

Virginia
Opera

Presents

Hansel & Gretel

By: *Engelbert Humperdinck*

*Libretto by
Andelheid Wette*

after the fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm



Study Guide
2011-2012 Season

2010-2011 SEASON

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	4
Objectives.....	5
What is Opera?.....	6
The Operatic Voice.....	8
Opera Production.....	10
Cast Characters/Brief Summary.....	11
Full Plot Synopsis.....	12
Original Story by Brothers Grimm.....	14
Notes on Virginia Opera’s 2011 Production.....	20
Director’s Notes.....	21
Historical Background.....	23
The Composer: Engelbert Humperdinck.....	24
Discussion Questions.....	25

Preface

Purpose

This study guide is intended to aid you, the teacher, in increasing your students' understanding and appreciation of HANSEL AND GRETEL. This will not only add to knowledge about opera, but should develop awareness of other related subjects, making the performance they attend much more enjoyable.

Most Important

If you only have a limited amount of time, concentrate on the cast of characters, the plot and some of the musical and dramatic highlights of the opera. Recognition produces familiarity, which in turn produces a positive experience.

The Language

HANSEL AND GRETEL was written in German. The Virginia Opera will perform Hansel and Gretel in English. In addition, English supertitles will be projected on a screen above the stage. With these **Supertitles**, audiences can easily understand all that is being sung.

Objectives

1. To understand how opera, as an art form, reflects and comments on society and the world in which we live.
2. To develop an awareness of how the study of certain art forms such as opera can communicate ideas of the past and present.
3. To develop a basic understanding of what opera is. Students should be able to identify the many elements (musical, visual, and dramatic) of an opera and understand how they work together to produce a unified, exciting, and emotional work.
4. To understand the process of adapting a story for the stage; what changes need to be made and why. Incorporated in this objective is a basic understanding of what makes a good opera.
5. To know the basic plot/story line of HANSEL AND GRETEL.
6. To understand how music serves as a mode of communication in opera and the effect music has on characteristics and mood.
7. To develop some sense of appreciation for opera as a timeless art form that brings real characters, emotions, and situations to life.
8. To understand the working relationship between words and music in an opera. Students should understand how a composer and librettist work together to create significant, dramatic, and unified meaning.

What is Opera?

Opera is a unique type of entertainment—a play that is sung throughout. Because it combines music and theater, opera can be the most moving of all the arts, and can tell a story in a way quite unlike any other. It does so by means of words, actions, and music.

The words of an opera are called a **libretto** (the Italian word for “little book”), much like the words of a play are called a **script**. There are important differences between a libretto and a script, however. For one thing, a libretto usually contains far fewer words than a script. The reason for this is the music. It can take more time to sing a line of text than to say it; also, words are often repeated in operatic music for reasons of musical form. Therefore, there are fewer words in an opera than in a play of the same length.

While the spoken word can clearly show what people are thinking, singing is much better at showing emotions. For this reason, the plot of an opera is likely to be filled with dramatic situations in which highly emotional characters perform bold actions.

The way **librettists** (the people who write the words) use words is also different. Opera librettos are commonly made up of poetry, while this is not often true of the scripts for plays. Many of the musical passages can be considered a type of sung poetry, complete with meter, accents, and rhyme. If you were to say the words that the characters sing, this would become very clear.

A librettist can also do something that a playwright cannot—he or she can write an **ensemble**. An ensemble is a passage in the libretto in which more than one person sings; often, several characters sing different vocal lines simultaneously. In a play, if all the actors spoke at once, the audience could not understand the words. In an opera, the music helps the audience to sort out the thoughts and feelings of each singer. Frequently, each individual character has a distinct musical or vocal style which distinguishes him/her from the other characters.

If the libretto of an opera is a special language, the score (or musical portion of an opera) is a special use of music. It is music that is meant to be sung, of course, but it has characteristics that many songs do not. **Operatic music is dramatic music, written for the theater.** For this reason, it must also be capable of describing strong feelings that invite the audience’s involvement with the story and their identification with people on stage. In addition, a good operatic composer can use music as a tool to define character and personality traits of his characters.

One way in which a **composer** (the person who writes the music) can use music is through the voices of the singers themselves. A human voice, especially when singing, can express all sorts of feelings. Composers know this and use this knowledge to the fullest. First, they consider the personality of a character and then choose a voice type (either high or low) that best suits this type of person. For example, younger characters are often sung by the higher voice types. There are five different voice categories (perhaps some students are familiar with these from singing in a choir):

SOPRANO: the highest female voice

MEZZO-SOPRANO: (also called ALTO) the lower female voice

TENOR: the highest male voice (like Pavarotti or Caruso)

BARITONE: the middle male voice

BASS: the lowest male voice

Each of these voice categories can be subdivided into more specialized types, such as “dramatic soprano”, “lyric soprano”, “coloratura soprano”, “basso-buffo”, depending on the specific type of music being sung. These distinctions are known as **vocal fachs**, from a German word meaning “mode”.

