

The Importance of Drama in Orff Schulwerk

By Julie Scott

One more story about my mother, Martha Scott. (Well, I think this is the last one, but I won't make any promises.) It was level II. Rick Layton was our teacher, and near the end of the two weeks, we were ready to dramatize "The Man, His Daughter, and Their Donkey." We had learned the opening song and the travel music; we had heard the story and learned a speech piece with ostinati. It was time to assign roles.

"The man" was Bob Henry, one of two token men in the class.¹ "The daughter" was a young woman who accepted the role with glee. When Rick said, "And who wants to be 'the donkey?'" one hand went up—a little too quickly. It was my mother's. (Later, she would describe it as the role of a lifetime. I never let her forget it, and she didn't want to.)

Everyone took their places to begin the dramatization. Costumes were assembled from out of nowhere, and someone gave "the donkey" a tie, by which she could be led through the various scenes. I have a vivid memory of looking at her—slightly slumped, long face. She was in "relaxed donkey mode"—in no hurry to go anywhere with "the man" or "his daughter."

So, with songs, speech, and instrument pieces learned; opening song practiced; roles assigned; and scenes marked; it was time to create the closing dance. Rick called us all to a circle. Everyone went—except my mother.

Rick began the facilitation of the dance: "Circle or lines?" "Partners or groups?" "Martha, come over here." I looked over just in time to see my mother, still in donkey stance, shake her head. "Martha?" Again, she shook her head, and in a soft voice said, "Come and get me." As we all fell apart with laughter, "the man" went to collect his stubborn "donkey."

¹ Bob Henry later became President of the Texas Music Educators Association.

I believe that dramatization of stories is one of the greatest strengths of Orff Schulwerk. It is the medium that draws all of the other media together. Through dramatization, we sing, perform rhythmic speech, move, and play instruments to tell the story. As they engage in creative play-acting, students also learn lessons about human nature. Brigitte Warner wrote:

By recreating a story on their own, [the students] rise well above the superficial level of “acting out,” since they must probe the story’s meaning first and then identify with the specific problems it represents. In this manner they come to understand the fundamental concerns of mankind, which are always present in these folk stories.²

To “probe the story’s meaning,” students must be given opportunities to discuss, question, and explore the story. It follows then, that dramatization is one of many Orff activities that involve choice and thoughtful decision-making on the part of the students. They enjoy having choices—having some control over what happens in the lesson. Although we give the students direction and suggestions when we are working on a dramatization, many of the decisions about the lines to speak, music to be performed, movement to incorporate, and staging are up to them. There is no script, no pre-composed music, no given stage directions. The ideas and interpretation are those of the students.

So, what is the role of the Orff Schulwerk teacher in the process of acting out a story? Warner wrote: “Play-acting differs from formal acting in that the actors are involved in creating the play.”³ In formal acting, the teacher is the director, but in play-acting, the teacher becomes the facilitator. This means that, just as in other facets of Orff Schulwerk, the teacher relinquishes a great deal of the decision-making to the children. The teacher’s assumptions of how the story

² Brigitte Warner, *Orff Schulwerk: Applications for the Classroom*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 257.

³ *Ibid*, 258.

goes may have to be reconsidered. And more often than not, the interpretations of the students are far more interesting and fresh than the standard interpretations of the adults anyway.

Back to the stubborn “donkey,” who got her way. You see, my mother, as the actress, knew how the story ended. The fate of the donkey, which had been revealed in Rick’s telling of the story, was that she was to be sold at market. The “man” and his “daughter” were setting out on a journey to the village for just that purpose. The wise “donkey,” played in the story by my mother, Martha Scott, understood their plan, and she was not going along willingly. The donkey’s terms were, “Come and get me.” Although they rolled their eyes, Rick, the facilitator and Bob, the “man” surrendered to her terms. As open-minded Orff Schulwerk teachers, they understood that student play-actors must be allowed their interpretations.

Sources

Warner, B. (1991). *Orff Schulwerk: Applications for the classroom*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.