

# CALGARY OPERA



## HANSEL AND GRETEL

INSIDER'S GUIDE

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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge that we live, work and play on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut’ina, the Iyârhe Nakoda Nations, the Otipemisiwak Métis Government of the Métis Nation within Alberta Districts 5 & 6, and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.

# KEY IDEAS

- Playing with the idea of scale, **stage director Brenna Corner wanted to create a world where the adventures of children and adults are interchangeable:** the lessons that Hansel and Gretel learn could easily be those that adults must also undertake. Ultimately, listeners of all ages discover that **love and connection create safety, combat isolation, and lead to personal transformation.**
- **Calgary Opera’s production of *Hansel and Gretel* is a collaboration with the Old Trout Puppet Workshop,** an internationally acclaimed creative ensemble that brings stories to life with puppetry and puppet artists. Any character who is not a human is a puppet! Look for characters like the Witch, the Sandman, the Dew Fairy, the Will-o-Wisps and other forest creatures. The Old Trouts also created the sets, costumes, and props for the production.
- **Puppetry asks us to use our imaginations:** children intuitively bring worlds to life in their imaginations. In this opera, older youth and adults must also rely on their imaginations to accept that inanimate objects become real. **Director Brenna Corner also wanted this production to feel like a pop-up book springing to life,** so be sure to watch for visual clues, like the scenery, that suggest this idea.
- ***Hansel and Gretel* appeared in a collection of German folk stories published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812.** The story was published in follow-up editions with slight changes: for instance, in one version, a white duck carries the siblings across a great lake on their return home. Stories that were shared through the oral tradition often change in slight ways, depending on the teller. Read the [Grimm version](#) first, and you will notice how the librettist (person who wrote the words) of this opera also added her own changes to the story!
- While the opera first premiered in 1893, **the theme of poverty and food scarcity portrayed on stage are regrettably still a concern around the world today.** As you watch the opera, consider how the artists portray the sources and consequences of, and their resilience to, these real world challenges.
- **The role of Hansel is performed by a woman, which in opera we call a “pants role” or a “trouser role.”** A child’s voice is not yet fully developed and would not be able to handle the vocal demands of the role, while a fully developed male voice would sound too much like an adult. In these cases, adult women play the role of male youth. (Another example is Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*.)

# CHARACTERS

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	ABOUT
<b>Hansel</b> A young boy, the brother of Gretel	mezzo-soprano	Hansel is playful, brave, and protective of his sister.
<b>Gretel</b> A young girl, the sister of Hansel	soprano	Gretel is optimistic and encouraging, and not afraid to stand up to the Witch.
<b>Peter</b> Hansel and Gretel's father	baritone	Unsteady revenues from Father's broom-making business often leave his family hungry. His spiritual faith helps sustain him in difficult times.
<b>Gertrud</b> Hansel and Gretel's mother	mezzo-soprano	Quick to lose her temper, Mother sends the children away in the woods in anger, only to later realize her mistake.
<b>The Nibbling Witch</b> A witch who lives in the Ilsenstein forest	mezzo-soprano (or tenor)	The Witch lives in a house made of sweets in the middle of the woods. She lures children into her home and then bakes them into gingerbread.
<b>The Sandman &amp; Dew Fairy</b> Two magical beings who appear in the woods	soprano or mezzo-soprano	The Sandman comes to lull the children to sleep while the Dew Fairy wakes them up.
<b>The Gingerbread Children</b>	children's chorus	The Gingerbread Children are young children who have been put under a spell by the Witch.

**Calgary Opera attracts world class talent to perform for our audience**, including local singers and McPhee Artists who apprentice at Calgary Opera. For more information about the performers who bring these characters to life, please visit us [here](#).

# THE STORY

## **Overture - Prelude to the Story**

*In this production, an additional storyline has been woven into the overture:*

Once upon a time near a town not too far away, fourteen children lose their way in a dark forest, where a witch is rumoured to live. For years parents insist their children never go into the haunted wood. Eventually people begin to forget about the lost children and dangers of the wood.