After a composer has chosen the characters’ voice types, he then tries to interpret the libretto in musical terms. A character may sing very high notes when agitated or excited, or low notes when depressed or calm. He or she may sing many rapid notes or a few long held notes, depending upon the mood at the time.

In an opera production, the ideas of the composer and librettist are expressed by the singers as directed by a **conductor** and **stage director**. The conductor is responsible for the musical aspects of the performance, leading the orchestra and the singers and determining the musical pace. The stage director is responsible for the dramatic movement and characterizations of the singers. He works with a **design team**—a set designer, costume designer, and a lighting designer – to determine the visual interpretation of the work. Just as the composer and librettist must work in close communion in the writing of an opera, the conductor and stage director must have a close collaboration to produce a unified interpretation of an opera. Both must collaborate with the singers and the design team (and sometimes a **choreographer**, if dancing is involved). For this reason opera is perhaps the form demanding the greatest degree of collaboration.

An opera then, is a partnership of words and music with the purpose of telling a dramatic story. While the story itself may be about everyday situations or historical figures, it usually has a moral or idea that the entire audience understands. This is one of the great features of opera—it unites a variety of people with different backgrounds by giving them a common experience to relate to.

The Operatic Voice

To present a true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, and Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving a unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Marriage of Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<i>Verdi Baritone</i> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<i>Buffo Bass</i> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	<i>Basso Cantate</i> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of a myriad of art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



HANSEL AND GRETEL

Premiere

First performance in Weimar, Germany on December 23, 1893.

Cast of Characters

Hansel	Mezzo Soprano
Gretel	Soprano
Gingerbread Witch	Mezzo Soprano
Peter	Baritone
Gertrud	Mezzo Soprano
Sandman	Counter-Tenor
The Dew Fairy	Soprano
Angels	Chorus

Brief Summary

Hansel and Gretel are doing chores while their mother is away. Their minds are not on their work and they fall into singing and dancing. Their mother Gertrud returns and is annoyed by their waste of time. She accidentally spills the jug of milk that was to be their dinner. Angrily, she sends them out into the forest to gather strawberries. The children's father Peter arrives with food in his basket and he and Gertrud celebrate. He asks about the children and is worried about their being in the forest because of a witch that lives there. Peter and Gertrud hurry out to look for their children.

Hansel and Gretel are picking strawberries when they realize they are lost. They become frightened as the forest becomes misty. They see the Sandman through the mist. He sprinkles sand in their eyes to make them sleepy. They sing their Evening Prayer and fall asleep. Fourteen angels come from heaven to watch over them.

The children awaken as the morning mist clears. They see a gingerbread house covered with candy. They are very excited about the candy but are unaware of any danger. The witch creeps up on them and throws a rope around Hansel's neck. The children try to escape but the witch casts a spell on them. She puts Hansel in a cage and plans to fatten him up. As the witch prepares to cook the children Gretel is able to break the spell and unlock Hansel's cage. The witch tells Gretel to look into the oven to see if it is ready. Gretel pretends to not understand and asks the witch to show her what to do. When the witch bends down in front of the open oven, the children push her in. The oven explodes and the candy figures around the witch's house turn back into children. The touch of Hansel and Gretel bring them back to life. Peter and Gertrud arrive and are thankful to have found their children. The assembled company rejoices at the demise of the witch.

HANSEL AND GRETEL

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Overture

The overture comprises many of the musical themes found in the opera. Folk-like dances are combined with the expressive hymn of the “Evening Prayer.” The prominence of the “Evening Prayer” suggests that the children will be protected by divine providence. Humperdinck entitled the overture “Children’s Life” and sought to embody the spirit of children and their ways in the music.

Act I

The scene opens at the cottage of the broom-maker Peter, where his children Hansel and Gretel are performing chores. Hansel is making brooms and Gretel is knitting stockings. As she works Gretel sings a folksong, “*Suse, liebe Suse*” (Susy, dear Susy). Hansel joins her but then throws down the broom he is making and states that he is hungry. Gretel tries to humor him and shows him a jug of milk that a neighbor has given the family. They are completely distracted from their work with the dancing song, “*Bruderchen komm tanz mit mir*” (Brother come dance with me). The dancing comes to an abrupt halt by the entrance of Hansel and Gretel’s mother, Getrud. The children try to explain, but she is very annoyed at their foolish waste of time. In her exasperation she knocks over the jug of milk. She sends the children out to pick strawberries and laments the loss of the milk, “*Da liegt nun der gute Topf*” (There lies the good jug). The broom-maker’s song “*Ral-la-la-la*” is heard in the distance. It is first heard in a minor key suggesting hardship but the song transforms into an uplifting major key as Peter arrives with a basket full of food. As they celebrate, Peter asks about the children. Getrud tells him that she sent them into the forest. This engenders a noticeable change the rhythmic patterns of the music. Peter’s anxiety is reflected as he sings of the witch who lives in the forest in the “*Witch’s Ride*.” He sings the “*Witch’s Ballad*” which convinces Gertrud that the children may be in danger. Peter and Gertrud hurry out to find their children.

