

## Opera for Children and The Poetics of Space, in Digital Pills

*Ópera para crianças e A poética do espaço, em pílulas digitais*

Karen ACIOLY

Doutoranda em Educação (UFF), mestre em Mídias Criativas (PPGMC/ECO-UFRJ), maîtrise em Études Théâtrales (Sorbonne Paris 3) e especialista em Literatura Infantil e Juvenil (Ucam).  
E-mail: contato.karenacioly@gmail.com

Cristina Rego Monteiro da LUZ

Professora Doutora de Comunicação e Cultura (ECO-UFRJ). Jornalista de formação, coordena a linha Editorial do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Mídias Criativas (PPGMC/ECO-UFRJ).  
E-mail: cristina.regomonteiro@eco.ufrj.br

### Abstract:

This article focuses on opera for children, taking a broad overview across time and space. The aim of the research is to identify what constitutes opera for children by embracing its dramaturgical, poetic, imagistic, and symbolic aspects. The chosen approach was sensitive listening to children, and alongside this, exploring important aspects of theory and practice. A case study was used as a framework for analysis — the creative process of the children's opera Bem no Meio, which served as the basis for the production of mini-documentaries in digital snippets. These mini-docs provide pedagogical support for raising awareness and educating students, parents, teachers, and new audiences. They were intended to generate a visual literature of opera for children, a genre that is still little disseminated and studied in Brazil. The research incorporated concepts from the phenomenology of the imagination, particularly those of Gaston Bachelard (2008).

**Keywords:** Bachelard; children's opera; imaginary; poetry; espace.

### Resumo

Este artigo tem como objeto de pesquisa a ópera para crianças, a partir de seus sobrevoos no tempo e no espaço. Seu intuito é identificar o que seja esse gênero, acolhendo seus aspectos dramaturgicos, poéticos, imagéticos e simbólicos. O caminho eleito para análise foi a escuta sensível de crianças e, braços dados com ela, uma caminhada por aspectos importantes de teoria e prática. Utilizou-se como referencial um estudo de caso – o processo criativo da ópera infantil Bem no meio, base para a produção de minidocumentários em pílulas digitais. Os minidocs, que oferecem suporte pedagógico para a sensibilização e formação de alunos, pais, professores e novos públicos, tiveram como propósito gerar

literatura visual da ópera para crianças, gênero ainda pouco difundido e estudado no Brasil. A pesquisa agregou conceitos da fenomenologia do imaginário, notadamente de Gaston Bachelard (2008).

## Introduction

In Brazil, opera for children is surrounded by mysteries. Unlike the European countries who know and recognize such artistic genre as part of their culture, opera intimidates our country of cocos, jongos, sambas, maracatus and an infinitude of sound beats – as stated by Livia Penedo Jacob<sup>1</sup> in the preface of the book (Acioly, 2022). It is often thought that there genre has been only small changes in the genre since its beginnings in 17th-century Florence, when it served to entertain the social elites composed of white men and women of the European high nobility and was performed in large theaters with lavish productions. As it catered to the elite, over the centuries it would have formalized itself practically bound to this restricted audience.

However, at the end of the 20th century, with the arrival of new technologies, European directors realized the isolation of opera in rigid formats and understood the urgent need to rejuvenate their audiences. The task was not at all simple, since adults were practically the only people in the audience.

However, with the arrival of new technologies<sup>2</sup> at the end of the 20th century European directors realized how isolated opera was by still following rigid formats and understood the urgent need to rejuvenate its audience. This goal was far from easy since the adults were practically unaware of the mysteries of childhood and its diverse and multiple neurological, psychological and cultural particularities.

In addition to good performances, children's audiences demand stories that play with the emotions and mysteries of their universe and local culture, which, as Edgar Morin (1989) would tell us, makes for a far more complex task of creation. Therefore, what is applied in Europe cannot be mirrored in Brazil, a country that embraces diverse childhoods such as indigenous, quilombola, riverside, rural, gypsy, borderish, urban, children of migrants and settlers.

Creating for children as an adult is like diving into the unknown, as told by Bachelard (2008) and Larrosa (2013). New repertoires, formats and languages must be created. Opera for children in Brazil shouldn't be treated as a subgenre of opera that comes from Europe and is for adults. We need to bear in mind that opera is a genre and opera for children is the discovery of another paradigm, still in transformation, that arises from traditional opera with many distinct nuances and variations of its own.

---

<sup>1</sup> Livia Penedo Jacob holds a PhD in Comparative Literature Theory from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) and the University of Winnipeg (Capes-PDS 2017), with a thesis that won an Honourable Mention in the 2021 Capes Thesis Prize.

<sup>2</sup> According to Theresa Schmitz, in her article "L'opéra jeune public: stratégies compositionnelles pour transformer l'enfant spectateur en mélomane" (2012)

Such variations indicate a paradigm shift that may be understood - and scenically applied - through studies of the imaginary.

In this article we will reflect on what was observed in the creative process of the opera *Bem No Meio*. Originally the show was idealized for performances on a live stage theater with an audience. However the season needed to be interrupted right after a general rehearsal due to the COVID pandemic. As an alternative, the production was adapted into a digital product. The entire scenographic installation, set structure, videos, interviews, recordings of the team's work, rehearsal and backstage footage were used for the production of short digital documentaries that relate the experience of creating an opera for children to the studies of Gaston Bachelard's (1884-1962) work. Bachelard is a French philosopher and essayist whose main characteristic is the diffusion of his thought between science and poetry, especially concerning the proposal of an opera for new audiences. He speaks about commotion, daydreaming and about opening the thought to multiple meanings, as does the opera for children through its listening. *Bem no Meio* was then transformed into a new project – short digital pills divided into chapters – edited during the period of investigation of this research, from 2020 to 2022.

