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**Why Opera Education? Five case studies of views in a European context**

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Since the 1980s, Opera Houses across Europe have started education programmes; some encouraged by national governments, others on their own initiative, emphasizing that the art form should be accessible to everyone. But although Opera Education is now a widely practised activity in most Opera Companies the field is almost unresearched. Only recently, from the late 1990s onwards, has Opera Education been treated as a separate practice in research on education in arts organisations. Studies, writings and reports started to focus on Opera Education in order to give an overview of 'best practice' within the field and concentrate on concrete educational activities looked at from the students', teachers' or artists' point of view. This is the first piece of qualitative research that compares Opera Education practitioners' thinking on Opera Education in an in-depth investigation. The study has explored, through a representative sample of Opera Education practitioners in Europe, the complex interaction of personal, social and cultural factors that give rise to their answers to the question *Why Opera Education?*

To reveal views, ideas and beliefs a methodology was developed offering enough space to the participants in the research to express their thoughts as freely as possible within the context of their professional work. The overall question, *Why Opera Education?*, was explored via four sub-questions focusing on what opera education practitioners in an Opera House/Company understand opera education to be, why they are engaged in it, how they see it within the Opera House/Company and the wider cultural setting and what the possible influences are to their perspectives. Through the case study approach, using the narrative as a semi-structured interview technique, it has been possible to address these questions and to set the stories of the practitioners in a comparative framework. The results are valuable not only to opera education professionals but also to other arts education professionals, arts marketing professionals, policy makers and people working in opera, because they offer a unique way of exploring the audience – institution relationship in today's society.

The in-depth focus offered insight into the complex and rich field of audience-related activities in an Opera House/Company. The daily challenges the practitioners are confronted with are broader than just opening up the art form to a wider audience and are an integral part of the audience-related activities in the Opera House or Company. By looking for the reasons behind Opera Education, lines of thinking that at first sight seemed to be quite predictable, were revealed to be more complex and challenging than if one had only looked at 'what' Opera Education is/might be. What emerged from the study was that the personal and cultural background of the practitioners is crucial to their thinking. Through the European framework of the research it was possible to identify the importance, the richness and the complexity of the diverse cultural contexts that shape the beliefs of the practitioners. The thesis argues that only through a rich contextual excavation of beliefs situated within personal, social, cultural and professional narratives the diversity of meanings about Opera Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be realised. As such this research raises new questions about the 'role of opera' today, and about the impact of Opera Education and audience-related activities on the art form. These are questions that hopefully will be explored through further qualitative research in the future.

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