Act II

The opening prelude reprises the “*Witch’s Ride*” music from the end of Act I. The music reinforces the feeling of impending danger for Hansel and Gretel. By contrast, the opening forest scene is tranquil as Hansel picks strawberries and Gretel makes a garland of flowers. They sing a folksong, “*Ein Mannlein steht im Walde*” (A little man stands in the forest). Their playful voices mimic a cuckoo trying to steal their strawberries. Their lighthearted feelings give way to more fearful ones as they realize that they are lost. The forest seems threatening and darker as the music takes on a mysterious tone full of chromaticism. Mists rise and the children fear something unseen. As the air clears they see the Sandman who sings the simple melody, “*Der kleine Sandmann bin ich*” (I am the little sandman). He brings peaceful sleep in a chorale-like melody. The children sing the “*Evening Prayer*,” a lush and beautiful invocation that eases their fears and allows them to sleep in peaceful innocence. A fantasy ballet ensues with fourteen angels descending from heaven to guard the children in their slumber.

Act III

An abrupt and staccato motif associated with the gingerbread house begins Act III and foreshadows danger on the horizon. This staccato motif is smoothly transitioned to a calmer sequence as the Dew Fairy enters to awaken the children. She sings, "*Der kleine Taumann heiss'ich*" (My name is little dew-man), in a variation of the Sandman's song. A theme closely associated with the Evening Prayer follows as Gretel begins to awaken and then rouses Hansel. They mimic the sound of an early morning bird before relating their dreams of the fourteen angels. They are so engrossed in their happy memory of the night before that they feel no alarm when the mists clear and they see a gingerbread house. The house covered in candy seems an extension of their dream even though the orchestra echoes with the sound of a flowing barcarolle rhythm and the sharp, accented motif associated with the gingerbread house and the witch. The children seem unaware of the change in the atmosphere and sense no danger as the witch creeps up on them. Suddenly the whole orchestra resounds with the staccato rhythms as the witch throws a noose around Hansel's neck and laughs coarsely.

Accompanied by the web-like barcarolle rhythms, the witch coaxes the children with false endearments but they remain wary. Hansel slips out of the noose and they try to escape. The witch drops her pretense and halts them with a magic spell. She puts Hansel into a cage thinking she might hold onto him while she fattens him up. Gretel, who is deemed plump enough, is sent to set the table. The witch becomes more excited as she prepares to cook, stoking the fire in the oven. Gretel is able to overcome the witch's spell and unlatch the lock on Hansel's cage. The witch tells Gretel to look into the oven but Gretel pretends not to understand and asks the witch to show her. The witch grumbles about her stupidity but bends over in front of the oven to demonstrate. Hansel and Gretel leap behind the witch and push her into the oven. They express their exultation in the Gingerbread Waltz, "*Nun ist die Hexe tot*" (Now the witch is dead) in which the barcarolle figures associated with the witch are adapted to the children's expression.

The witch's oven explodes, releasing the candy-like figures around the cottage. These figures are children who are brought to life by the touch of Hansel and Gretel. They sing "*O ruhre mich an*" (O watch over me), a subdued song which becomes a dance as life and movement returns to the children. More of the opera's themes are woven into the overall structure of the music, replicating the form of the overture. The "Ral-la-la-la" melody heralds the arrival of Peter and Gertrud which is rapidly followed by the dance-song, "*Bruder komm tanz mit mir*" (Brother come dance with me) from Act I. The culmination of the finale is the restatement of the soaring melody of the "*Evening Prayer*," bringing completion to the happy reunion and jubilant celebration.

ORIGINAL HANSEL AND GRETEL STORY

BY BROTHERS GRIMM

Hard by a great forest dwelt a poor wood-cutter with his wife and his two children. The boy was called Hansel and the girl Gretel. He had little to bite and to break, and once, when great dearth fell on the land, he could no longer procure even daily bread.

Now when he thought over this by night in his bed, and tossed about in his anxiety. He groaned and said to his wife, "What is to become of us? How are we to feed our poor children, when we no longer have anything even for ourselves?"

"I'll tell you what, husband," answered the woman, "early tomorrow morning we will take the children out into the forest to where it is the thickest. There we will light a fire for them, and give each of them one more piece of bread, and then we will go to our work and leave them alone. They will not find the way home again, and we shall be rid of them."

"No, wife," said the man, "I will not do that. How can I bear to leave my children alone in the forest? The wild animals would soon come and tear them to pieces."

