

The Little Black Cat



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About the project

In 2021/22 CYO will create and perform a puppet opera, based on a Japanese folktale, *The Little Black Cat*. We will work with the Norwich Puppet Theatre to:

- Grow the creative experience of young people in both opera and puppetmaking
- Create an imaginative and high quality artwork and to attract and engage audiences, with a particular emphasis on children and young people
- Build the confidence and support the well being of participants by enabling them to collaborate in a supportive environment with their peers and coaches
- Develop a range of transferrable skills in all participants
- For those considering a career in the arts, provide a range of practical skills and first hand experience and knowledge to support their journey

The project will work primarily with 11-19 year olds with the involvement of CYO members and partner secondary schools, as well as older students and young artists at the start of their careers.

We will offer activities in clearly defined modules, enabling young people to get involved across the project or to focus on those activities that interest them most.

We aim to produce a finished work which can be:

- Performed live
- Filmed as a long lasting resource for future use

The video version will include a set of teaching resources, aimed at its ongoing use as a classroom introduction to opera and puppetry.

We believe that this will be the first project of its type, locally, nationally and even internationally: a high quality community opera, created by children and young people for children and young people.

The need

The impact of creative activities and general and music in particular on the mental health, self-confidence and self-expression of children and young people is well evidenced. The Cultural Learning Alliance provides substantial evidence in support of the importance of the arts in education (<https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/evidence/>), with Youth Music's *Sound of the Next Generation* report focussing on music in particular (<https://youthmusic.org.uk/sound-of-the-next-generation>).

CYO's own experience underlines the importance of our activities in the lives of participants. The young people who take part form close bonds with CYO and each other. For the time that they are with us, they are able to leave behind their day to day social and academic concerns and focus entirely on creative activities that they love with peers who share their interests. Over the past 10 years, young people, parents and teachers have shared with us the profound impact of our work on their confidence, mental health and general wellbeing (<https://cambridgeyouthopera.com/impact/>).

There is substantial evidence that music education is being stripped back in state schools in England. In 2019 the British Phonographic Institute (BPI) produced a report, showing a 21% decrease in state school music provision over the previous five years. The situation is more worrying because the situation is significantly worse in schools with a high proportion of students receiving pupil premium. Meanwhile provision across the private sector has risen by 7%, potentially leading to an increase in the inequality gap across the professional arts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem further. In December 2020, the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) report, *The Heart of the School is missing*, showed a 39% reduction in classroom music activities and 66% reduction in extracurricular activities in secondary schools during the pandemic. Almost 10% of schools offer no classroom music at all, even where this is a curricular requirement.

Engagement

CYO is responding to this crisis in two ways:

In a separate programme of work, we are aiming to reach a broad base of primary school children in our region, offering the children and their schools a transformative programme, which we believe will engage and inspire children at an age when they are open to the arts and less self-conscious than teenagers. From this foundation, we aim to build a future interest, not just in our work, but in the arts in general.

In *The Little Black Cat*, we aim to engage with young people with a wide range of interests, including music, art, design and making, theatre and writing. The modular nature of the project will make the activities easier to access: participants will have the option of taking part in one or more clearly defined six to eight week blocks of activities, based around their age and interests.

Under COVID, our Digital Opera Making Workshops were almost entirely focussed on creative activities and were hugely successful, not just in the quality of work produced, but also in engagement terms. We involved 50 young people (our target number), over half of whom were new to CYO and who were able to develop collaborative relationships, working on composition, writing, design and production projects

(<https://cambridgeyouthopera.com/digital-opera-making-workshops/>).

We aim to build on this experience in *The Little Black Cat*, combining our longstanding expertise in performance and backstage production and technical theatre, with new strands including composition, libretto creation and puppetry.

We will work closely with our partner schools to engage with young people who might not otherwise consider our work. Wherever possible, we will take our work into schools, rather than waiting for young people to come to us. We aim to work with schools, helping inspire their young people and supporting the post-COVID recovery of arts in the schools.

The move to digital has also opened up options for working with and bringing together participants and partners over a larger geographical distance, enabling us to expand our network more easily at a regional level.

