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## Opera Reaches Out: From the Classrooms to the Theatre *Literacy Program Encourages Involvement Both Inside and Outside the Classroom*

PHILADELPHIA, PA- Educators throughout the country continue to discover modern means to develop literacy among their students. Stepping outside of more traditional curricula towards progressive, multidisciplinary methods of instructing students adds a new dimension to the classroom. The Opera Company of Philadelphia's *Sounds of Learning™* program uses opera libretti to connect local youth to both to their studies *and* a 16th-century art form. Art-Reach will soon be in tune with the program as it takes members to the Academy of Music to experience an original Opera Company production, *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, this fall.

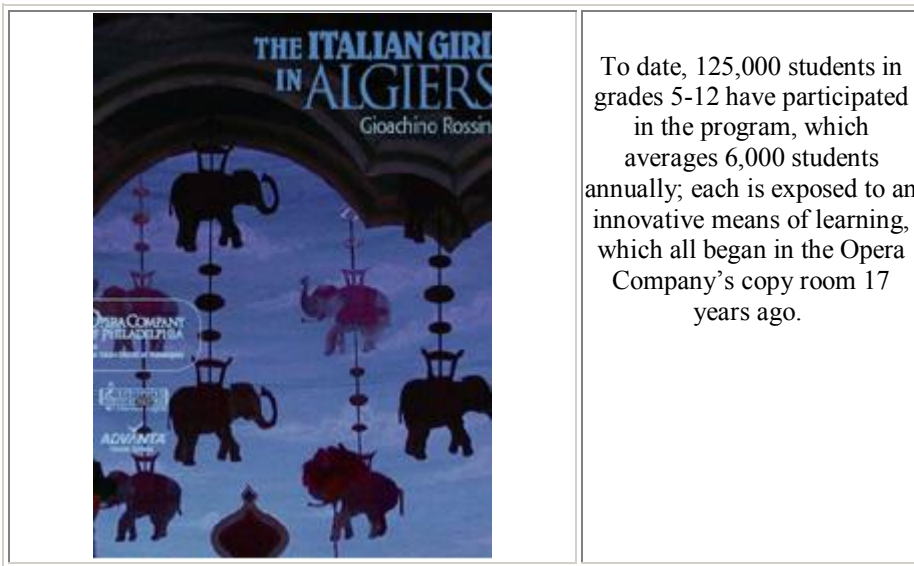
*Sounds of Learning™* demystifies opera, enabling students to embrace and become involved in an art form that many believe to be too foreign for comprehension



*Sounds of Learning™* was founded in 1991 by Dr. Dennis Creedon. A reading specialist for the Philadelphia School District, Dr. Creedon was preparing materials for his students to attend a rehearsal at the Opera Company when approached by General and Artistic Director Robert B. Driver, and *Sounds of Learning™* was born. To date, 125,000 students in grades 5-12 have participated in the program, which averages 6,000 students annually; each is exposed to an innovative means of learning, which all began in the Opera Company's copy room 17 years ago.

Michael Bolton, Director of Community Programs at the Opera Company, discusses the program's evolution with passion. With its core objective being to encourage arts-integrated literacy development by using libretti from the season's repertoire, Bolton discusses the program's purpose and his direct involvement.

In support of the program's objective, *Sounds of Learning*<sup>™</sup> demystifies opera, enabling students to embrace and become involved in an art form that many believe to be too foreign for comprehension. Bolton, along with volunteers, does research to produce an 80-page student guide that students use to prepare for an opera. Each guide contains information on Philadelphia and the Academy of Music, theatre etiquette, musical and historic cultural information, and critical thinking and creative writing lessons. This guide and other supplemental materials dissect the show into more digestible pieces for students. Bolton believes that these 'pieces' help to better connect students to the show. "I basically connect the dots from an opera's libretto to topics that kids would be interested in that can easily be applied to the classroom," says Bolton, who often speaks to teachers to gauge classroom needs.