"Oh! you fool," said she, "then we must all four die of hunger, you may as well plane the planks for our coffins," and she left him no peace until he consented.

"But I feel very sorry for the poor children, all the same," said the man.

The two children had also not been able to sleep for hunger, and had heard what their step-mother had said to their father. Gretel wept bitter tears, and said to Hansel, "Now all is over with us."

"Be quiet, Gretel," said Hansel, "do not distress yourself, I will soon find a way to help us." And when the old folks had fallen asleep, he got up, put on his little coat, opened the door below, and crept outside.

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The moon shone brightly, and the white pebbles which lay in front of the house glittered like real silver pennies. Hansel stooped and stuffed the little pocket of his coat with as many as he could get in. Then he went back and said to Gretel, "Be comforted, dear little sister, and sleep in peace, God will not forsake us," and he lay down again in his bed.

When day dawned, but before the sun had risen, the woman came and awoke the two children, saying, "Get up, you sluggards. We are going into the forest to fetch wood." She gave each a little piece of bread, and said, "There is something for your dinner, but do not eat it up before then, for you will get nothing else."

Gretel took the bread under her apron, as Hansel had the pebbles in his pocket. Then they all set out together on the way to the forest.

When they had walked a short time, Hansel stood still and peeped back at the house, and did so again and again. His father said, "Hansel, what are you looking at there and staying behind for? Pay attention, and do not forget how to use your legs."

"Ah, father," said Hansel, "I am looking at my little white cat, which is sitting up on the roof, and wants to say good-bye to me."

The wife said, "Fool, that is not your little cat, that is the morning sun which is shining on the chimneys."

Hansel, however, had not been looking back at the cat, but had been constantly throwing one of the white pebble-stones out of his pocket on the road.

When they had reached the middle of the forest, the father said, "Now, children, pile up some wood, and I will light a fire that you may not be cold."

Hansel and Gretel gathered brushwood together, as high as a little hill. The brushwood was lighted, and when the flames were burning very high, the woman said, "Now, children, lay yourselves down by the fire and rest, we will go into the forest and cut some wood. When we have done, we will come back and fetch you away."

≤ 3 ≥

Hansel and Gretel sat by the fire, and when noon came, each ate a little piece of bread, and as they heard the strokes of the wood-axe they believed that their father was near. It was not the axe, however, but a branch which he had fastened to a withered tree which the wind was blowing backwards and forwards. And as they had been sitting such a long time, their eyes closed with fatigue, and they fell fast asleep.

When at last they awoke, it was already dark night. Gretel began to cry and said, "How are we to get out of the forest now?"

But Hansel comforted her and said, "Just wait a little, until the moon has risen, and then we will soon find the way." And when the full moon had risen, Hansel took his little sister by the hand, and followed the pebbles which shone like newly-coined silver pieces, and showed them the way.

They walked the whole night long, and by break of day came once more to their father's house. They knocked at the door, and when the woman opened it and saw that it was Hansel and Gretel, she said, "You naughty children, why have you slept so long in the forest? We thought you were never coming back at all."

The father, however, rejoiced, for it had cut him to the heart to leave them behind alone.

Not long afterwards, there was once more great dearth throughout the land, and the children heard their mother saying at night to their father:

"Everything is eaten again, we have one half loaf left, and that is the end. The children must go, we will take them farther into the wood, so that they will not find their way out again. There is no other means of saving ourselves."

The man's heart was heavy, and he thought, "It would be better for you to share the last mouthful with your children." The woman, however, would listen to nothing that he had to say, but scolded and reproached him. He who says a must say b, likewise, and as he had yielded the first time, he had to do so a second time also.

≤ 4 ≥

The children, however, were still awake and had heard the conversation. When the old folks were asleep, Hansel again got up, and wanted to go out and pick up pebbles as he had done before, but the woman had locked the door, and Hansel could not get out. Nevertheless he comforted his little sister, and said, "Do not cry, Gretel, go to sleep quietly, the good God will help us."

Early in the morning came the woman, and took the children out of their beds. Their piece of bread was given to them, but it was still smaller than the time before. On the way into the forest Hansel crumbled his in his pocket, and often stood still and threw a morsel on the ground.

"Hansel, why do you stop and look round?" Said the father. "Go on."

"I am looking back at my little pigeon which is sitting on the roof, and wants to say good-bye to me, answered Hansel.

"Fool." Said the woman, "That is not your little pigeon, that is the morning sun that is shining on the chimney."

Hansel, however, little by little, threw all the crumbs on the path. The woman led the children still deeper into the forest, where they had never in their lives been before.

Then a great fire was again made, and the mother said, "Just sit there, you children, and when you are tired you may sleep a little. We are going into the forest to cut wood, and in the evening when we are done, we will come and fetch you away."

When it was noon, Gretel shared her piece of bread with Hansel, who had scattered his by the way. Then they fell asleep and evening passed, but no one came to the poor children.

