



Opera, Dance and Disability

RESEO Conference from 31 March- 3 April 2010

in cooperation with Casa da Música, Porto (Portugal)

and in conjunction with the 4th edition of the festival "Ao Alcance de Todos"

SUMMARY

"You don't do it out of charity, you do it because it's bloody interesting!"

– P. Rodrigues, Casa da Música

How can we facilitate the access of people with special needs to the world of opera and dance- or to the world of music and the arts? How can one work with people with different disabilities? What are the challenges? And even more importantly: what do we stand to win? What approaches and formats exist? How can modern technology help these projects? These were the questions on our minds at the beginning of the RESEO Conference "Opera, Dance and Disability", which took place from 31 March- 3 April 2010 in cooperation with the Casa da Música in Porto (PO). 64 participants from 15 countries attended the conference, which was interpreted simultaneously into French and English. In order to provide maximum access, certain sessions were translated into sign language. The print documentation provided by the Casa da Música was also available in Braille.

And what could be a more festive opening, and more in-touch with the subject-matter than to be greeted while sitting in the spring sunshine on the steps of the Casa da Música by a percussion ensemble of young people with special needs: celebrating our common love for music and being swept up in wild rhythms!

The Casa da Música was indeed an ideal location to delve into this subject matter.

A **guided tour** of the impressive building designed by architect Rem Koolhaas provided the delegates with an insight into the possibilities offered by this state-of-the-art building and its technology. Paulo Rodrigues, head of education, offered an overview of the **wide range of education activities** offered by his team.

Additionally, the conference dates were chosen to coincide with the Casa da Música's festival **Ao Alcance de Todos**, a festival especially highlighting the work for and with disabled people. This festival, now in its 4th edition, is receiving increasing recognition and success. It enabled the conference to be set in an atmosphere where many artists with special needs and artists working with disabled people in the framework of their own artistic approaches, were present and available for in-depth discussions.

Fascinating was certainly also the possibility to attend two performances which took place in the framework of this festival.

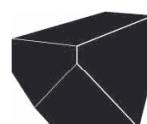
The first, **Border Control**, resulted from a project directed by Tim Yealland and Rachel Leach (UK), two artists well known to the RESEO network, involving around 25 participants from CerciGaia, an institution supporting mentally disabled people, as well as students from Casa da Música's training course for music amateurs. This musical play examined how people react when they are being observed, searched and dissected by their environment. How does it feel when one might be the object of others' suspicions? How does society, how do we, look at people who are different? The **post-performance debate** on the following day



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with both directors as well as with Rute Rosas, responsible for the stage set, allowed the members to discuss in-depth questions on the working process leading up to this absorbing performance.

The second performance was the staged concert “**Viagem**”, directed by Rolf Gehlhaar, and based on “The Elephant’s Journey” by José Saramago. It was performed by 70 performers with special needs. It integrated many of the instruments designed for the specific needs of the players in the project *Instruments for Everyone*. Its high artistic quality proved once more the benefits of providing access, here also via technical means, to people with special needs, enabling them to express themselves and create music.

A RESEO conference, however, is never only about “passive” listening and seeing others’ work. Practical sessions and workshops form an integral part of the conferences. In this case, the workshops offered provided several benefits: organised in cooperation with local organisations for people with diverse special needs, they ensured that the conference participants did not remain “amongst themselves”, but mixed with people with special needs, overcoming possible barriers and insecurities. Led by local experienced workshop leaders, they provided examples of successful methods chosen by the Casa da Música in working with this target group- a source of inspiration for the members’ work. Set at the beginning of the conference, they gave a lively introduction into the conference theme- and enabled the participants to get to know each other in a less formalised context. Lastly, of course: it is well known that things one has done oneself and practiced are more easily remembered! **Four different workshops** were provided, each run twice, making small group work possible. **1) Dancing in the dark**, in cooperation with blind and visually impaired participants, stimulated the interpersonal relationships between the participants, and strengthened the body/senses relationship through movement; **2) Gamelln**: Accessible to all, the *gamelan* was a central element in workshops run by the Casa da Música which involved deaf people and those with mental difficulties or cerebral palsy. The Robotic Gamelan was designed especially for the latter, and particularly for those with reduced mobility. **3) Sound=Space** is an interactive installation where anyone can set off an infinite number of sounds with just one simple movement. Designed by Rolf Gehlhaar, this electronic instrument can be simultaneously played by various people, just by moving around in an empty space monitored by sensors, which capture any presence or movement. **4) Instruments for everyone** offered the opportunity to experience unique instruments fully tailored to the needs of disabled artists and participants, taking into account their specific physical and/or mental needs. These people are thus given an effective opportunity for artistic fulfilment and communication. Taking up the expression of workshop leader Rui Penha: “Some instruments are easier to play by people with special needs- and that’s good!” A RESEO delegate having participated in “Dancing in the dark” sums up: *“It was more than just “useful”- but rather touching and enlightening. I had the chance to experience “oneness”. When everyone had to walk with eyes closed I had the feeling that I was not in any way different from those ones who could not see. I had my other senses to lean on except for my vision. (...) One of the most touching moments of my life was when at the end of the workshop my blind friend, when finding each other, gave me a big hug. (...) Thank you for that!”*

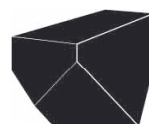
These fascinating workshop experiences helped the participants plunge head-on into the theme.



