



Welsh National *Opera*

through  
listening eyes

An intimate witness to creativity

"Hywel is a very restless, very boisterous 7 year old boy with autism. He has very little speech. During the session with WNO he heard a violin for the first time. It was magical. He was transfixed. He stood on a chair to get a better view, saying *my turn* and *thank you* repeatedly. He became very involved with the dance. He was more verbal than I have ever heard him, and there was increased eye contact too. It was a learning experience for us both."

Sheila Mullett Class 3, The Hollies School



# through listening eyes

## An intimate witness to creativity

When you watch *Through Listening Eyes*, you're not just witnessing a holiday from a depressing normality. You're witnessing something that happened. When a meaningful moment hits you, it changes you for good. What the parents and carers will tell you is that after these experiences the youngsters are different, they're happy with themselves. They've been in a creative experience, they've expressed themselves, their act of self-expression has been appreciated and incorporated into a greater whole. That experience never leaves them. Feeling themselves valued, they become more purposeful, and move into more effort. You see development – emotional development, social development, physical development – which no-one ever expected to see. This is not a holiday from normality. Things are changed for good. Once the sun has come out, it comes out for good.

**Dilys Price OBE Touch Trust**

The WNO MAX Department does not set out to teach people when *The Magic Flute* was written. We set out to bring out the operatic in every person: Multi-layered artistic skills, spatial communicative gestures, empathy, expression, team work. That's our job. We don't teach people about opera. We're not an education department. But people do learn things.

**Sarah Alexander WNO MAX Director**

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The participants in WNO MAX projects are involved in processes that don't feel like normal work. Collaborating on writing a song is not like writing a poem in an English lesson. It's not marked by the teacher. It's set to music by a professional composer and sung to a live audience. People give themselves over to the process. When the song is performed, you go back to them and you ask, Do you like the lyrics to this song? And they say, *We love them!* And you say, *Well, you wrote them!* And they say, *Oh no we didn't – did we?* You have to show them their own handwriting on the paper to prove to them that they did it. People lose their sense of individual ownership. What they gain is a sense of ensemble, of group ownership. They gain the bigger picture. With Touch Trust, these participants were never going to be able to stand back and say, *I wrote that song.* So we chose to make a film. Their creative act would be the act of engaging with Richard Chew's opera, *Wise Eye*. Working with film, we could capture that engagement. Afterwards when we showed them the film they could say, *I listened, I looked, I made a gesture, and that was my creative act.* And there it is, creatively part of the film. Richard Aylwin's film is created out of these responses. These fresh, original, powerful, beautiful responses. Richard's work is so lyrical, so songlike, he was able to turn these responses into a visual song.

**Sarah Alexander** WNO MAX Director



As a result of the WNO workshops, in many cases staff have come to see the children in a different light. They saw children showing potential in areas where before they had shown none. **Sue Gilby** Tŷ Gwyn School



Artists don't bring any assumptions about a child's ability. With every new project we create a fresh canvas for people to make a mark on. This gives a fresh perspective on people's creativity. Kids who teachers say won't do well, in fact they thrive. They've been offered a new way of being themselves. **Sarah Alexander** WNO MAX Director



During the workshops the children interacted with each other in a very special way, that is not often seen in special schools. This was a huge achievement for many of the children, who in some cases do not normally interact at all with other children. **Sue Gilby** Tŷ Gwyn School

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I went to Berllan Deg School to show Richard's film to the able-bodied children who sung so beautifully on our recording. To make sure they understood the film, I asked them to make a list of all the things they could do that the children who appear in the film couldn't. They could sing, they told me. They could run across the playground. They could eat lunch without assistance. The list went on and on, this list of things they could do that the children who appear in the film could not. But everyone was agreed, none of this meant that those children couldn't have a laugh, couldn't enjoy themselves, couldn't feel miserable, couldn't cry. But we forget these things. That's why the film is so moving and, in a way, why it is shocking too. It makes you tremble a bit to see that the emotional world of the participants in this film is exactly the same as our own. But of course it is!