They did not awake until it was dark night, and Hansel comforted his little sister and said, "Just wait, Gretel, until the moon rises, and then we shall see the crumbs of bread which I have strewn about, they will show us our way home again."

≤ 5 ≥

When the moon came they set out, but they found no crumbs, for the many thousands of birds which fly about in the woods and fields had picked them all up. Hansel said to Gretel, "We shall soon find the way."

But they did not find it. They walked the whole night and all the next day too from morning till evening, but they did not get out of the forest, and were very hungry, for they had nothing to eat but two or three berries, which grew on the ground. And as they were so weary that their legs would carry them no longer, they lay down beneath a tree and fell asleep.

It was now three mornings since they had left their father's house. They began to walk again, but they always came deeper into the forest, and if help did not come soon, they must die of hunger and weariness. When it was mid-day, they saw a beautiful snow-white bird sitting on a bough, which sang so delightfully that they stood still and listened to it. And when its song was over, it spread its wings and flew away before them, and they followed it until they reached a little house, on the roof of which it alighted. And when they approached the little house they saw that it was built of bread and covered with cakes, but that the windows were of clear sugar.

"We will set to work on that," said Hansel, "and have a good meal. I will eat a bit of the roof, and you Gretel, can eat some of the window, it will taste sweet."

Hansel reached up above, and broke off a little of the roof to try how it tasted, and Gretel leant against the window and nibbled at the panes. Then a soft voice cried from the parlor -

"Nibble, nibble, gnaw

who is nibbling at my little house?"

≤ 6 ≥

The children answered -

"The wind, the wind,

the heaven-born wind,"

and went on eating without disturbing themselves. Hansel, who liked the taste of the roof, tore down a great piece of it, and Gretel pushed out the whole of one round window-pane, sat down, and enjoyed herself with it.

Suddenly the door opened, and a woman as old as the hills, who supported herself on crutches, came creeping out. Hansel and Gretel were so terribly frightened that they let fall what they had in their hands.

The old woman, however, nodded her head, and said, "Oh, you dear children, who has brought you here? Do come in, and stay with me. No harm shall happen to you."

She took them both by the hand, and led them into her little house. Then good food was set before them, milk and pancakes, with sugar, apples, and nuts. Afterwards two pretty little beds were covered with clean white linen, and Hansel and Gretel lay down in them, and thought they were in heaven.

The old woman had only pretended to be so kind. She was in reality a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and had only built the little house of bread in order to entice them there. When a child fell into her power, she killed it, cooked and ate it, and that was a feast day with her. Witches have red eyes,

and cannot see far, but they have a keen scent like the beasts, and are aware when human beings draw near. When Hansel and Gretel came into her neighborhood, she laughed with malice, and said mockingly, "I have them, they shall not escape me again."

Early in the morning before the children were awake, she was already up, and when she saw both of them sleeping and looking so pretty, with their plump and rosy cheeks, she muttered to herself, that will be a dainty mouthful.

≤ 7 ≥

Then she seized Hansel with her shrivelled hand, carried him into a little stable, and locked him in behind a grated door. Scream as he might, it would not help him. Then she went to Gretel, shook her till she awoke, and cried, "Get up, lazy thing, fetch some water, and cook something good for your brother, he is in the stable outside, and is to be made fat. When he is fat, I will eat him."

Gretel began to weep bitterly, but it was all in vain, for she was forced to do what the wicked witch commanded. And now the best food was cooked for poor Hansel, but Gretel got nothing but crab-shells. Every morning the woman crept to the little stable, and cried, "Hansel, stretch out your finger that I may feel if you will soon be fat."

Hansel, however, stretched out a little bone to her, and the old woman, who had dim eyes, could not see it, and thought it was Hansel's finger, and was astonished that there was no way of fattening him.

When four weeks had gone by, and Hansel still remained thin, she was seized with impatience and would not wait any longer.

"Now, then, Gretel," she cried to the girl, "stir yourself, and bring some water. Let Hansel be fat or lean, to-morrow I will kill him, and cook him."

Ah, how the poor little sister did lament when she had to fetch the water, and how her tears did flow down her cheeks. "Dear God, do help us," she cried. "If the wild beasts in the forest had but devoured us, we should at any rate have died together."

"Just keep your noise to yourself," said the old woman, "it won't help you at all."

Early in the morning, Gretel had to go out and hang up the cauldron with the water, and light the fire.

≤ 8 ≥

"We will bake first," said the old woman, "I have already heated the oven, and kneaded the dough." She pushed poor Gretel out to the oven, from which flames of fire were already darting. "Creep in," said the witch, "and see if it properly heated, so that we can put the bread in." And once Gretel was inside, she intended to shut the oven and let her bake in it, and then she would eat her, too.

But Gretel saw what she had in mind, and said, "I do not know how I am to do it. How do I get in?"

