

# FROM EDUCATION *to*

## HOLISTIC ENGAGEMENT

*Report on the results from the first edition of the “European overview on programming for young audiences and participatory projects”*

*October 2023*

This short report intends to publish the first results of an European overview of participatory work and non-standard programming realised by **RESEO, the European network for opera, music and dance education** in autumn 2023. This research project aims to showcase the variety of initiatives implemented by cultural stakeholders and how art enables and bears witness to the evolution of society. The call for contributions launched in November 2023 states that “every citizen has the fundamental right to ‘participate in any way in cultural life’”<sup>1</sup> Among state-mandated institutions tasked with supporting cultural life, opera houses traditionally focused on preserving operatic heritage. However, since the 1980s and 1990s, they have increasingly engaged in outreach to broader segments of society, starting with programming for young audiences, often stepping into roles previously held by grassroots initiatives and national education services. By questioning the notion of public services, they redefine the term of “audience” itself: what kind of audiences are we addressing? Who are the “other” audiences, who do not spontaneously attend opera or dance performances or concerts? How can we define those “other” audiences : by age, by cultural, geographical, economic or physical location? And how can we give these other audiences access to their cultural rights?<sup>2</sup>

Using the combined membership of the RESEO and Opera Europa networks as its ethnographic field, RESEO aims to highlight the diversity of existing initiatives and substantiate the growing impression that, since the establishment of education departments in European opera houses, a shift from education (primarily targeting young

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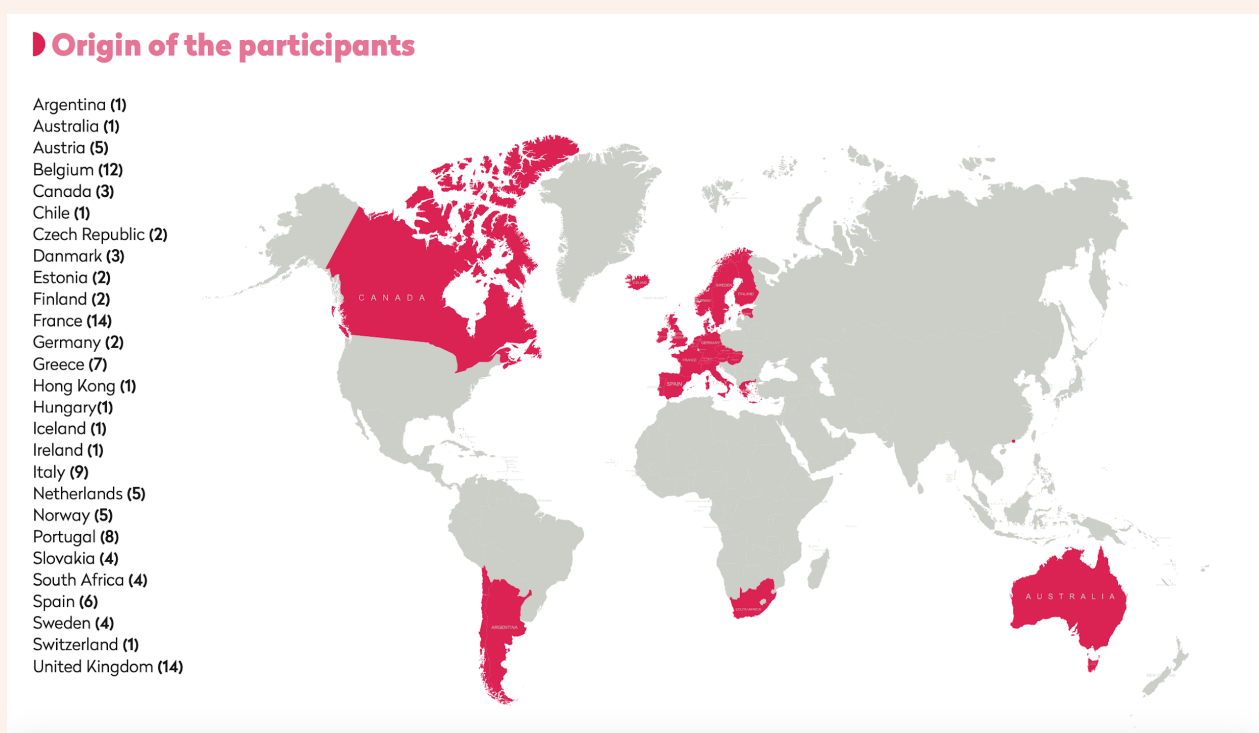
<sup>1</sup> . Saez, Jean-Pierre, De la participation, Editio, L’Observatoire, La revue des politiques culturelles, Grenoble, 2012, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> . Schmitz, Call for contribution, 2023, p.2