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Typical for RESEO conferences was also the presentation of members' work and the input of external experts and artists, the latter providing a novel, "outsiders" perspective onto the subject matter and enriching insights.

Two (or rather three) external speakers were invited to the conference:

Professor Dr. Adam Ockelford, Roehampton University (UK), in his speech "Autism: Windows on the Musical Mind" explored how exceptional early development (fascination for sound combined with difficulties in language understanding in autistic children) can produce exceptional musical development:

In Europe, it is estimated that 7000000 people are on the autism spectrum, and 2000000 are blind. Focusing on autism, these individuals face two key challenges: language (semantics and symbolism) and social skills/ understanding others' feelings. These are counterbalanced by two strengths: acute perceptual skills: absolute pitch is thought to be common, approx. 1:20 (versus 1:10000 in the general population); and a love of orderliness and pattern. The repetitiveness of music is thus a key factor in explaining these children's early fascination for music. Music plays to the strong points and helps overcome the weaknesses, becoming the principal medium for communication and socialization, providing a shared interest in the "outside" world and thus a motivation to communicate in words.

Adam underlined his presentation with videos, illustrating musical communication and talent in autistic children that goes beyond the mere "parroting" of music (albeit remarkable), but shows elements of creative arrangement and composition skills. In a lively exchange, **Derek Paravicini**, an autistic and blind piano virtuoso, took obvious pleasure in highlighting these issues, demonstrating his talents on the piano and performing audience requests. A beautiful presentation of the power of music!

A second fascinating speech was held by **Salla Lähteenmäki** (Finland). She described the production "**The Hunt of King Charles**" (*Kung Karls Jakt*) - the world's first sign language opera, created for and by the Deaf community by **Teatteri Totti**, a professional Finnish Sign Language Theatre, which has been performing domestically and internationally for the past 20 years. *Kung Karls Jakt*, written by Zacharias Topelius and orchestrated by Fredrik Pacius, was the first Finnish opera. The sign language version was performed for the first time in May 2008 in Mariehamn, Åland.

This presentation, of exceptional quality- accessible and captivating also for the hearing, aroused great interest and questions. It also stimulated reflection on preconceived ideas and realities, which are taken for granted: What is opera? What is music? What is "singing"? What is the difference between "speaking", "singing" and "operatic singing" in a sign language version?

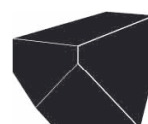
Worth mentioning: this presentation also offered the opportunity to pay tribute to the skills of interpreters: all RESEO conferences are interpreted simultaneously in English and French. For this specific speech, additionally, Salla Lähteenmäki spoke in *Finnish Sign Language*, and was interpreted directly into *English spoken language* by her interpreter (which was then also translated into French spoken language): a great thank you to the interpreters, whose skills help us overcome linguistic barriers!



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Of course, the RESEO network itself possesses an enormous pool of resource people active in the field of opera, dance and disability: its Network members! Small group discussions were chosen as a format allowing for maximum exchange. After a short panel presentation by members selected for their different approaches, target groups as well as geographic representativeness of different European regions, all participants broke out into small groups, allowing for time to ask in-depth questions, discuss challenges and experiences. This format was offered twice during the conference.

Giving input in the first round were: **Miguel Nabais Pernes**, *Manager Foco Musical* (PO): "The Little Stone Girl – an interactive dance performance"; **Kevin Rainey**, *Project Manager Royal Opera House* (UK): "The Turtle Opera"; and **Clare West** (UK): "Intention Unites" – energy, movement, visualization tools for working creatively with people with physical disabilities.

The speakers in the second round were: **Stéphanie Petiteau**, *Education Manager Opéra national de Lyon* (F): "The Opera Côté Cours project: a performance is about doing something beautiful with many different people"; **Flora Klein**, *Manager of the Young Public department Opéra national du Rhin* (F): "Vibrations"; **Rhian Hutchings**, *Education Manager Welsh National Opera* (UK): "The Merman King - Opera on Film" and **Hanne Deneire**, *freelance composer* (B): "Over art"

Not linked to the subject of special needs, but essential to the development and functioning of the RESEO network was the RESEO Annual General Meeting (held annually during the Spring conference); the minutes of this meeting can be consulted separately.

Furthermore, RESEO introduced a "Productions Space", an element which shall take place in all future conferences. The format shall be further developed in order to best meet the needs of our members: provide a space for exchange for those wishing to tour their productions and are looking for a hosting structure, those looking for productions on various topics, or those seeking to co-produce.

Taking up the questions asked at the beginning of this summary: How can we facilitate access and work with people with special needs? What approaches and formats exist? What are the challenges? What do we stand to win?

We are certain, based also upon the feedback form completed by the participants, that this conference provided an outstanding possibility to discuss these questions, to search for answers, and to be inspired by work in this field. It certainly gave all delegates the opportunity to overcome possible apprehensions- and, as the workshop leader Ana Rita Barata stated:

"Really, we are all the same. What keeps us from going ahead, from moving, is fear."

The information, exchange and support provided during this conference will certainly help us all to go ahead!

RESEO
May 2010

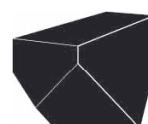
RESEO especially wishes to thank the Casa da Música, director Antonio Pacheco for his warm welcome and lively interest, as well as especially Paulo Rodrigues, education manager, his team, and the technical staff- without whom this conference would never have been as successful.



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