To support the reflections developed here, we listened to children's testimonies during the pandemic and post-pandemic period, as inspiring primary sources to understand children's thinking and the complexity that the theme - not listening to what children tell us - encompasses. We have therefore gathered unpublished material from a creative, iconographic and theoretical perspective in order to create a sensory panorama of Bachelard's work in an opera for children in this part of the 21st century.

It is Jorge Larrosa who speaks to us with particular clarity about the place of the adult when observing the child:

The experience of the child as another is the attention and enigmatic presence of childhood, of those strange beings we know nothing about and those wild beings who don't understand our language. It is therefore a question of giving childhood back its enigmatic presence and finding the of our responsibility for the answer, in the face of the demand that this enigma carries with it (Larrosa, 2013, p. 186).

Starting from this premise, according to which childhood is never what we already know, we try to show that we don't claim to know everything about the genesis of childhood definitions, nor should we compare Brazilian childhoods to those of other continents. The idea is simply to point out that opera for children is developing differently around the world. When we talk about opera for children, we are also talking about cultural and intercultural diversity. To do this, it's important to realise that opera for children, as Bachelard<sup>3</sup> (1978), goes beyond reason. It is necessary to question pre-established knowledge in favour of an innovative approach and a break with traditional thinking (Carvalho, 2021, p. 339),

<sup>3</sup> BACHELARD, Gaston, *Os pensadores*, Abril Cultural, São Paulo, (1978)p.4-10

without prejudice, prioritising dialectics according to which positions that were previously considered contrary and excluding cease to be so, thus revealing that all knowledge is relative. Just as opera - the so-called traditional opera - begins to dialogue with opera for children when it encounters Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology as an interface. Its own phenomenology, based on four elements: water, earth, fire and air.

This premise, associated with opera for children, is represented in this research by the opera *Bem no meio*.

### **The creation of the opera *Bem no meio* and the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard**

The word opera means work in Latin, from the verb *operari*, which means labour, effort or service (Rodrigues, 2014). This term has historically been associated with the collaborative effort of many artists involved in producing a work of musical theatre, such as an opera.

Although the genre was initially restricted to the Italian language, it soon spread to other countries, thus crossing various cultural boundaries through the transformations it adopted over the centuries, as well as through its assimilation by other cultures, such as French, English and German.

With the passage of time, from the 20th century onwards, various changes took place in the operatic genre: composers began to experiment with new forms of musical expression in opera, exploring a wide range of styles, aesthetics and techniques, such as the 'opera', such as serialism<sup>4</sup>, with innovative approaches. The themes of modern operas became more diverse and often reflected contemporary social, political and psychological issues in music, text and staging. The librettos (textual narrative) of 20th century operas generally became more abstract and symbolic, abandoning the traditional structure of recitatives and arias in favour of a more fluid and organic approach.

With the arrival of new technologies, composers began to incorporate multimedia elements into opera productions, including video projections, mixing with live electronic music and other audiovisual resources to enrich the scenic and musical experience. Sensitive issues, such as whether or not to use microphones for voices and instruments, opened the door to new tensions: if microphones were used for singers and some musical instruments, who would be in control of the result: the composer, the conductor or the sound technician?

Éric Champagne<sup>5</sup> reflects on this issue. He draws a picture of opera in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom in the 20th century and comes to some conclusions, including that 'the genre

<sup>4</sup> Serialism is a compositional technique in which musical parameters such as pitch, duration, dynamics, among others, are organised according to an ordered series, called a dodecaphonic or serial series (Sadie; Tyrrell, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> In the article 'L'opéra pour enfants ou la quête d'identité: commentaire critique sur L'arche, d'Isabelle Panneton et Anne Hébert' (2006)

is characterised by a limited duration of less than an hour and a theme intended for children, reproduced in a comprehensible way by a libretto written in the language of the audience and supported by clear and simple music' (Champagne, 2006, p. 82<sup>6</sup>). These statements reinforce the perception of a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of what traditional opera is. This is an absolutely new subject that escapes what is already known.

### The imaginary as a point of contact between different cultures

With all the differences and particularities that exist between peoples and cultures, apparent globalisation seems to have really convinced the world's population (or at least the part of it that has access to the internet) that we are all similar, that we communicate using countless digital tools and that we have gradually formed a worldwide consumer network, which is possibly under control, as communication theorists such as Armand Mattelart (2000), David Held and Anthony McGrew (2001) have observed. The issue is controversial and brings into debate the pros and cons of this technological advance that we've experienced over the last 30 years, as we'll see later.

However, the different cultures are beyond the present time and bring symbolism and subjectivities from the unconscious and our imaginary. The philosophers of the Imaginary, such as Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung - just to name a few - have delved into this enigma that precedes us and makes us relate images and sounds to meanings, memories that we haven't lived, something we don't know about but that we know we are part of.

How can diving into the imagination - a term that, not by chance, gives its title to the book by Brazilian philosophers Marly Bulcão, Marcelo de Carvalho, Constanca Marcondes Cesar and André Campello (2021) - illuminate the path towards childhoods and opera for children, regardless of their culture? Danielle Rocha Pitta, in her short book *Initiation to Gilbert Durand's theory of the imaginary* (2005), gives clues as to how we can begin to work out an answer to this question: how, then, is a culture's imaginary formed? According to the author, 'we must consider that the process of image formation is the same whether we are dealing with an individual or a culture' (2005, p. 19).

Pitta reveals that a culture's own sensitivity, in interaction with its environment, can occur in different ways, according to what that culture values. The philosopher exemplifies this with the case of two tribes from different cultures who, when they come into contact with the same stimulus, react in opposite ways:

---

<sup>6</sup> “[...] le genre est caractérisé par une durée limitée à moins d’une heure et un sujet spécifiquement destiné aux enfants, rendu aussi compréhensible que possible par un livret écrit dans la langue de son auditoire et porté par une musique claire et simple.”