**Sarah Alexander** WNO MAX Director

Richard Aylwin saw them. Not the outside, not the skin, but them. It's the opposite of patronising. We spend so much time being patronising without even realising it. We spend so much time praising the most intelligent, the richest, the most beautiful bodies. Richard was able to perceive them. It was beautiful. He didn't hide the disability but, somehow, when you saw the film, you knew the disability was not of the essence.

**Dilys Price** OBE Touch Trust

One of the strongest responses we have from adults who see *Through Listening Eyes*, who are also regular opera goers, is that they can't speak about it. They're stunned by the participants. The film gives them permission to watch these people. It's difficult, and it's joyous. But is it opera? Well, it's profoundly emotionally engaging, it's a little bit shocking, it makes you think about society differently, and it's all done through music. Your involvement with the participants precisely follows the emotional contours of the music. Richard Aylwin hasn't cheated; if someone is thrilled in the film, that's because they were thrilled, and by exactly the bit of Richard Chew's music that you're hearing. It might not be what an opera audience is expecting to see but, in a very special way, it's the perfect contemporary opera. **Sarah Alexander** WNO MAX Director



I feel that in twenty years time we're going to look back and we're going to wonder how we could have left disabled people in the dark ages in the way that we have. I think this film is seminal. We'll look back to *Through Listening Eyes* and say, That film changed things for people and children with profound and multiple disabilities. Things will never be the same again. At the moment it's a small group of us, it's Touch Trust and it's Welsh National Opera and their MAX Department. But when people see it, it's going to be before the video and after the video. **Dilys Price** OBE Touch Trust



A film about an opera about a fox called *Wise Eye*, *Through Listening Eyes* is a unique testament to human creativity.

During a series of residencies in 2004, WNO and Touch Trust engineered a life-changing encounter between a remarkable group of young people and adults, and a remarkable group of artists. The result is this extraordinary film, which no-one with an interest in opera or the visual arts should miss. It is a work of rare intimacy and haunting visual intensity.

WNO and Touch Trust would like to thank their collaborators Hijinx Theatre Company, Diversions Dance Company, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, Academi, Tŷ Gwyn School, Craig-Y-Parc School, The Laurels Bungalow, The Hollies School, The Tremorfa Dance Group at Sbectrwm and Ysgol y Berllan Deg.

*Wise Eye* was originally commissioned by WNO in 2002, as a response to Janáček's opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*, for its work with special needs groups.

WNO thanks The Equitable Charitable Trust, BBC Children in Need, Kids Out, JPMorgan Fleming Educational Trust, The Pethybridge Community Fund and The Grocers' Charity for supporting the *Wise Eye* commission.

Ffilm am opera am lwynog o'r enw *Wise Eye* yw *Drwy Lygaid sy'n Gwrando*, sy'n tystio i greadigrwydd dyn.

Yn ystod cyfnodau preswyl yn 2004, trefnodd OCC a Touch Trust rhyngddynt gyfarfodydd syfrdanol rhwng grŵp arbennig iawn o bobl ifanc ac oedolion, a grŵp rhyfeddol o artistiaid. Y canlyniad yw'r ffilm anghyffredin hon, a dylai unrhyw un sy'n hoff o opera neu'r celfyddydau gweledol ymdrechu i'w gweld. Mae'n waith anarferol o gynnes sy'n llawn dwyster gweledol dwfn.

Mae OCC a Touch Trust yn dymuno diolch i'w cydweithwyr, Cwmni Theatr Hijinx, Cwmni Dawns Diversions, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, Academi, Ysgol Tŷ Gwyn, Ysgol Craig-y-Parc, Byngalo The Laurels, Ysgol The Hollies, Grŵp Dawns Tremorfa yn Sbectrwm a Ysgol Y Berllan Deg.

Cafodd *Wise Eye* ei gomisiynu'n wreiddiol gan OCC yn 2002, fel ymateb i'r opera *The Cunning Little Vixen* gan Janáček ar gyfer ei waith gyda grwpiau anghenion arbennig. Mae OCC yn dymuno diolch i Ymddiriedolaeth Elusennol Charitable, BBC Plant Mewn Angen, Kids Out, Ymddiriedolaeth Addysgol JPMorgan, Cronfa Gymunedol Pethybridge ac Elusen y Groseriaid am gefnogi'r comisiwn *Wise Eye*.