Why a puppet opera?

CYO's mission is to broaden the creative horizons of children and young people through opera. We use opera to cultivate the arts as a natural part of daily life, and grow the confidence of our participants. We believe that opera is ideal for this, as it encompasses such a variety of elements across all the arts. In so doing we open up what is often considered an exclusive art form, building a new appreciation of opera in its many and various forms for the future.

We are looking at a puppet opera in particular for this project because:

- It offers us new avenues to creative development, expanding our both our network and the activities, skills and experiences we offer
- It gives young people the opportunity to grow their imaginative thinking and explore worlds they might never otherwise experience
- It provides us with multiple routes to performance and the creation of a lasting resource, with a lifespan and legacy beyond the end of the project
- It has the potential to attract new, younger audiences, providing an engaging and entertaining route into opera

Content

The story follows a young orphaned girl whose search for her lost cat takes her to the infamous Cat Mountain, a strange island, which holds great danger for humans. A fully developed version of the story is available on request. We intend to supply the young people with an outline version on which they will base their libretto. Although the story originates in Japan, we do not plan a Japanese setting for the opera.

We have chosen the story because:

- It has drama, poignancy, charm and humour, lending itself particularly to development by young people and enabling us to introduce the wide repertoire of operas based on folk and fairy tales
- It features a strong, central female character who draws on her courage and resources to find a better life
- It offers participants the opportunity to explore human interactions, our relationships with the natural world, the potential for courage in unexpected places, the power of love and kindness and the consequences of cruelty and greed. And, of course, cats!
- The cat elements will form the basis of an entertaining project for younger participants (11 – 13 year olds), while the human elements will give young people aged 14+ the opportunity to develop the story in ways which interest them
- The story is compact and will be easy to adapt into a short work.
- From a performance perspective, the project will offer solos, small ensembles and a cats' chorus, creating opportunities for the involvement of participants and partners
- The interactions between humans and nature in the form of cats and catlike humans, as well as human and natural environments lends itself to puppetry
- The finished opera will form a resource for introducing opera in primary schools – we intend to use it in our own programme and make it available to other organisations.

Partners

Puppetry

We are thrilled to be working with the Norwich Puppet Theatre, who fulfil our partnership requirements perfectly. They:

- share our aims and ethos
- have significant experience of puppetry in educational settings
- have an excellent track record of high quality puppet making and performance, particularly for children and young people

The Norwich Puppet Theatre's new Director, Colette Garrigan, has created a strategy which includes the development of a youth puppet theatre alongside their existing performance and outreach activities. This project will offer young people in Norwich to take part in activities relating to all areas of puppetry. NPT are conducting a needs analysis and will be recruiting to the project on this basis. *The Little Black Cat* will provide an ideal testing ground for this work.

The main focus of the NPT will be on the design, creation and performance of the final puppet performance. However, we will be seeking their advice throughout the project, to ensure that the libretto and score are performable in the context of a puppet opera.

Schools

We will be seeking to work with our existing secondary partner schools, as well as potentially attracting new partners to the project.

- Chesterton Community College: CYO and CCC are longstanding partners and have worked together in the past with both the Music and Art/DT departments. The school is committed to working with us on this project, with the support of the Head Teacher, Head of Music and other staff:
 - The Music Department, including the composition club and Yr 7 choir, as well as pupils across the school.

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- Additional Arts: CCC offers extra arts activities to pupils who are receiving extra tuition in maths and English. We aim to work with the school to provide an engaging project to this group; whether this falls within the musical, dramatic or puppetry elements of the project is to be confirmed.
 - Eastern Learning Alliance: CCC forms part of this Multi-Academy Trust. We are particularly interested in more rural schools where access to the arts may be limited and will be working with Witchford Academy and Downham Market Schools. We will be working with CCC, whose music offering is the most developed in the Trust and the music teachers from Witchford and Downham Market, to identify pupils who will benefit most from the project and to ensure that the delivery is appropriate to each school environment.
 - Netherhall School (Anglian Learning MAT): CYO has a strong existing relationship with this Trust, both through work on *Hansel and Gretel* and also with their primary schools. In a new relationship we will work with Netherhall School's English department, who will be running a two week module with all their year 8s as part of the work on cats. We will be inviting these students to continue into the later phases of the project and speaking with music staff about further involvement.