*A culture's own sensibility in interaction with a particular environment and circumstances values more or less the schèmes<sup>7</sup> that, as a whole, correspond to the human condition. This is how one culture can perceive the universe as full of divisions and oppositions, while another will perceive it as united and harmonious. For this reason, it is not a question of classifying a culture into this or that structure, but of understanding what the 'predominant polarisation' is, in other words, the type of dynamism at work, which leads to the determination of the 'anthropological path' in a given culture or social group (Pitta, 2005, p. 18).*

We therefore have to think about what the artist causes when he stands in front of each audience or when, through scenography, projections, lighting and movements, we provoke imaginaries. According to the philosopher, 'the images will be organised around a nucleus and form constellations, ordering them at the same time around images of gestures, schèmes, and objects privileged by sensitivity' (Pitta, 2005, p. 20). In other words, we engage with images according to what they represent to us in our culture.

Pitta also says that Durand researched countless images from different cultures in an attempt to classify them. He noticed that they were divided and regrouped into two distinct regimes: diurnal and nocturnal, and that the symbols, following their own logic, regrouped around organising nuclei. Thus, the philosopher exemplifies:

*the image of the movement of the ripple means that the waves of the water are linked to the waves of the hair, long, feminine hair, which, in turn, are linked to the dimension of the femininity of the water, images that all converge around the passage of time, the passage of the waters of the river, which pass and never return (Pitta, 2005, p. 21).*

This spiral of images creates new ones, as well as new meanings and symbolic representations. Considering that 'symbols are ambiguous and characterised by endless meanings' (Pitta, 2005, p. 23), following the path of searching for images and their symbolisms seems to be a good clue for those who want to begin to understand the richness of children's imagination. If the imaginary means the alliance with what is deepest and most unconscious in us, how can we look for images that cross cultures in an opera for children?

Theresa Schmitz<sup>8</sup>, author of the book *L'opéra jeune public* (2022) and one of the few European researchers to have looked into the subject, reflects on some of the marketing issues surrounding opera audiences. The need to rejuvenate this audience, which frequents large theatres, has led to a rethink of opera schedules, which has facilitated access to these performances, including cheaper tickets. However, the so-called new audience didn't turn up:

*As audiences were getting older and new subscribers didn't turn up to support the expensive programme, opera houses had to find new strategies to keep the machine*

<sup>7</sup> *Schème* is a philosophical term for something prior to the image, which corresponds to a general tendency of gestures, taking into account emotions and affections. It brings together unconscious gestures and representations (Pitta, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Theresa Schmitz is the author of the book *L'opéra jeune public* (2022)

running. Firstly, the rationalisation of the organisation and the internationalisation of the artistic masses were seen as efficient tools for reducing the overall budget. Secondly, some states began funding opera houses with up to 90 per cent of their total budget in order to save this art form, which was considered a European cultural heritage. In order to justify the high expenditure and the use of public money, the call for the democratisation of this legitimate art form then became a political issue (Schmitz, 2010, p. 2).

Schmitz's comment highlights a fundamental issue for our study: opera in France is considered a cultural heritage, which is not the case in Brazil. When Schmitz says that changes in the mould of the opera genre would alienate wealthy and traditional audiences, she signals that raising awareness and forming new audiences would have to overcome the challenge of creating bridges between the traditional and the contemporary, and between rich and poor/middle-class people.

For Jonathan Dove (apud Schmitz, 2010), in the specific case of *Swanhunter*, the most important thing would be to avoid singing and slow music. In his opinion, 'the works must adapt to the children's lower concentration span: only a high tempo and a sequence of exceptional and spectacular effects would be able to keep the children's attention' (Dove apud Schmitz, 2010, p. 6). He notes that children's lives are surrounded by a lot of stimuli, so the show needs to be part of that, just as intensely. Dove says that opera for children needs to have familiar sound elements: 'Percussion is one of the instruments they definitely relate to. This is true of all dance music. For this reason, it was very important that the work had a strong rhythmic identity' (Dove apud Schmitz, 2010, p. 6).

According to the composer, with whom we agree, 'a bored child will not return to the opera a second time' (apud Schmitz, 2010, p. 6). This is an important insight, as it shows that the author is looking at and caring about children. Jonathan Dove wants young viewers to enjoy themselves, to leave saying to their parents: 'We want more of that!' (apud Schmitz, 2010, p. 6).

His words are in line with the opinion of composer and PhD in Music Composition Marcos Lucas, who, in an interview conducted by email in March 2020, when talking about two important aspects of opera for children, the story and the text of the libretto, points out:

I think a lot of thought should be given to the nature of this text (libretto) in terms of its suitability for children of different age groups. As for the musical language of children's opera, I can see that there are two positions. There are composers who think they should adapt their language to the children's universe and others who argue that they shouldn't make any concessions. Personally, I think that children are, sometimes much more open than adults to different languages, but the composer must also seek references with the music that children listen to... all of this is very complex (Acioly, 2022, p. 33).

Lucas's opinion is in synergy with Dove's. As a counterpoint, one of Brazil's most prolific composers, Tim Rescala, gives his opinion and also emphasises the importance of history in musical creation:

Technically, there's no difference. It depends a lot on the theme. When I wrote *The Orchestra of Dreams*, I was telling colleagues that I was going to write an opera for children, with dodecaphonic, tonal music and minimalist passages. Everyone thought I was mad because children's music had to be simple. I'm totally against that. I think it's the opposite. Maybe it has to be for adults. The child, unlike the adult, is an open book. You offer them music and they absorb it. Children are better able, more open and more capable of grasping complex structures than adults. Adults, over the course of their lives, run out of patience and no longer have this openness. Children react to a proposal you make: they will like it or not. The reaction is immediate. In *The Orchestra of Dreams*, the children not only interacted, they left the theatre singing and playing. It's not the musical content that determines whether a show is for children or adults: it's the theme and the approach (Rescala apud Hartkopf, 2010, p. 159).