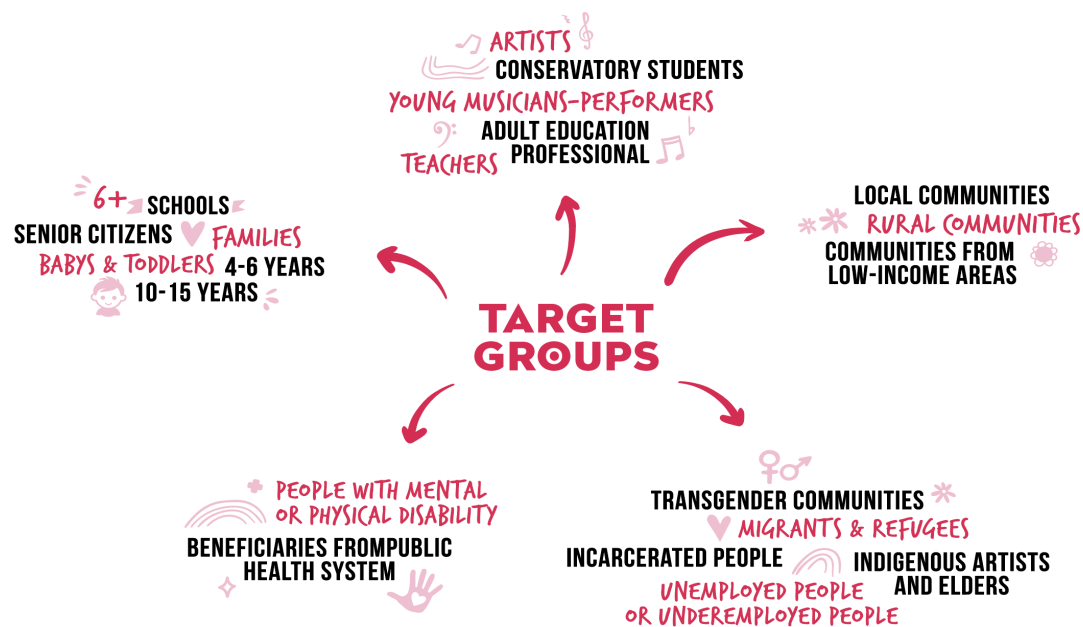
audiences) to a broader, more holistic engagement with diverse societal groups, has occurred. Moreover, as outreach to young audiences has become standard practice, political stakeholders increasingly expect the cultural sector to embrace society as a whole. The call for contributions was spread to the opera communities and mediation sector through the newsletters of both networks and published on their respective websites.

### *Presentation of the data collected by the RESEO call of November 2023*

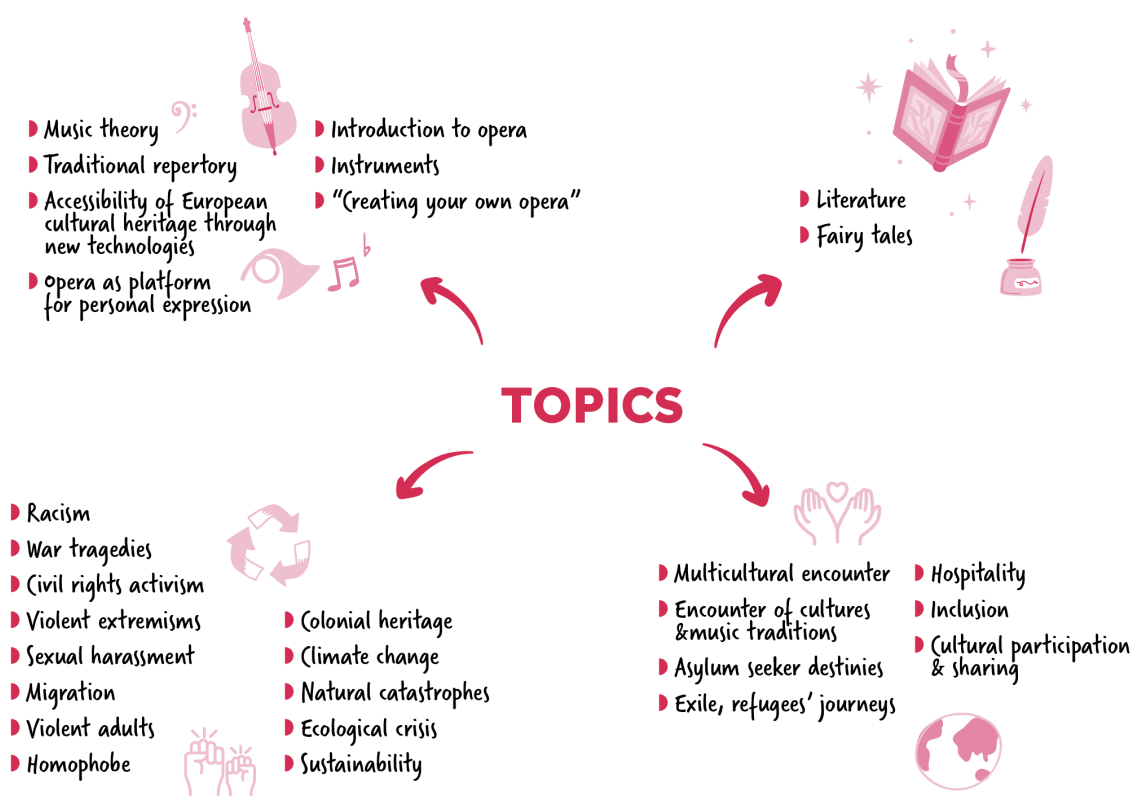
Over a four month period, 125 productions, 69 participatory works and 56 productions for young audiences were submitted. Institutions are located in 125 countries and mainly in Europe.