The CYO Team

Caroline Coetzee	Artistic Director Project lead; Writing coach; Theatre direction / Production; Creative coach 11 – 13 years
Alastair Chilvers	Musical Director Musical rehearsal and performance; Orchestra recruitment; Consultation coach for composition; Creative Coach 11 – 13 years
Russell Hepplewhite	Composer Composition coach; Orchestration
Marion Dall Caldwell	Creative Coach / Pianist Creative coach – 11 – 13 years; Recording piano part and playing for vocal rehearsals
Julia Caddick	Vocal Coach Vocal coach – rehearsals; Consultation coach for composition; creative coach 11- 13 years
Trui Malten	Lighting design
Georgia Piano	Stage management and technical theatre

Project phases and timescales

All timescales are approximate, depending on fundraising and the development of key partnerships

PLAN AND DEVELOP

(Complete)

- Create a project proposal, plan and budget.
- Secure the necessary funding to deliver the project. As with all CYO projects, there should be no charge to participants or partners, ensuring that activities are as accessible and open as possible.
- Develop the partnerships needed to deliver the project and secure a lasting legacy.

PHASE 1

MODULE 1: CREATE – OPERA CATS

Winter term 2021 11 – 13 Year Olds

- Creative activities eg
 - Story of The Little Black Cat
 - Writing cat music
 - Writing cat words
 - Designing cats
 - How to sing like a cat
 - What would a cat village look like?
 - Famous cats in opera
- We will run a series of workshops over six weeks. We hope to run these in person at Chesterton Community College, but can move them online if needed
- Participants will be divided into small groups for creative activities, with each group led by a mentor from the CYO team
- As part of this phase, Yr 8 English students at Netherhall will complete a two week module about cats, based on the project

- The resulting music, words, sounds and all visual material will be handed over to Russell and Caroline to create cat's choruses and to the NPT. We expect to see the young people's designs reflected in the puppetry, as well as in other materials eg promotional material and foyer displays, relating to the project

MODULE 2: CREATE – MAKING THE OPERA

Winter term 2021 14 – 19 Year Olds

- The young people will be provided with a libretto plan and invited to write the words and music relating to all the human (non-cat) elements of the opera
- We will run a series of weekly workshops over nine weeks – these will primarily be offered online to increase the geographic reach of the project
- Workshops will include a taught element, relating to specific challenges of vocal composition, but will primarily be based on small group collaboration
- The young people will work in small groups with Russell Hepplewhite (composer) and Caroline Coetzee (librettist/director) with input from Alastair Chilvers (Musical Director) and Julia Caddick (Vocal Coach)
- In addition to the workshops, there will be a weekly consultation session, in which groups and individuals can explore specific issues with the coaches and other members of the CYO team
- Following the completion of the workshops, Caroline Coetzee and Russell Hepplewhite will compile all the material created, including the cat motifs/words from Module 1 and the words and music created during Module 2 and create a finished libretto and score, orchestrated for small ensemble

PHASE 2

MODULE 3: CREATE – PUPPETS - NPT

Spring Term 2022

- The NPT will run design and puppet making workshops for young people in their Norwich base. The puppets will be professionally finished, to ensure that they can be used effectively by young puppeteers.