In parallel to the creators' opinions, Schmitz addresses another detail that can permeate other languages, such as literature, visual arts and theatre: the prejudice that any art made for children can be considered minor. The researcher writes that, in her testimony, Dove spoke openly about adapting her language, her creative gesture, to this special audience. Most composers, according to the musicologist, refuse to admit this for fear of devaluing their work (Schmitz, 2010). The devaluation of artistic creation for children is closely linked to the lack of recognition of children as citizens, rather than future citizens.

9

### **The creation of an experimental methodology for the scenic dramaturgy of an opera for children**

How can we create a methodology that understands the poetic complexity of listening sensitively to children's narratives, be they gestural, silent, verbal or behavioural, based on their symbolic universe? Can we perceive, in small gestures, the greatness of children's affections and imaginations? What if we followed Barthes' advice?

I would therefore like the speaking and listening that will take place here to be similar to the comings and goings of a child who plays around his mother, moves away from her and then returns to bring her a pebble or a strand of wool, thus drawing a whole play area around a calm centre, within which the pebble or the wool finally matter less than the zealous gift that is made of them. (Barthes, 1977, p.20)

How can we combine what Barthes says with the 'Bachelardian compass' to illuminate the path from theory to practice?

---

<sup>9</sup> To give you an idea, in Brazil, where children - individuals aged 0 to 12 - make up 17.15% of the population, it was only in 2024 that Children's Culture was included in the National Culture System, i.e. the rights of Brazilian children to cultural goods, in their entire ecosystem, were recognised.



If the path is made while walking, as Morin (2005) suggests, we can say that the process of writing the opera *Bem no meio*, aimed at children, as well as the conception of its staging - which raises many reflections on extremes: shadow/light (light/dark), real/imaginary, revelation/hiding, rise/fall, fear/courage - could serve as an experimental methodological investigation of an opera for 'new audiences'. It also draws on the reflections of theorists and professionals who think about the complex universe of the real and the imaginary for this audience, travelling the path from theory to practice. This methodology served the purpose of this researcher because, when it comes to children's imagination, it is worth emphasising - as we saw in the second chapter of this dissertation - that each child is a universe, wrapped up in their culture. Therefore, as an author and director - from this point on in the research I will be speaking in the first person singular - I wanted, in a poetic and metaphorical way, to create a story that would bring children's voices into the world of myths<sup>10</sup>, schèmes<sup>11</sup>, symbols<sup>12</sup> and archetypes<sup>13</sup> (Pitta, 2005, p. 22). The dramaturgy should provide the myths and images that would immerse us in the imaginary world of two children. Thus, if 'every image is, in a way, also a narrative' - as Roland Barthes teaches in *Aula* (1977, p. 17), the images would need to evoke what words could not say.

The as yet unreleased show was conceived from the sensitive listening to the children's narrative, the creation of the libretto and the poetic space. These were the starting points for the discovery of the stage show, but also, later, of the mini-documentaries in digital pills.

While listening, the inspiration for writing the libretto took shape when I came into contact with Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. In the book, I found what I was looking for: 'keys to wonder', as Bill Moyers (1990, p. 6) says in the introduction to *The Power of Myth*, about Campbell's thinking when studying such narratives. The question I asked myself was: how could I think of a story that could bring together so many ingredients and such a cosy poetic space, as Bachelard proposes when talking about the nest, the shell, the house and the room (2008)? To begin the journey of discovering the staging, the first step was to understand the images that the story evoked.

### **The story: libretto and its summary**

If a story, as Joseph Campbell says, is 'the way it is told' (1990, p. 13), how could the story of *Bem no meio* (*Bem in the middle*) be told? The story of *Bem no meio* tells - and sings - the journey of a girl (*Bem*)

<sup>10</sup> Myth is a dynamic system of symbols, archetypes and schèmes that tends to compose a story, in other words, that is presented in the form of a story. It is the founding story of culture: it establishes the relationships between the various parts of the universe, between people and the universe, and between people and each other. The opera *Right in the middle* deals with flight, birds, which is reminiscent of the myth of Icarus and the desire to fly.

<sup>11</sup> The schème is prior to the image, it corresponds to a general tendency of gestures, it takes emotions and affections into account. It brings together unconscious gestures and representations.

<sup>12</sup> A symbol is any concrete sign that evokes, through a natural relationship, something absent or impossible to perceive. It is a representation that makes a secret meaning 'appear'.

<sup>13</sup> Archetype is the representation of the schèmes, the first image of a collective and innate character; it is the preliminary state, the area where the idea is born. It constitutes the junction between the imaginary and the rational processes.

who is born with a strange hole in her back - from which a wing will emerge - who discovers she has the gift of going in and out of books and who is right in the middle of her parents' separation<sup>14</sup>. Just as children's books have texts in prose, verse and/or dialogue, in an opera, the written text is called the libretto. It's like the textual script of an opera: it's the text that contains all the words recited (in musical time) or sung.

In a libretto there are at least two separate domains. The first concerns the 'narrative' element, basically the plot and its characters; the second involves the representation of the narrative in text form, in specific (and almost always poetic) words. While the first domain tends to remain stable in opera performances, the second can be very variable (Abbate, 2015, p. 22-23).

This definition of what a libretto is, which is quite simple and straightforward, is aimed at newcomers and those curious about what opera is. However, it's possible to add a few other points when dealing with the world of children: a libretto is a way of telling a story in the language of opera. It can be written by a child, an adult, a poet or not, a famous or unknown author who likes the sound of words and the way they can make sense together. The stories can be original, invented or adapted from existing ones, whether or not they were written to be sung. The narrative can be ordered with a beginning, middle and end, or have loose scenes that the audience can link together. That's why it's very important to choose a storyline with words that sound thought-provoking and inspiring, and that can vibrate in the space to the sound of lyrical singing.

As already noted, opera has three dimensions: the dramatic text - which represents an action that develops through interaction between the characters in the present time, similar to a play - the music and the staging, which takes into account the scenography, the poetic space, the costumes, the play between the actors and the relationship with the audience. Considering so many elements, the libretto must also be a provocateur of imaginations for creators and audiences.