In order to not predefine target groups, the questionnaire asked institutions to name the audiences for and with whom the productions were realised. The high variety of different target groups can be classified by criteria of age, geographic implementation, social groups, ethnic origins, professional groups:



In the early years of community opera and opera for young audiences the range of topics was very limited, often drawing on traditional operatic themes, fairy tales, or classics from children's literature. Today, the sector no longer confines itself to those sources, as reflected in the submitted topics:



The data received reflects a Europe-wide aim to include the whole diversity of existing social groups in the institutions' local areas and fuse anthropological, pedagogical, sociological, philosophical and legal values. According to the collected responses, the field appears to have reached a certain level of institutionalisation. However, the uneven geographic distribution of participants, with some European countries underrepresented or several institutions from the same country responding while others did not, suggests that this institutionalisation is not yet fully established or consistent across Europe. For each country we can find examples of proof for both statements. The holistic engagement of art institutions can be fully integrated in cultural policy of a state and at the same time not be recognised by the regional funders. Sharing and Participation can reproduce the existing values as well as challenge them.

When engaging with the RESEO and Opera Europa memberships during annual meetings in Vienna (April 2024) and Porto (October 2025), the following questions emerged:

- What should this sector look like in ten years?
- Institutionalized? Independent? Fully integrated and funded?
- Responsible? Visionary?
- Will we achieve accessibility and inclusion?
- Can we forgo large-scale productions and instead invest in small, strong, sustainable productions that leave a legacy?
- Will opera houses and concert halls truly be public spaces?
- Will we be able to imagine collective leadership, developed together with communities?
- Who serves whom?
- Will we shift the focus from the aesthetics of the product to the meaning of the process?
- Do we need to reimagine the audience experience—as audiences and curators—to inspire change?
- What will we show and produce together?
- Will we be truly open to new stories?
- Will we trust that individuals and communities can create meaningful experiences?
- Will we move from artistic perfection to artistic experience?

- Let's seriously ask ourselves: What happens to the participants the day after their participation, a month later, a year later?
- Will we focus on the question of artistic quality—and rethink it?
- How will it evolve?

The selection of questions represented above is a sign of a collective experience of bringing an isolated practice towards the core of a complex institution like an opera house. But it continues to show the lack of full legitimacy that is still handicapping the sector, its representatives, its works and the participants of community or participatory projects. Further, on an European level the organisation of the study, its dissemination and the presentation of the first results to the practitioners show that the connection between research and the sector is an enriching experience and can provide new resource for both sides, but highlights at the same time the necessity of working on the used glossary on an international level. Outreach, education, participation, co-creation, mediation, sharing and contribution are terms used in a very different, sometimes complimentary, sometimes opposite way.

This report is the starting point of a pluriannual research project. In Winter 2025/2026 RESEO will launch the second edition of the call for an European (International) Overview on programming for young-diverse audiences and participatory productions.

More information coming soon.

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