

# Youngsters relate to FSU's modern twist on opera

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Matt Cooksey is a first-year master's student in opera production at Florida State University. As part of his training to be a well-rounded professional, he and his classmates are taught about design, costuming, lighting and other aspects of production. He has taken his study one step further and, inspired by the 19th-century opera "Beatrice and Benedict" by Hector Berlioz, he created a new interpretation for young audiences.

Cooksey explained his process: "I had to pick the musical numbers, figure out the structure of the show, and get to work basically writing a completely new libretto. All of the lyrics were mine, the dialog is mine, so it was a pretty huge undertaking."

The original comic opera by Berlioz is largely based on Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," and Cooksey believes its themes are particular well-suited for teenagers. "We go around carrying baggage about should I really say what I mean? Should I come



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The cast of *Beatrice and Benedict* perform for Cornerstone students.

out of my shell and say this is who I am? I think it's a human anxiety and I wanted to provide a platform for these students to see that it is OK."

Through the FSU Opera Outreach program and with the help of a six-person cast and a pianist who provided live accompaniment, Cooksey was able to present his work to students in several schools across the city. Though the show was written with middle schoolers in mind, Cooksey found an eager audience at Cornerstone Learning Community, where nearly 200 pre-K through eighth-grade students enjoyed the production, performed in their outdoor theater.

Cornerstone seventh-grader Evan Marty has been involved in musical theater for most of his life. He said, "I don't have a great voice but I'm interested in seeing how opera works and all the ranges people can have." Sixth-grader Tyson White was also impressed by the singing but was even more taken with some of the technical aspects of the show. He said, "I enjoyed seeing how the scenes changed."

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# Opera

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Fourth-grader Pandora Flom was intrigued by the show's history and how Cooksey created a contemporary, school-based setting where the story could unfold. "They told us the opera was really, really old and how they made it modern. I think I liked it that way. It would have also been really interesting for it to be old, but I liked it the modern way."

Pandora's fourth-grade classmates Reese Bowden and Alec Winger were both mesmerized by the acting. "I felt that the characters were giving out what they were feeling and the music was too," Reese said. The often quarreling and mischievous characters felt relatable to Alec. Mildly exasperated, he joked that "Hero," a rather bombastic personality in this revision, "is a lot like my sister."

Playing the role of single-minded Hero was Camden McLean, an FSU sophomore majoring in vocal performance. "Hero, to me, is the precedent of every single mean girl character there's ever been." She added, "I think it's important to put that up on stage." Camden recognizes that many students face difficulty navigating treacherous social situations and she feels this performance allows students to see their own struggles reflected on stage.

"A lot of what I love about the arts is that it gives people a platform to connect to, it's like 'I remember when I felt that exact emotion' or 'I lived that story, too.' It makes people feel a little bit less alone which I think is really important in our global society right now."

The title role of Benedict was played by FSU graduate student Luke Barnard. He is studying vocal performance and was moved by the universal nature of the opera's message. "There's a reason this show, which



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Intended for middle schoolers, the opera also captivated younger audience members.



was done in the 1800s, is still being done today. It has a lot of truths. It's something that resonates with our history and it has something to say that is timeless."

Barnard feels it is especially important to provide young audiences with the opportunity to explore the world of opera and is grateful to be involved with the unique FSU Opera Outreach program. He said, "There's not as much exposure to this kind of music and by bringing it into the schools we're sort of opening the children's eyes to the possibilities of classical music. Whether that gets them excited to play the saxophone or maybe start taking voice lessons so they can try opera themselves. To engage in something that they're not particularly used to hearing and become advocates for it, that's a beautiful thing."

*Amanda Karioth Thompson is the assistant director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).*

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