With this in mind, the libretto for the opera *Bem no meio*, based on sensitive listening to children and studies of the imaginary.

### **The search for symbols and the heroine's journey**

Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Power of Myth* (1990), characterises the hero's journey in a theory that aims to codify the steps taken by characters throughout countless stories around the world, including non-fictional ones. According to the writer, a hero is someone who goes beyond the ordinary

---

<sup>14</sup> Link to The Opera for Children, minidoc in digital pills, whose case study is based on the opera *Bem no Meio*, libretto and mise-en-scène by Karen Acioly and music by Camille Rocailleux: <https://youtu.be/UQAAagelc00>

sphere of human experience, dedicating part or all of their life to something greater than their own existence.

For Campbell, there are two types of hero: those who are drawn to adventure by something without having prepared for it, and those who are determined and go out in search of challenges. There are two types of feats: physical, such as saving someone's life or risking oneself for another, and spiritual, manifested when the hero experiences a supranormal situation in human spiritual life and returns to tell his community about it.

Heroism consists of leaving one condition of life and arriving at a better, richer or more mature one than the previous one. Being a hero is about how much a person is capable of sacrificing for something or someone. In addition to the other, the individual path that each person takes is also a hero's journey, a path of self-knowledge seen as a rite of passage between important stages of life, such as from childhood to pre-adolescence - as is the case in the story of *Bem no meio* - or from adolescence to adulthood.

According to Campbell, the hero goes through some stages that are natural challenges in the world of myths. The first is categorised as 'the departure'; the second, 'the initiation' and the third, 'the return'. The journey of *Bem no meio* as an opera, alternating scenes of story movement (recitatives) with others of breathing and extended emotional times (scenes of vocal choirs, without words and arias). The story should also evoke the four elements of nature: water, earth, fire and air, which are present in the work of Gaston Bachelard (Bulcão; Carvalho; Cesar; Campello, 2021). From the writing of the libretto, the musical writing and the entire Bachelardian poetic space were devised.

The first evocations of opera, based on a flight story

According to Bachelard, 'it is necessary to show in scientific experience the traces of childhood experience' (apud Bulcão, 2021, p. 415), because there is nothing in science that can be perceived without imagination and invention. Philosopher Marly Bulcão summarises Bachelard's view of this aspect that unites science and imagination:

children are able to achieve this balance effortlessly, because not only do they have a treasure trove of imagination and intense experiences of the dreamlike and the fantastic, but they also have a nascent sense of reason that has not yet taken on the rational rigidity that characterises adult rationality (Bulcão, 2021, p. 417).

When referring to science as a pursuit that is inseparable from imagination, Bachelard gives the example of the child who, on receiving a toy, tries to open it to discover its interior, how it is made. However, adults interfere and repress this curiosity, saying that this kind of attitude is not polite. After all, what does a scientist do if not go in search of answers to hypotheses intuited from discovered knowledge, in other words, 'open toys' so that their curiosity can be transformed into hypotheses?

One of the French philosopher's scholars, the pedagogue and poet Georges Jean (apud Bulcão, 2021, p. 416), sought to find answers to his questions in Bachelard's work. One of them was: 'How can children understand the complexity of the world?'. It was Bachelard himself who answered, in the article 'Instant poétique et instant métaphysique': 'Poetry is an instant metaphysics. In a short poem, it must give a vision of the universe and the secret of a soul' (Bachelard apud Thiébaud, 2011). Nourished by all this reading, I realised that the libretto for *Bem no meio*, written as a large poem divided into 11 scenes peppered with silences - since 'there is no poetry without silence' (Lassus, 2010, p. 42) - was in tune with the author's thinking.

### **The interrelations of the scene and the poetics of space**

After writing the libretto, we realise that the staging would have to create relationships between the aesthetic and symbolic concepts of Gaston Bachelard's work in all the dynamics that would make it up. This would include the emotional variations of the text, the musical score, the movement of the singers, the scenographic elements, as well as the dynamics of the light and the relationship between stage and audience<sup>15</sup>.

We start from the premise that an opera for children should consider the unity of time, place and action. Thus, if the time of childhood - as we can see from listening to sensitive of the narrative of the children surveyed - is the exact time of the present and if, for Bachelard, it is the time of the instant, with 'poetic creation arising in the instant [...] a form of metaphysics' (Bulcão, 2021, p. 205), we are talking about a time that can be discontinuous, just like the imagery and poetry that a child brings with them in their childhood:

Poetry is instant metaphysics. A short poem should give a vision of the universe and the secret of a soul, at once a being and objects. If it simply follows the time of life, it is less than life, living in its place, the dialectic of joys and sorrows. It is, then, the principle of an essential simultaneity, in which the most dispersed, most disunited being conquers unity (Bachelard apud Bulcão, 2021, p. 206).

Bachelard's thought provided the basis for the unity of the staging, since in *Bem no meio* we have a very peculiar scenic reality: it is an opera for children whose music should make the audience feel like flying like the birds, overflowing with affection and wonder. The time proposed for the action is the

---

<sup>15</sup> 'In order not to become dogmatic, a theory of opera must maintain a certain flexibility among its own conceptual categories, starting with the fundamental categories of 'theatre', 'drama', 'work of art' (opus), 'text' and 'interpretation', and not confine them to definitions which, although they satisfy the need for order typical of science, run the risk of losing the reality of history and ideas... the analysis of an opera which would be limited to the relationship between music and words, without taking reality into account the reality of the stage is an approach that is now considered obsolete in musicology' (Dahlhaus, 1992, p. 123).

child's internal, subjective time, the time of the present instant. The main action is the adventure (or reverie) of flight. The theme therefore calls for a journey of enchantment, drama, pain and overcoming. The action takes place on the threshold between consciousness and the imaginary, combining the character Bem's entry into her favourite book, the discovery of a new world and the comings and goings between the imaginary and the real world. The music should convey warmth through its rhythms and silences, and enable the viewer to get involved with various sensations.