"Silly goose," said the old woman, "the door is big enough. Just look, I can get in myself." And she crept up and thrust her head into the oven.

Then Gretel gave her a push that drove her far into it, and shut the iron door, and fastened the bolt. Oh. Then she began to howl quite horribly, but Gretel ran away, and the godless witch was miserably burnt to death. Gretel, however, ran like lightning to Hansel, opened his little stable, and cried, "Hansel, we are saved. The old witch is dead."

Then Hansel sprang like a bird from its cage when the door is opened. How they did rejoice and embrace each other, and dance about and kiss each other. And as they had no longer any need to fear her, they went into the witch's house, and in every corner there stood chests full of pearls and jewels.

"These are far better than pebbles." Said Hansel, and thrust into his pockets whatever could be got in.

And Gretel said, "I, too, will take something home with me," and filled her pinafore full.

"But now we must be off," said Hansel, "that we may get out of the witch's forest."

When they had walked for two hours, they came to a great stretch of water.

≤ 9 ≥

"We cannot cross," said Hansel, "I see no foot-plank, and no bridge.

"And there is also no ferry," answered Gretel, "but a white duck is swimming there. If I ask her, she will help us over." Then she cried -

"Little duck, little duck, dost thou see,

Hansel and Gretel are waiting for thee.

There's never a plank, or bridge in sight,

take us across on thy back so white."

The duck came to them, and Hansel seated himself on its back, and told his sister to sit by him.

"No," replied Gretel, "that will be too heavy for the little duck. She shall take us across, one after the other."

The good little duck did so, and when they were once safely across and had walked for a short time, the forest seemed to be more and more familiar to them, and at length they saw from afar their father's house. Then they began to run, rushed into the parlor, and threw themselves round their father's neck. The man had not known one happy hour since he had left the children in the forest. The woman, however, was dead. Gretel emptied her pinafore until pearls and precious stones ran about the room, and Hansel threw one handful after another out of his pocket to add to them. Then all anxiety was at an end, and they lived together in perfect happiness.

My tale is done, there runs a mouse, whosoever catches it, may make himself a big fur cap out of it.

HANSEL AND GRETEL

Notes On The Virginia Opera Production

The Virginia Opera production of Hansel and Gretel will have an updated, contemporary look that is sure to resonate with young audiences and their parents.

Kevin Newbury, the stage director for our production, has moved the location of the story from Germany to an American forest. The timeless themes of the original story will be presented in a more modern context, propelling this children’s classic into an updated twenty-first century adventure. Hansel and Gretel, and their parents, Peter and Gertrude, will be part of a traveling carnival that tours along country roads and has fallen on hard times. Regardless of their poor circumstances they maintain a loving family that sustains the children when they get lost in the woods and face difficult and frightening challenges. As they look for their way home the children must face many trials, including bullies, before they must use their ingenuity to protect themselves and their lives. The “fairytale” characters of the story – the Sandman, the Dew Fairy and the Witch – receive an equally creative treatment that is sure to provoke and delight. The challenges that children face today will be reflected in Hansel and Gretel’s adventure providing an example of how classic fairytales can be made relevant to the lives of today’s children.

For a more in-depth explanation of Virginia Opera’s current production, please see the Director’s Notes written by Mr. Newbury.

HANSEL AND GRETEL
Director’s Notes by Kevin Newbury

Virginia Opera, 2011

Hansel and Gretel is about a child's fear of being abandoned and, like all classic fairy tales, the story combines elements of fantasy and terror. In our production, we are interested in focusing on the emotional and psychological underpinnings of the story. Hansel and Gretel live in a time of great economic hardship and as a result of their family's poverty, the children feel ostracized, unloved and alone. Mom and Dad are so busy trying to make a living that they don't have any time for their children. Just as painfully, the other children in the community ostracize and bully Hansel and Gretel, augmenting this landscape of displacement and deprivation. What does it feel like to not belong anywhere?

In spite of its folkloric traditions, *Hansel and Gretel* feels very 21st century to me. Thus, we thought it could be exciting to invite the audience into the familiar context of the 21st century. I imagine that Hansel and Gretel (and their parents) are German immigrants, finding their way in a harsh 2011 American economy while striving to maintain a connection to their own folklore, language and traditions. As the text outlines, the family is completely broke. In our production, they have lost their home and they are living in their station wagon in a kind of a tent city. Their house is literally a makeshift camp sight. A child's ultimate fear is being abandoned and unloved, and losing a home only increases this feeling of abandonment. Hansel and Gretel read old books of German folklore, acting them out and inserting themselves into the stories. Both children are imaginative and they create their own games to entertain themselves in their isolation. The children are trying to escape a life without love and assuage their own heartache. **Their ultimate wish is not just an abundance of food but also an abundance of love.**

The entire story unfolds in the same wooded surround (complete with telephone poles, searchlights and other elements of modernity). Children do not have to travel far from home to find that they are lost. What do Hansel and Gretel fear most in the woods? The scary stories they read in their old German fairy tale books, the darkness, the unfamiliarity and, most importantly, *the other children*. The other kids are waiting in the woods, ready to taunt and tease the misfit Hansel and Gretel. Throughout the evening, the other children are integral to the storytelling, embodying the scary characters from Hansel and Gretel's folklore.