## **Act I**

Hansel and Gretel do their chores while ignoring hunger pangs; the family is poor with little to eat. Determined to stay positive, Gretel teaches Hansel how to dance—but the two soon get carried away and forget their chores. In her anger at discovering the children’s chores cast aside, Mother accidentally knocks over the jug of milk meant for the evening meal. Frustrated and upset, she sends her children to the woods to gather strawberries. Alone, she expresses her sorrow that she is unable to feed her children and asks God for help.

Father enters with a full bounty of delicious food, earned through a successful day of selling brooms. He asks where the children are—to his shock, Mother has sent them into the mysterious forest, where a dangerous Witch supposedly dwells. Father explains that the Witch lures children with sweets, only to bake them into gingerbread and then eat them! Mother is horrified, and the two venture into the woods in search of their children.



San Diego Opera, *Hansel and Gretel*, 2020

## Act II

Time passes quickly as Hansel and Gretel search for strawberries in the forest. Soon, it is dark and the children realize they may not be alone. Fourteen magical creatures called will-o-wisps approach them. The Sandman shoos them away and sprinkles Hansel and Gretel with golden dream-sand. Sleepily, the two say their prayers and dream of fourteen angels guarding them in their sleep.

## Act III

The Dew Fairy appears and wakes Hansel and Gretel from their sleep. While looking for something to eat, the two children come upon a giant gingerbread house, decorated with delicious treats. As they begin nibbling at the edges of the house, the Witch appears and lures them inside. Once inside, she traps them and begins fattening them up to eat. Scared but resourceful, the two work together to invent an escape— but will they be able to outwit the Witch in time?



Vancouver Opera, *Hansel and Gretel*, 2016

# INTERPRETING HANSEL & GRETEL

Some of the first popular collections of German folk tales were collected and published by two academics, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, known as the Brothers Grimm. Their telling of Hansel and Gretel made its way into the hands of Adelheid Wette, the sister of the composer Engelbert Humperdinck, who first asked her brother to create a series of songs based on the story. After revisions, the work became a fully-fledged opera, and one that is not only for children. With rich and full orchestration, it demands vocal stamina of the two leads and also poses many important questions to adult listeners.



Illustrated by  
Frank Adams, 1925

Even though Wette softened the original story into an enchanting fairy-tale opera, folk tales in their uncensored forms often depict dark narratives which psychoanalysts like Carl Jung interpreted as metaphors for the human psyche and its transformation. In Hansel and Gretel, every character yearns for food and sustenance. As beautifully stated by [Joseph Lee](#), [Lisa Marchiano](#), and [Deborah Stewart](#), a trio of Jungian analysts, the symbolism of hunger makes us wonder: what might we be starving for? Have we left our inner children to fend for themselves in the wilderness of the unconscious? Echoing the “rite of passage” myth, the story of Hansel and Gretel shows what happens when the two siblings undertake the trials of the unknown. They plunge into the darkness of their own fears, overcome temptation, and find their way back home, to wholeness.

What is the source of their courage and resourcefulness, however? While Humperdinck turned toward the spiritual sustenance of a higher power, in this production, the focus shifts to the redemptive power of love. In a fairy-tale world where children go on dangerous journeys meant for adults, love for one another keeps them safe. Rewarded for their valour and loyalty, the siblings’ efforts affect not only themselves but ripple positively onto the other captive children who have been under the witch’s spell.

Taken literally, Hansel and Gretel is an exciting escape into the world of the child’s imagination. Taken symbolically, it is a call to awaken to one’s own inner world and to undertake the important work of addressing what we hunger for most.

# DIVING DEEPER

Continue the discussion before and after the performance  
by exploring resources such as these:

## **The Complete First Edition: The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brothers**

**Grimm** Translated & Edited by Jack Zipes | Read [here](#)

This acclaimed English translation of the classic Brothers Grimm stories is beautifully illustrated and proves a delightful read.