In considering the many benefits and people served to date by the *Sounds of Learning*<sup>™</sup>, Bolton acknowledges that there are many obstacles. "One of the challenges with this program is that it covers such a wide demographic." The program's wide base, grades 5-12, tests program staff to provide materials that are both appropriate and comprehensible to students with wide-ranging abilities. "On one hand we may have a class of ESOL students who are trying to find a connection between their own language and English, and on the other we may have an AP English class comparing the opera's literary source with other literature of its time," says Bolton. Nonetheless, the program's materials seek to open students' eyes to an artistic realm that is often viewed as unattainable. Says Bolton, "The more prepared [students] are to go to the opera, the more they will enjoy it."

The program also connects students to those behind the music, makeup and costumes: the opera singers. The student guides also include information about the singers in the show. Bolton wants to not only introduce students to the singers, but to also help students realize that the singers, too, *are human*. "I always ask opera singers about their background when doing their profiles," says Bolton. Doing this helps to further inter-weave the educational component within the operatic element. "It's all about giving kids someone to root for. If they read in someone's bio that s/he started singing in church, and one of the kids sings in church, there's a connection." Many students have responded to this connection, realizing their interests in opera through their participation in *Sounds of Learning*<sup>™</sup>. Soprano Karen Slack, an alumna of the program, saw *Carmen* in 1992, realized then that she wanted to become an opera singer, and now has an international opera career. *That* is the sort of passion that this program seeks to infuse: helping youth to improve their literacy skills is still a primary goal, yet the program has evolved to one where students also connect their reality to what is displayed on stage.

As Bolton reflects upon the program's historical impact, he notes a common theme among students as they emerge from a show. "So many kids say, 'I thought this was going to be boring, and it wasn't.' The kids get so involved in the story." That "connecting of the dots" Bolton references takes students from their limited

opera knowledge to a more well-versed, realistic viewpoint. When asked about future plans for the program, Bolton speaks of reaching audiences through technology. “We have plans to bring the *Sounds of Learning*™ outside Pennsylvania, and we’re just looking at ways of utilizing technology to reach even further. Although we’ve definitely created future opera lovers through this program, we hope to give students an opportunity to participate in something that they otherwise may not experience. The ultimate goal of the *Sounds of Learning*™ is to make opera more accessible and enhance kids’ overall experience.”



Past *Sounds of Learning*™ workshops held at Art-Reach, included members from Fishers Lane LTSR and Creative Kids Club where both children and youth made ginger bread houses. Workshops were taught by Art-Reach staff member, Stephanie Walsh who is classically trained in opera.

Art-Reach members will have the opportunity to experience what promises to be a spectacular performance, thanks to the Opera Company’s ticket pledge. Both children and adults alike are invited to experience the thrill of the opera on November 12th. To take part in this *Sounds of Learning*™ sponsored performance, participants will be required to participate in a four-hour free workshop that focuses on opera and *The Italian Girl in Algiers*; the content presented will be an abbreviated format that is similar to the *Sounds of Learning*™ program. In addition, the workshop content will be similar to one of the program’s student guide books, in that it will cover Academy of Music facts, discuss the history and story of the

featured opera, share featured music from the show itself, and more. The workshop provides a 2 to 3 hour experience. Sessions are offered at member's location or in the Art-Reach office and will be taught by Art-Reach staff member Stephanie Walsh or Art-Reach affiliated artist Michael Borton, both trained opera singers. For further information or to schedule a session, members are encouraged to visit the [member calendar](#) for details.

In the coming weeks, both Art-Reach members and youth from local schools will come face to face with *The Italian Girl in Algiers*. Yet, before settling into their seats, the prospective audience will study not only the opera's composer, Rossini, but Algeria, Thomas Jefferson, pirates, and more in classrooms. By the time the curtains part, the audience will already feel connected to the performers and the performance. *That's* hearing the opera between the notes, before the first one is even uttered.

-Talia Adell Stinson

\*To participate in OCP workshops and to attend the performance of *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, please visit the [member calendar](#), choose November 12th and scroll to the Opera Company of Philadelphia listing for details.