases of the devising processes in opera shows that, depending on the phase, a project may move between different sides of the *us* and *them* spectrum (Matarasso in this volume). The project’s desire and aspiration are to create as many moments of co-creation as possible, reflecting the attitude of *we* (ibid.) – moving from a purely socially oriented approach to a greater delegation of control to the young artists and the ensemble itself. In the context of being anchored in a large state institution, however, limits are reached, and at certain moments, the binary of *us* and *them* becomes more visible again. These are often due to the dependency on internal institutional processes.

After three years of the *Opera Lab*, it is evident that the Vienna State Opera has learned a lot from the young ensembles and the life of their worlds. The fact that their ideas from the are supported and showcased by the Vienna State Opera and its partners with the same importance as productions at the main house is highly appreciated by the project participants. Observations on language and communication use, awareness of barriers, needs, and interests, etc., are just a few examples.

While it has proven effective to anchor dance and music theatre projects, like the lab formats, outside the Vienna State Opera at places such as the Kulturhaus Brotfabrik, to build welcoming and accessible relationships with new young artists and communities and to foster intensive cooperation with

local partners, it would be desirable for the narratives and ideas of young people to be shown in the same light as repertoire productions in the future. The Vienna State Opera is taking an important step in this direction with the opening on Vienna's Karlsplatz in winter 2024 of NEST, a new venue specifically for children's and youth opera, dance, experimental, and community formats, which will form an axis with the Brotfabrik in relation to the lab projects. Here too, the house, especially the outreach department, is in the midst of new negotiation processes: What newly gained knowledge can and should be transferred, and which approaches should be abandoned? Will the newly found processes endure, or is it time to continue exploring new synergies within the strategic, structural, and content-related development of hopefully significant theatre moments and encounters?

Bibliography

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