### **The creation of the poetics of space in Bem no meio**

To start thinking about the spaces and the relationship that would be established between them in the poetics of the text of Bem no meio, we considered that the target audience, from 2 to 12 years old, would be brought by the hands of adults and that the poetic space should evoke symbolic images from our unconscious, so that the age difference wouldn't prevent adults from diving into the imagination. Following Roland Barthes, for whom 'every image is, in some way, also an image of adults. Following Roland Barthes, for whom 'every image is, in some way, a narrative' (1977, p. 16), and the dramatic text of the show was integrated into the study of the images. The relationship between the small and the large was considered, as well as digital projection for certain scenographic elements, in the choice to use the idea of two different main circles, adaptable to the various spaces, and smaller ones around them. New questions arose: given that the story of Bem in the middle begins with Bem's birth, this symbolic space could be that of a shell, with a rounded base, inside which the character would stay.

### **The circular form**

In the theatre, the audience wants to feel that they are living a collective experience, to test their belonging, to experience the gathering, as in a circle or storytelling circle of ancestral cultures. Based on this notion, it was considered that the first images of the narrative-scenographic space for the receiving public could be designed in such a way as to identify it as a welcoming place, in a circular or semi-circular shape. This would make it easier for the audience to look both at the stage, where the narrative would unfold, and at themselves, generating a strong sense of belonging to the show.

The idea reminds us of the welcome of the womb, the womb and the protection that should be present from the start of the show. It would be the representation of a 'happy' or safe space, as Bachelard suggests in his concept of topophilia, which refers to spaces defended from adverse forces (Bachelard, 2008, p. 17). Towards the back of the stage, we projected images that weren't very clear, even blurred, in order to try to represent the eyes of a baby who perceives shadows and moving lights, but can't yet distinguish things clearly.

According to Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (2008), the nest and the shell, refuges for vertebrates and invertebrates, are happy spaces in our unconscious. The opera's scenographic space would then incorporate the topophilia and roundness<sup>16</sup> evoked by Bachelard's poetics, gaining resonance and new narrative meanings within the story.

#### The shell: the challenges

According to the *Dictionary of Symbols*, the conch shell represents the fertility of water: 'Its shape and depth are reminiscent of the female sexual organ. Its occasional content, the pearl, is the origin of the legend of Aphrodite, born from a shell. This confirms the double erotic and fertilising aspect of the symbol' (Chevalier; Gheerbrant, 2016, p. 269-270).

If the shell is the birthplace of the character Bem, it is also where her fears, doubts and challenges take place: the scenic heart; the reference point for the other scenic elements. It is a place of both birth and challenges and transformation. As a piece of scenography, it should therefore be able to communicate the immediate image of topophilia on stage and acquire new meanings throughout the show, following Bem's story. In relation to the other two pieces situated in the poetic space, the shell would be right in the middle and more in the background, as the centre of the action - to recall Dort's proposal to hide what is most important - inspiring mystery and recollection.

Based on the idea that the imagination is a dynamic flow of images, as Bachelard suggests, a shell already evokes the sea around it. This sea, in turn, evokes the moon, planets, forests and the great phenomena of nature, such as a storm or a gale, which are necessary for the opera's most dramatic moments. So that the evoked images could also appear, the shell had to have a space for projections, which would be located at the top, as if it had already been opened after Bem's birth.

#### The nest: welcoming the imaginary

In contrast to the shell, for the creative unfolding of the story, in the construction of the narrative scenic space, a second place would be necessary so that Bem could act in its sacred and welcoming space: the imaginary.

As Bachelard tells us, 'the nest is a hiding place for winged life' (2008, p. 95). Thus, this second poetic space created in the scenario was baptised the nest. It is Bem's place of reverie, where her daydreams take place and where she meets Gaia (the second role, her best friend). It is also the imaginary space within the book, where the girl finds shelter and overcomes obstacles. In it, which is also circular, attached like a swing, Bem discovers her main gift: the ability to fly, to discover new questions, to enter

<sup>16</sup> 'Being round awakens in us feelings of maternal protection and inner rest' (Bachelard, 2017, p. 192).

and leave the book, to belong to two worlds. It is, after all, a place of resilience, where the character finds nourishment and support in the face of challenges. The nest would then have two narrative functions: symbolic and metaphorical. It would be the space of the character's discoveries and transformations. Bachelard concludes:

For the bird, the nest is undoubtedly a cosy, sweet and pleasant home. It is a house of life: it continues to protect the bird that emerges from the egg. For the bird emerging from the egg, the nest is an external fluff before the bare skin finds its feathers... (Bachelard, 2008, p. 95-96).

Based on what the philosopher says, we want to show that the bird comes out of the egg like Bem comes out of the shell. This new condition imposes difficulties for both of them, who are nevertheless welcomed within the confines of the nest (the imaginary one), a space where they can certainly feed, but which is also the place where the Bem child will assume its growth, power and capacity for flight, as its wings begin to grow.

The children in the choir are projected onto the set in suspended circles, forming a string of beads - the children's voices are the thread that integrates everything.

The space for the parents is in the two larger circles, arranged between the two sides of the shell. Thus, the scenes in which the adults would appear give the dimension of their visibly larger statures than the character Bem. In this way, the children in the audience can see, symbolically, feelings that they might not be able to decipher, for example, how big the adults really are and what they feel when they are not listened to by the adults.

A fifth, external element would be fundamental: the narrator. As a storyteller and singer-songwriter, the narrator stood in a third circular space, located next to the audience, off-stage, a place called the 'point'.

The point is not part of the scenes that take place on stage, like the shell and the nest. It's a place where the narrator - also a musician - would have a piano, accordion, ocean drum and hang around him, constituting an exterior fictional space, with particular acoustics, inside the place where the audience would be. This would create the metaphor of the story within the story. Circles of different sizes, textures, heights, structures and narrative functions, as well as an imaginary thread, would be the reading within the reading, the listening beyond the listening, to the narrative spaces and the narration of Bem's in the middle.

