

## Oberlin Opera on tour: *Jack and the Beanstalk*

by Kate McKenzie



This January, the Oberlin Opera Theater hit the road, staging eleven performances of *Jack & the Beanstalk* across seven venues. While such tours are uncommon, it was the audiences of elementary school students that made the show truly special.

A Winter Term education tour was the joint vision of professors Stephanie Havey and Kyung-Eun Na,

who served as Stage and Music Directors. Both had extensive experience organizing similar outreach programs, and felt a call for Oberlin Conservatory to be more active in the wider community. Equipped with an enthusiastic student cast and crew, the show began rehearsal on January 9th, a mere ten days before its preview performance in Warner Concert Hall.

The thirty-minute children's opera was adapted from the music of Gilbert & Sullivan operettas by John Davies, who rearranged the simple but catchy melodies and authored a playful libretto to match. Havey first encountered *Jack & the Beanstalk* years ago while working with a professional company. She felt it worked particularly well for young audiences because of its familiar



plot and novel touches, such as an amnesia-inducing fall that leads the Giant to amend his bad behavior at the show's end.



Responses from interested schools poured in. In Huron, the entire population of Woodlands Elementary assembled on the gym floor to watch, a total of over five hundred students from Pre-K to fifth grade. A painted scene of rolling hills provided backdrop and backstage for the cast and five-person crew while faculty pianist Tatiana Likhina supplied accompaniment on a keyboard off to the side.

As Jack, Travis Guillory captured the attention of the room from his first entrance, bounding right up the aisle of delighted students and conjuring gasps with a perfect leaping heel click. Direction for the show had focused on engagement and clarity, both of text and visual storytelling. Guillory's train of thought was simple and effective: "I think, 'What would a kid find funny?' And then I take that to the max. I want kids to laugh."

The cast was rounded out by Jamie Felix-Toll, Ella Vaughn and Will Sulkow in the roles of the Giant, Jack's Mother/Giant's Wife, and the bean-trading Trouble Man. Once the final bows had been taken, dozens of hands shot up for the concluding Q&A. "How do



you sing so beautifully?” asked one child sincerely. The opera seemed to have worked its magic.



Teachers and administrators were also impressed. Every school the Opera Theater visited enthusiastically invited them back.

Although *Jack & the Beanstalk's* run ended on January 31st, Havey and Na plan to revive and expand the program in future Winter Terms. It won't only be the elementary students that benefit. Guillory was drawn to the production in part for the chance to perform the same show many times in a row. Though typical for professionals, this is a rare opportunity for a student.

Havey and Na also saw the project as a means to teach these budding professionals how to use their skills to contribute to their communities. The student participants collaborated with tour coordinator Genevieve Dilan to create several handouts explaining the basics of opera and considering the best methods to appeal to audiences of different ages. “I strive to instill in them the understanding that music is more than just a craft,” wrote Na in a mission statement. “It is a powerful tool for personal expression, community service, and societal impact.”



Ultimately, the project is about the future of music. Na understands first-hand what an impact an early opera experience can have. At age ten, her life was changed by a performance opportunity in the children's chorus of a touring La Scala production. That initial spark is what ignited her still-burning passion for the art form.

By giving children a first encounter with classical singing, the directors hope to inspire further generations of music-lovers and music-makers. Thanks to the hard work of the *Jack & the Beanstalk* team, our future already feels a little brighter.

*Photo credits: Genevieve Dilan*

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