Eventually, during the beautiful fantasy that ends the second act, Hansel and Gretel dream of being included and loved by the other children. In the dream, the other kids (the "angels") play games with them, share their toys and their food, and it ends with all of the children falling asleep in one big, inclusive slumber party.

When Hansel and Gretel wake up, they find themselves alone in an old, run-down carnival that slowly comes to life, complete with hanging lights and inviting circus tents. For young children, a carnival is like a fairy tale, promising fun, excitement and wish fulfillment, while, at the same time, infusing the atmosphere with a certain menace and unfamiliarity. When I was a child, getting lost at the carnival was akin to Alice falling into the rabbit hole. (Think of Tom Hanks in the movie *Big*, stumbling upon a mysterious abandoned fortune-telling machine that grants his wish to be an adult). In our production, the Sandman, the Dew Fairy and the Witch are all carnival denizens. The Witch's house becomes a vintage carnival food cart, a child's dream: complete with cotton candy, fried dough, candy apples and, yes, gingerbread men. At the end of the opera, Hansel and Gretel actually become the

heroes, saving all of the other children from the witch's fryer.

Our approach feels contemporary and timeless, reflecting the terror of displacement that many people are feeling right now while also embracing the beauty and the fantasy of the fairy tale. Throughout, Hansel and Gretel strive to find a way to make the most of their isolation, even as they are surrounded by a world of emotional and financial deprivation. **Their ultimate wish -- to be loved and included, *fed* in the literal and the emotional sense -- comes true.**

HANSEL AND GRETEL

Historical Background

In 1890 Engelbert Humperdinck wished to write a comic opera and was actively seeking a libretto to set to music. Concurrently, his sister, Adelheid Wette, asked him to compose music for four folk songs contained in the Brothers Grimm fairytale *Hansel and Gretel* for her



Illustration by [Arthur Rackham](#), 1909

children to perform. The four songs were so well received that his family convinced him to expand them into a *Singspiel*, a musical play with spoken dialogue. The *Singspiel* contained sixteen songs linked together by the dialogue. It was performed at the Wette's house to great praise and enthusiasm. The reaction of the listeners convinced Humperdinck that this material could be turned into a full-length opera even though he had some reservations about the suitability of a fairytale for operatic treatment.

The completed opera was given to Richard Strauss, assistant conductor of the Weimar Theater, in October 1893. He enthusiastically endorsed staging the opera. This was accomplished in December, premiering just before Christmas. The opera enjoyed immediate success in Germany and abroad, although critics have argued that the Wagnerian nature of its orchestration is at odds with the simplicity required by a fairytale. Humperdinck himself referred to his work as a *Märchenoper* – a fairy-tale opera. There is no doubt that the musical score is rich with many Wagnerian elements, but the melodies are true to their folk song roots and display a genuine simplicity and honest emotion.

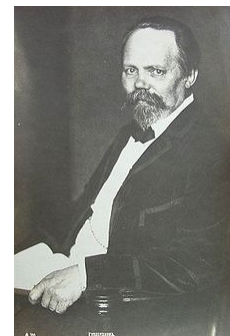
The singing parts in **HANSEL AND GRETEL** exemplify the manner in which opera composers can alter gender roles to suit their musical purpose. The role of the little boy, Hansel, is written for a female mezzo-soprano, and is commonly referred to as a “pants” role for a woman singer. The role of the witch, which is frequently sung by a mezzo-soprano, is sometimes sung by a tenor, a high male voice. The role of the Sandman is frequently sung by a soprano, but in Virginia Opera's production this role will be sung by a counter-tenor, a male singer with a very high voice range.

Humperdinck's success spawned a new school of composition in Germany focusing on themes of enchantment and familiar stories of childhood. The public embraced this turn to familiar roots, with songs and dances of childhood, the natural serenity of the forest and hints of the magical. There was a longing for relief from the deeply psychological and mythical Wagnerianism that had dominated German opera for decades. With this fresh approach, composers paid homage to Wagnerian principles symphonically with their orchestrations, but the treatment of the subject matter and the melodic line was made lighter and brought closer to home.

Additionally, German fairytale operas provided a contrast to the *verismo* rage in Italian opera. *Verismo* was an operatic genre that grew from the French literary concept of naturalism. It stressed the seamier underside of human nature and was considered “a gritty slice of life.” The opera-going public in Germany was always aware of the pressure of Italian opera trends on German composers. By supporting this contrasting operatic style they honored a cultural heritage borne of their own experience and memories.