The sixth and final element is the space where Bem rises and falls in his attempts to fly, which has been baptised vertigo, since every dream of flight is followed by the fear of falling, according to studies in the anthropology of the imaginary (Pitta, 2005, p. 25-26): 'the catamorphic symbols (relating to the fall) are those relating to the painful experience of childhood. The fall has to do with fear, pain, vertigo

and punishment'. Pitta explains that, for Bachelard, 'it is the same operation of the human spirit that takes us towards the light and upwards' (Bachelard apud Pitta, 2005, p. 27).

Image 1- Scenography study for projectins



Source: Technical drawing devised by Karen Acioly for the opera Bem no meio, inspired by the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, and realised by set designer Rostand Albuquerque.

### The spaces between the actors' bodies, pause, movement and dance: Bem, Gaia and the narrator, the dynamic circularity of bodies and spaces

One of the languages present in an opera for children is dance, which can create an interface between movement and pause, music and silence. Considering the actors' bodies as spaces of representation and the circle as part of this invisible space of the imaginary "around the actor", I thought of working on the movement and displacements of Bem and Gaia based on the concept of circular movement:

For the actor, the first circle is his body. In it, they rediscover the space of the circle. Body awareness work will sharpen this reality. Whether on the floor, standing or moving, the human body is inscribed in the circle by its own proportions. Each rotation



of the arm, shoulder, ankle and pelvis awakens this fundamental dynamic perception. Frontal, transversal and sagittal, the actor feels that their 'bubble', or 'area' of performance, is linked to the figure of the circle. An enlarged, changing and expanding circle that spreads through space in concentric waves. A circle that also has a centre, because all movement has a primary impulse, the very heart of things' (Fohr; Freixe, 2015, p. 88).

The idea of the invisible circle around the actors' bodies, which reverberates in concentric waves according to their movements, synergises with the perception of the imaginary and its resonances, as we have already seen in Bachelard. Therefore, the movement of these bodies and their respective invisible circles can reverberate even more waves and resonances in the imagination of the actors and the audience when they move and interact, creating circles on top of each other. It was based on this idea that I thought about the movement of the staging, also considering that every movement needs a pause, just like the music of silence, in order to be better heard.

When we add music, which is also invisible, to movement and dance, the imaginary is potentiated and can even reach the point of commotion: 'Imaginary valorisation is then the means by which the world is animated, taken out of its indifference' (Pitta, 2005, p. 45). From this union of artistic forces, we are transported to a state of emotion.

The musician-narrator who occupies the outer point in the show would have to start from the idea that there is a solar system of spiralling instruments around him and, as part of that system, play them. Just like all the instruments there and the bodies of the actors, the narrator will therefore also be in circular motion. We need to consider that all these elements together create powerful centres of reverberation and sensory resonance.

## The content and dramatic arc of digital pills

The possibility of creating image resonances and multiplying the possibility of creating meanings with the use of digital arts meant that the format of minidocs in digital pills brought together a large part of the Bachelardian elements: nuclei of images, which would form other nuclei, intensified by music and the possibility of using the language of animation.

In other words, the format expanded the possibilities of meanings and senses. The richness of the proposal would resonate with the virtual audience through the overlapping of sound languages and visual effects. The visual components that only digital tools can provide are integrated with the other languages, forming the ensemble of opera in person, filmed opera and opera 'animated' through the use of new digital technologies.

The operation of the mini-documentaries in digital pills has shown that it is possible to create a new product within the identification of the opera genre for children, despite the fact that it implies a break with the assembly patterns of traditional shows. Furthermore, the integration of new technologies has brought together previously unheard of expertise for this category of show, while also emphasising the fundamental axes of opera: music, text and staging, in a balance of value. Each of these elements has been opened up, based on the reference of the libretto, to multiple possibilities for choosing languages, including audiovisual and digital media.

## Final considerations

Far from being a formula, opera for children is a discovery, a multi-sensory experience, a fruitful spiral of creating new senses. These senses are, in turn, reverberated in the images, perceptions and emotions of those who are beginning to be introduced to the world, its countless curiosities and mysteries.

It differs from opera for adults in that it is conceived for children in their rich imaginative, spiritual, affective and symbolic universe. It has no intention of restricting itself to any conceptual imprisonment, as it should be an unfailingly attractive sensory experience: simple, communicative and moving, designed for children from the outset.

Opera for children is an anti-traditional art form that has emerged from the original opera in various parts of the world, transforming it. It was recognised with the creation of new repertoires, mainly (and not only) at the beginning of the 21st century, along with the development of new technologies. It's a new subject that escapes what is already known. It has its own characteristics, which are open to cultural

and intercultural diversity, and makes it possible to listen through the imagination. Above all, it conveys musical, scenic, textual and aesthetic poetry.

Opera for children presupposes remarkable encounters: it mixes the unknown and the known, lyrical and popular singing, simple and complex structures, in continuous or discontinuous chronological time, and must strip away prejudices. It must contain elements of the imaginary and symbolism of children and their cultures, in order to allow for nuclei of images and resonances. To create an opera for children, it is advisable to be close to them, the children. Listen to them, understand them, since the child is the master - and compass - of those who create for them. The child in the audience will like to see themselves mirrored, represented on stage. It's also important that the child plays their role, if applicable, with their voice, their vocal range, in their mother tongue, without fearing the use of microphones or the accompaniment of large orchestras.

Performed in small, medium or large formats, it can be in person, audiovisual or digital. It is open to multiple languages and formats, to the pulse of life, to the time of the instant and to the resonance of affection, because it takes into account the dynamics of those on stage and in the audience. The composition, libretto and staging must endeavour to represent it with excellence. Curiously, it's not the theme that defines it, but rather the way it is an opera for children, but rather the poetic way in which it and its approach affect children, how it moves them. It may or may not follow chronological time. It is also known that its running time must be compatible with the intended audience and its rhythm must be interspersed with silences and moments. The libretto can be written by children, adults and children with adults. In the classroom and beyond. It's a pleasant calling card that plants in children the curiosity to learn more about the operatic genre and the desire to return.