## **Engelbert Humperdinck: Hänsel und Gretel** | Watch [here](#)

A beautiful traditional production of Engelbert Humperdinck's opera *Hänsel und Gretel* sung in the original German with English subtitles.

## **Aidan Lang Introduces Hansel & Gretel** | Listen [here](#)

Former General Director of Seattle Opera Aidan Lang offers an insightful introduction to the opera *Hansel and Gretel*.

## **Vancouver Opera review: Puppets, reimagined score lift fairy tale classic to realm of extraordinary** | Read [here](#)

Interested in learning more about arts writing? Read this review of stage director Brenna Corner's *Hansel and Gretel* for Vancouver Opera.

## **An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales** | Read [here](#)

Swiss Jungian analyst and scholar Marie-Louise von Franz has published a wealth of materials on the interpretation of fairy tales; this is a great primer for exploring fairy tales as a reflection of the psyche and to contextualize further reading.

## **Hansel and Gretel** | Listen [here](#)

Intended for older youth and adults, this podcast offers an insightful Jungian interpretation of *Hansel and Gretel* and invites us to consider how we handle our inner hungers.

## **Jungian Ever After: Hansel & Gretel** | Listen [here](#)

Another compelling podcast by Jungian analysts exploring abandonment and resilience in *Hansel and Gretel* and how they relate to current events.

# ABOUT THE COMPOSER

**Who is the composer? The person who writes the music of an opera.**

On September 1, 1854, **Engelbert Humperdinck** (ENG-el-bayrt HOOM-per-dinck) **was born in Seiburg, in what would later become Germany.** He began composing at an early age and although his parents preferred that he study architecture, he enrolled in music classes at the Cologne Conservatory beginning in 1872. Four years later, he was studying in Munich, one of the prime musical centers of the time.



Humperdinck later travelled to Italy where he met **Richard Wagner, a composer who had been revolutionizing the world of opera with his large-scale works and new compositional techniques.** The two worked closely together: Wagner invited Humperdinck to assist his production of *Parsifal* in 1880, and the young composer also tutored Wagner's son in music theory.

**Humperdinck was greatly influenced by Wagner,** whose musical style can be found in the opera *Hänsel und Gretel*, which found immediate success when it was premiered in 1893. The first two performances of the opera were also conducted by two top conductors of the day: Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler.

Hansel and Gretel (as it is referred to in English-language productions) **began originally as incidental music and songs for a play that Humperdinck's sister, Adelheid Wette, had been writing for her children.** Known as a *Singspiel* (a sing-play), it had 16 songs and piano accompaniment, and he presented it to his fiancée Louise Taxer as an engagement present. Seeing its musical potential, Humperdinck undertook orchestrating the world and fleshing it out to create a full-scale opera.

**The opera is often associated with Christmas,** as its earliest performances (and many performances often to this day) are presented around the Christmas holiday. **Many tuneful melodies are based on German folk songs,** and several of the most recognizable numbers include the Evening Prayer duet and Witch's Ride.

**Learn more by exploring:** [Engelbert Humperdinck](#) at The Kennedy Centre

# ABOUT THE LIBRETTIST

**Who is the librettist? The person who writes the words (dialogue and lyrics) of an opera.**

What does “libretto” mean? In Italian, libretto means “little book.” Early Italian opera houses printed off “little books” for audience members that had all the words written inside, so that attendees could follow what was being sung.

**Adelheit Wette** (ah-del-HAIT VET-tuh) was born September 4, 1858 in Siegburg, in what is now known as Germany. **She was an author, composer, and folklorist**, now most recognized as the librettist for the fairy-tale opera *Hansel and Gretel*, composed by her older brother Engelbert Humperdinck.

In April 1890, Wette asked her older brother to compose music to a short play she had written about the Grimms Brothers’ fairy tale, *Hänsel und Gretel*, which **her two teenage daughters would act out for a private Christmas celebration**. The family was so delighted that they encouraged the two to develop it into a full-length opera.

