

Noyes Fludde: A Community Opera by Benjamin Britten

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Background:

Noyes's Fludde was written by Benjamin Britten in 1957/8 as a "community opera". He wanted amateurs and professional, adults and children to come together to enjoy making music.

The story is based on the Biblical story of Noah as presented in the Chester Cycle of miracle plays. These plays were written in the 14th century and were performed by ordinary working people. Originally performed inside churches, they became too disruptive and moved outside to the streets. Local tradespeople and craftspeople processed around the streets of their town acting out Bible stories from the Old and New Testaments using simple props and costumes and using carts for their stages. Each group selected a suitable story and made it their own. For example bakers and grocers performed the story of the Last Supper and people who brought water from the local river into the city of Chester performed the story of Noah. Although the stories stick to the basic Biblical plots, they were adapted to make them speak powerfully to the people – often by the addition of humorous elements.

The story of Noah as presented in the opera:

God tells Noah that he is going to destroy the earth with a flood because of the evil he sees among the people.

God promises Noah that he and his family will be saved by building an ark – a huge boat. God provides very specific instructions about how this should be done.

Noah's family members find it difficult to believe Noah when he tells them about God's warning and instructions, but reluctantly they support the building project.

Mrs. Noah does not want to get into the ark, and her friends think that Noah is crazy, but Mrs. Noah is finally persuaded to enter the ark.

A procession of animals arrives – two by two – they also enter the ark to be saved from destruction.

As the ark sets sail, a terrible storm begins.

When the storm subsides, Noah sends two birds to look for dry land, and a dove returns with an olive branch in its beak.

Noah, his family and all the animals celebrate.

God blesses Noah and sends a rainbow which symbolizes a new relationship between God and all humankind.

The characters in the opera:

The voice of God – the audience never sees this character who is nevertheless a powerful presence. God doesn't sing but speaks the words in a rhythmic, musical way.

Noye (Noah).

Mrs. Noye (Mrs. Noah)

Sem, Ham and Jeffett – Noah's sons and their wives Mrs. Sem, Mrs. Ham and Mrs. Jeffett

The gossips – Mrs. Noah's friends.

Groups of animals including lions, leopards, horses, oxen, swine, goats, sheep, camels, asses, buck and doe, dogs, otters, foxes, polecats, hares, bears, wolves, monkeys, squirrels, ferrets, cats, rats, mice, herons, owls, bittern, peacocks, redshanks, ravens, cock and hen, kites, cuckoos, curlews, doves, duck and drake.

The audience also has an important role as they participate in the singing of three hymns which echo the themes of the opera. You can learn the hymns at <http://www.noyesfludde.com/project-noye-2014/hymns/>

The language of the opera:

Britten uses the original words from the medieval text, so many of the words are unfamiliar to us – this is why the title of the opera is Noye's Fludde – not Noah's Flood.

Some common Middle English words:

gan = began; quod/seyde = said; ay = always; certes = certainly; ech = each; fro = from; verray = true; ycleped = called/named; ywis = surely

The music and the instruments of the orchestra:

The music of the opera is very atmospheric clearly reflecting the atmosphere and the emotions of the characters. As well as the traditional instruments of the orchestra, Britten includes other instruments such as handbells, recorders and some homemade percussion instruments such as mugs hung on a clothesline. To find out more about the instruments of the orchestra, visit <http://www.philharmonia.co.uk/explore/instruments/>

Noye's Fludde: Some Activities for Students

1. Making instruments:

Benjamin Britten uses unusual instruments in the orchestra for this opera and makes sounds to represent the storm, the wind and the emotions of the characters.

Children can make instruments from common household items – combs and paper, cardboard cylinders filled with rice, beans, marbles etc...; plastic and metal lids and containers; glass jars filled with different amounts of water.

Have the children experiment with the different sounds their homemade instruments can make and discuss how they could be used to represent different kinds of weather, animals and emotions.

2. Create a soundscape:

Using body percussion (hands clapping, snapping, feet stomping, patting on leg or chest), voices and homemade instruments or ones more traditionally found in a classroom to create a theme or mood. An example can be found at: <https://soundcloud.com/dramaresource>

3. Mask making:

Masks are used to identify the various animals which enter the ark. Have the children select their favourite animal for inclusion in the ark and create masks to represent them

4. Creative writing:

- a) Select one of the characters or animals in the ark and write a diary entry or a poem to represent their feelings about being in the ark. Children may want to chart the way their character's (human or animal) emotions change through the story – anticipation, fear, relief, rejoicing. Hugh Chesterman's poem "Noah and the Rabbit" <https://jnvlieland.blogspot.ca/2013/02/more-hugh-chesterman.html> might make a good starting point for this activity.
- b) Children could tell or write stories or poems about personal experiences of dramatic weather and the emotions which accompany them.
- c) The rainbow remains a very powerful image in our culture. Many examples and ideas for poetry writing can be found at: <http://bit.ly/2qA2gDO>

5. Collage:

Use a variety of materials to create a group picture of one of the scenes from the story – building the ark, the animals entering, the storm, sending out the birds, the ending of the storm and the appearance of the rainbow. Alternatively, have groups or individual children create one scene and display them in order to tell the story.