## References

ABBATE, Carolyn. *Uma história da ópera*. São Paulo: Cia das Letras, 2015.

ACIOLY, Karen. *A dramaturgia da ópera para crianças: cultura e simbolismos*. Rio de Janeiro: Multifoco, 2022.

BACHELARD, Gaston. *A poética do espaço*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2008.

BACHELARD, Gaston. *A poética do espaço*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2017.

BACHELARD, Gaston. *A filosofia do não; O novo espírito científico; A poética do espaço*. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1978. (Coleção Os pensadores).

BARTHES, Roland. *Anula*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1977.

BRASIL. Ministério da Cultura. MinC divulga as 30 propostas prioritárias aprovadas durante a 4ª Conferência Nacional de Cultura. *Gov.br*, Brasília, DF, 7 maio 2024. Disponível em: <https://www.gov.br/cultura/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/minc-divulga-as-30-propostas-prioritarias-aprovadas-durante-a-4a-conferencia-nacional-de-cultura>. Acesso em: 4 set. 2024.

BULCÃO, Marly. A noção de instante nas obras de Bachelard. *In*: BULCÃO, Marly; CARVALHO, Marcelo de; CESAR, Constança Marcondes; CAMPELLO, André (org.). *A poética de Gaston Bachelard: mergulho na imaginação – devaneio, dinamismo, instante, metamorfose..* Rio de Janeiro: Multifoco, 2021. p. 205-216.

BULCÃO, Marly. Pedagogia e infância. *In*: BULCÃO, Marly; CARVALHO, Marcelo de; CESAR, Constança Marcondes; CAMPELLO, André (org.). *A poética de Gaston Bachelard: mergulho na imaginação – devaneio, dinamismo, instante, metamorfose.* Rio de Janeiro: Multifoco, 2021. p. 413-422.

BULCÃO, Marly; CARVALHO, Marcelo de; CESAR, Constança Marcondes; CAMPELLO, André (org.). *A poética de Gaston Bachelard: mergulho na imaginação – devaneio, dinamismo, instante, metamorfose.* Rio de Janeiro: Multifoco, 2021.

CAMPBELL, Joseph. *O poder do mito*. Tradução de Carlos Felipe Moisés. São Paulo: Palas Athena, 1990.

CARVALHO, Marcelo de. Dinâmica da incerteza: método de um pensamento imprudente. *In*: BULCÃO, Marly; CARVALHO, Marcelo de; Cesar, Constança Marcondes; CAMPELLO, André (org.). *A poética de Gaston Bachelard: mergulho na imaginação – devaneio, dinamismo, instante, metamorfose.* Rio de Janeiro: Multifoco, 2021. p. 336-357.

CHAMPAGNE, Éric. L'opéra pour enfants ou la quête d'identité: commentaire critique sur *L'arche*, d'Isabelle Panneton et Anne Hébert. *Circuit*, Québec, v. 16, n. 2, p. 82-92, 2006. Disponível em: <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/circuit/2006-v16-n2-circuit3623/902400ar/>. Acesso em: 21 mar. 2024.

DAHLHAUS, Carl. *La dramaturgie musicale dans Histoire de l'opéra italien*. v. 6, Liège: Mardaga, 1992.

FOHR, Romain; FREIXE, Guy. *La scène circulaire aujourd'hui*. Lavérune: L'entretemps, 2015.

HARTKOPF, Alessandra. *Ópera brasileira nos séculos XX e XXI: de 1950 a 2008*. 2010. Dissertação (Mestrado em Música) – Centro de Letras e Artes, Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2010.

HELD, David; MCGREW, Anthony. *Prós e contras da globalização*. Tradução de Vera Ribeiro. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2001.

LARROSA, Jorge. *Pedagogia profana*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2013.

LASSUS, Marie Pierre. *Gaston Bachelard musicien: une philosophie des silences et des timbres*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Septentrion, 2010.

MATTELART, Armand. *A globalização da comunicação*. São Paulo: Edusc, 2000.

MORIN, Edgar. *Introdução ao pensamento complexo*. Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2005.

MORIN, Edgar. *O método: a natureza da natureza*. v. 1. Lisboa: Publicações Europa-América, 1989.

PITTA, Danielle P. Rocha. *Iniciação à teoria do imaginário de Gilbert Durand*. Rio de Janeiro: Atlântica, 2005. (Coleção Filosofia).

SADIE, Stanley; TYRRELL, John. Serialism. In: SADIE, Stanley; TYRRELL, John (ed.). *The new grove dictionary of music and musicians*. v. 23. London: Macmillan, 2001. p. 116-131.

SCHMITZ, Theresa. L'opéra jeune public. Stratégies compositionnelles pour transformer l'enfant-spectateur en mélomane. *Transposition*, Paris, n. 2, p. 1-22, 2012. Disponível em: <https://journals.openedition.org/transposition/319>. Acesso em: 6 abr. 2024.

SCHMITZ, Theresa. The discovery of children as a potential audience for Operas. In: HOPKINS, Lucy; MACLEOD, Mark; TURGEON, Wendy (ed.). *Negotiating childhoods*. Leiden: Brill, 2010. p. 211-219. Ebook.

THIÉBAULT, Philippe. Le sentiment dans les poésies extrême-orientale et française: essai philosophique sur l'Imagination et le Symbolique. *Keulmadang*, Paris, 13 jan. 2011. Disponível em: <https://keulmadang.com/2011/01/13/le-sentiment-dans-les-poesies-extreme-orientale-francaise-philippe-thiebault/>. Acesso em: 10 abr. 2024.



ACIOLY, Karen; LUZ, Cristina Rego Monteiro da. A poética do espaço em uma ópera para crianças. *Kalagatos*, Fortaleza, vol.21, n.3, 2024, eK24071, p. 01-19.

Received: 08/2024

Approved: 09/2024