**Wette was an author with a strong interest in folksong and fairy tales**, and her literary gifts shone through in transforming the play into a libretto for the full-scale opera. In particular, Wette was able to retain the work’s unpretentious character, of a play created for a family gathering at Christmas. **She also softened the darker undertones of the original story and added characters such as the Sandman and Dew Fairy**. It is supposedly from this operatic version that the Witch’s house was transformed from plain bread to gingerbread, which has become a defining characteristics not only of the opera, but of the story itself.



Beyond her artistic contributions, **Wette was also known for her involvement in social causes**. She dedicated herself to philanthropy and championed issues related to children’s welfare, leaving a lasting impact beyond the world of music.

**Learn more by reading about Adelheit Wette [here](#) and [here](#).**

# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Use discussion and class activities to explore the questions the opera *Hansel and Gretel* poses to listeners of all ages:

**Begin with your sensory experience of attending an opera:** What stood out to you about the opera? What caught your attention? Share your thoughts with a friend.

**Choose a character that you identify with: Hansel, Gretel, Father, Mother, or the Witch.**

- Analyze the motivations and repercussions of your character's actions.
- What is an important turning point for your character? Write a letter or speech to another character describing your feelings at this turning point.
- Write an alternate ending based on your character choosing a different path forward from this turning point.

**What do we learn about the opera from the overture?**

- Close your eyes and listen once more to the opera [overture](#) (the opening instrumental music). Can you hear different characters, moods, or actions represented in the instrumental melodies and rhythms?
- Can you hear parts of the overture that sound like: a prayer, a dance, or something else?

**Poverty and food scarcity, regrettably, are still challenges that many people around the world face today.** Consider what you learned about this critical issue in the opera and how you can play a role to help someone in need.

**Fairy tales like *Hansel & Gretel* have important life lessons embedded in the stories. What does the opera *Hansel & Gretel* suggest about the process of growing up?**

- What age do you think Hansel and Gretel are?
- What danger signs do they ignore? What are the consequences?
- How have they grown in their independence and decision-making by the time they return home?
- What are the results of their bravery and efforts?

Although not the only interpretation of this opera, **the composer Engelbert Humperdinck and librettist Adelheid Wette suggested that spiritual faith played an important role in overcoming challenges.** For example:

- In the original text, Father sings: “When past bearing is our grief, Then ’tis Heaven will send relief!” Gretel reminds Hansel of this as well.
- Mother also prays for help to feed her children.
- The Evening Prayer music opens and closes the opera and weaves its way through it in many guises.

For readers interested in this perspective, consider reading [this personal essay](#) and reflecting on the questions it presents readers.

**Lingering questions?** Send us a note or join our opera discovery programs like Opera Buddies and Unpacking Opera to learn more.

**Additional Lesson Plans & Resources:**

- Metropolitan Opera [Study Guide & Lesson Plans](#)
- Arizona Opera [Study Guide & Lesson Plans](#)
- Mid Wales Opera [Hansel and Gretel Resource Page](#)
- Chicago Lyric Opera [Hansel and Gretel Resource Page](#)

# DISCOVERING OPERA

**Opera is a vibrant and ever-changing artform that combines the dramatic intensity of the theatre, heightened through music and singing.**

- Operas can be long or short, with any number of people involved.
- Operas can be sung in any language.
- Operas can tell stories about any time, place, person, or issue.
- Operas are still being written today.

Operas are created by the cast, crew, and artistic production team including:

- composers, who write the music
- librettists, who write the words or “libretto”
- directors
- conductors
- singers
- instrumentalists
- dancers
- set, lighting, special effects designers
- costume and makeup designers
- fight and intimacy coordinators
- choreographers
- stage managers and technical crew
- and the audience



**Each person brings who they are as a person to the creation of an opera.  
Their individual contributions shape the performance.**



**Operas are not typically autobiographical, although they do use stories and music to express the personal struggles and ideals of the creators.** They often also comment on important social concerns of the creators' time.

Sometimes stories from cultures not of the creators' own were used to convey universal themes. In these cases, the creators relied on imagination and empathy to enter the emotional world of someone whose specific experiences they never lived through.