HANSEL AND GRETEL

The Composer - Engelbert Humperdinck



Engelbert Humperdinck was born in Siegburg in the Rhine Province on September 1, 1854. Music was of great interest to him and he began piano lessons at a very young age. Composing his first piece at the age of seven, he also wrote two *singspiels* (operas with spoken dialogue) by the time he was thirteen. He wished to have a career in music but was opposed in this endeavor by his parents who

preferred that he study architecture. Nonetheless, in 1872 Humperdinck managed to take classes at the Cologne Conservatory where he studied with the esteemed German composer and conductor Ferdinand von Hiller. Four years later he won a scholarship to continue his studies in Munich and in 1879 won the first Mendelssohn Award given by the Mendelssohn Foundation.

By winning music prizes in competitive composition, Humperdinck managed to make his own way in the music world. He traveled to Italy, where he met Richard Wagner, the giant of German opera. Humperdinck accompanied Wagner when he returned to Bayreuth, the city where Wagner had built an innovative opera house specifically for the performance of his operas. Humperdinck assisted Wagner in the production of the opera *Parsifal* and also served as music tutor to Wagner's son, Siegfried. After his work in Bayreuth, Humperdinck won another prize that allowed him to return to Italy and also visit France and Spain. In Spain he accepted a teaching position at the Gran Teatre del Liceu Conservatory in Barcelona where he remained for two years.

In 1887, his credentials established, he returned to Germany to teach at Cologne Conservatory. He composed several works that garnered public notice. In 1890 he was appointed a professor at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt, a school of international renown, and was also asked to teach harmony at Julius Stockhausen's Vocal School, a world-famous institution. The year 1890 became even more consequential for Humperdinck when he agreed to compose four songs for a puppet show his nieces were performing for a family event. The program was so well received that he was convinced to expand his compositions into a full-fledged Singspiel. His sister, Adelheid Wette, wrote a libretto based on the Brothers Grimm fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*. Humperdinck set the libretto to music, composing sixteen songs to connect the dialogue of the story. In January 1891, Humperdinck began the process of composing a complete orchestration of the work. Within a few months he presented his fiancée, Hedwig Taxer, the completed opera as an engagement present. From home-grown beginnings, Humperdinck created an opera that would bring him everlasting fame and generated a heightened interest in Germany in stage works based on fairy tales. This style of opera was called *Märchenoper*.

The opera, **HANSEL AND GRETEL**, premiered on December 23, 1893 in Weimar, Germany. Conducting the opera was the German composer Richard Strauss. Strauss stated that he considered **HANSEL AND GRETEL** to be "a masterpiece of the highest quality." Audiences agreed and the opera became an immediate and tremendous success. **HANSEL AND GRETEL** proved to be Humperdinck's greatest and most popular work, although he continued to compose and teach until his death on September 27, 1921, at the age of sixty-seven. His other works include *The Seven Little Kids* (1895), *King's Children* (1897), *Sleeping Beauty* (1902), *The Reluctant Marriage* (1905), *The Christmas Dream* (1906), *The Provisioner* (1914), and *Scenes from German Student Life* (1919).

HANSEL AND GRETEL

Discussion Questions

1. The part of Hansel is sung by a mezzo-soprano. It is called a "pants" role for a woman. Why do you think a boy's role would be performed by a woman singer?

2. Who is the stronger character in the story – Hansel or Gretel? Or, do you feel they are equally balanced?
3. How does the traditional version of the story compare with Virginia Opera’s production?
4. Does the updated version seem like a fairytale? Or, does it seem more realistic? How?
5. Do the “fairytale” characters take an active role in the story? How do they interact with the children?
6. The “Evening Prayer” music sends a message about the safety of the children. What is this message? What is the significance of the fourteen angels?
7. Does the music foreshadow events to come? Can you give an example?
8. Which musical themes in the opera represent good and which ones represent evil?
9. Fairy tales are frequently “cautionary tales.” What behaviors are being suggested as more desirable? What are the consequences of undesirable behavior?
10. Do you think children should be frightened into good behavior?
11. The children sing of angels in their prayer. Is the appearance of the angels at the end of Act II just part of a dream? Or, does their appearance suggest that the children have divine protection?
12. Much of the story revolves around food. Why do you think this is so important to the story?
13. The foods associated with the evil character, the Witch, are sweets and candies. What is the message in this fact?
14. What kind of childhood behaviors help Hansel and Gretel? Which ones hurt them?
15. Do the musical themes reflect the type of character or event they are associated with? Discuss the themes and how they make you feel, i.e., light-hearted, sad, fearful, peaceful, excited, anxious, relieved, etc.
16. The song the enchanted children sing changes its tone as they come to life. How does it sound when it begins and how does it sound at the end? Does the music reflect the storyline?