MODULE 4: REHEARSE AND RECORD – CYO

Spring Term 2022

- CYO will rehearse and record the score created at the end of Module 2
- The majority of solo roles will be taken by 14 – 19 year olds, with the potential to involve younger and older singers
- The piano part of the finished vocal score will be recorded as a backing track for use in independent work by participants, by partner schools for chorus rehearsals if needed and by the NPT
- The focus with 11 – 13 year olds will be the performance of the cat’s choruses:
- Partner schools will rehearse these in school: CYO will provide the necessary resources and support to facilitate this
- Depending on demand, CYO will run our own cat’s chorus rehearsals for participants not covered by the partner schools
- At the end of the rehearsal period, the cats’ choruses will be professionally recorded for use in the performances. Recording the choruses will enable us to involve a large number of singers in performances which will take place outside term time. It will also reduce the operational challenges raised by involving singers from a large geographical area. In our experience, when large numbers of school based singers are required to travel to perform, we see a significant fall off, often particularly in those groups who would not usually engage with a project like this. Recording the choruses enables us to represent the work of a much larger group of young people.
- CYO rehearsals typically end in March, to accommodate GCSE and A Level students. Because this show will be performed live in the summer, we plan to hold two catch-up workshops, enabling us to touch base with our singers and ensure that they do not lose the learning acquired before exam season. We have successfully implemented a similar strategy for July performances in the past.

MODULE 5: REHEARSE – PUPPETS

Spring / Summer Term 2022

- The NPT will rehearse the puppetry elements in their Norwich base

MODULE 6: FINAL REHEARSALS – CAMBRIDGE PERFORMANCES

July 2022

- Three rehearsals will take place in Cambridge, two at our rehearsal base and one at Storey’s Field. These will bring together the singers, young puppeteers and production team to prepare for the final rehearsals
- The production team will be run by Georgia Piano and will include students from Anglia Ruskin University and teenage participants in the 14 – 19 age range. Trui Malten will provide mentorship for Georgia and will take ultimate responsibility for the lighting
- Technical and dress rehearsals will take place in Storey’s Field, followed by the performances
- During this phase the musical director will recruit and rehearse a small ensemble of young instrumentalists. We expect these musicians to be older than the singers, mostly likely conservatoire level or new graduates at the start of their career. As such, these will be paid positions

PHASE 3

To be fully scoped

MODULE 7: FILM AND RESOURCES

- We will engage a partner / contractor to film during the dress rehearsal / performances and potentially elsewhere and to use the footage to create a professional quality video of the complete opera
- Potential partners for this include Anglia Ruskin University and / or the Watersprite Film Festival
- We will create a set of educational resources to accompany the use of the video in schools and other educational settings

MODULE 8: FURTHER PERFORMANCES

- We are planning performances in Norwich, at the Puppet Theatre. These could take place as part of the Norfolk and Norwich Festival (2023) or NNF satellite events for 2022
- Depending on the success of the Cambridge performances we will explore the potential for performing at other centres in East Anglia and beyond

LEGACY

Through this project, we aim to provide an ongoing and long-lasting legacy.

Participants

The project should have a lasting impact on participants. We aim to build the confidence and self-belief of those who take part, and to provide them with expertise which they will be able to carry forward into their lives outside CYO. Participants will develop transferrable skills with influences far beyond their work with us. For those interested in a career in the arts the project will give practical experience of areas ranging from composition, writing and design, through puppetry to performance. Participants will have the option to choose those modules which best align with their interests, but will not be limited to a single strand, enabling them to experiment with new skills and develop new areas of competence.

Partners

The project will form part of the NPT's new youth puppetry strand and will support the development of this important work, providing evidence for further developments.

We will work with our secondary school partners to ensure that the project that benefits the schools beyond the time that they work with us.

We will work with the Cambridgeshire Music Hub and Norfolk and Norwich Festival Bridge to ensure that the project gains the penetration needed.

Audience

The final opera should have both an immediate impact, as well as a long term legacy. The live puppet opera will provide an entertaining and engaging introduction to opera for young audiences. As a video, it will become a resource for primary schools, with an accompanying information pack, enabling teachers to use it to introduce opera in the classroom. In this way, the impact and legacy will extend beyond the end of the project.

The Little Black Cat



CYO

This is a development project for CYO. We aim to expand our partnership working, while extending our experience in producing a project with a wide reach, resulting in longstanding resources. We are looking forward to working with the NPT, a more experienced organisation and learning from them, both creatively and in terms of outreach. Our intention is that this project will enable us to grow our work and reputation beyond our Cambridge base.