When this is the case, there are also important ideas to reflect on, including:

- Who is telling whose story?
- How are they telling it?
- For what purpose?

In recent years, opera creators prefer to share their own stories or to collaborate with those whose stories they would like to tell. As such, opera also presents an important opportunity to think critically about art, as well as to go beyond the opera itself and learn more about the history, language, traditions, and stories of those represented.



## **UNDERSTANDING THE MUSIC OF OPERA**

We understand music on its own terms by making music! By singing its melodies and harmonies, playing it and especially by improvising, we bring the music into our ears, bodies, and spirits.

To increase our musical understanding, we begin by learning by heart the melodies and rhythms we encounter. As the music of more artists becomes familiar, we begin to encounter unfamiliar music with more musical understanding.

**Whether you've heard an opera once or a hundred times, there's always more to discover.**

# WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE

**Whether you're brand new, or have been a subscriber for years, you're welcome at the opera.** Here's how you can get the most out of your visit:

## **WHAT TIME SHOULD I ARRIVE?**

We recommend you plan to arrive at the venue 45 minutes prior to the show start time. This will allow for time to find parking and take your seat without risk of missing any part of the performance.

## **WHAT TIME DOES THE SHOW START?**

Invited Dress Rehearsals at the Jubilee Auditorium start promptly at 7:00 pm.

## **WHERE IS THE THEATRE?**

Visit our [Getting Here](#) page for more information about our venues.

## **WHERE DO I PARK?**

Visit our [Getting Here](#) page for more information about parking at our various venues.

## **ARE FOOD AND DRINKS ALLOWED INTO THE AUDITORIUM?**

Drinks are allowed in the auditorium, provided they are in plastic containers.

Food is available for purchase in the lobby during intermission, although it may not be consumed in the theatre.



## **WHAT ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE AT THE THEATRE?**

The Jubilee Auditorium is fully wheelchair accessible (with the exception of the 2nd balcony) with ramps available at the north entrance. Assisted listening devices are available at the coat check. Please view our [Accessibility](#) page for more detailed information about accessibility features.

## **WHAT IS A DRESS REHEARSAL?**

A dress rehearsal is the final on-stage rehearsal of an opera before it premieres to the public. A dress rehearsal includes nearly full production values (with costumes, sets, lights, orchestra), but the show is still a work in progress.

Some of the seats are blocked off so that the production team (director, stage manager, lighting designer, choreographer, music staff, and others) can watch the show from the theatre, take notes, and communicate with the backstage crew. Should anything need adjusting, the rehearsal might be stopped or a part repeated to make sure that it is perfect.

## **WHAT DO I WEAR?**

You'll find people at the opera wearing a variety of styles, from jeans to jewels. Although many people enjoy dressing up when they go to the opera, there's no mandatory dress code.

## **HOW WILL I KNOW WHAT THEY'RE SAYING?**

Surtitles will be projected above the stage, which translate the Italian words into English as the singers are performing. This is similar to watching a film in a foreign language with subtitles turned on.

## **DO OPERA SINGERS USE MICROPHONES?**

In almost all operas, microphones are not needed. Instead, opera singers use their voices and bodies to naturally amplify the resonance of their vocal folds; they can be heard above the orchestra in large halls without amplification.

**To learn more, visit [calgaryopera.com/faq](http://calgaryopera.com/faq).**

# ABOUT CALGARY OPERA

Founded in 1972, Calgary Opera is one of Canada's most innovative and ambitious professional opera companies. With more than 50 events during the 2025-26 season, curious listeners of all ages can experience the wonder of opera all throughout the school year, whether as grand events at the Jubilee Auditorium or in diverse community experiences throughout our city and beyond.

Since 2007, we've offered an annual school tour production, performing for young audiences around Southern Alberta.

For over 25 years, we've offered the in-school music program Let's Create an Opera, reaching over 60,000 students.

This season, we are thrilled to partner with teachers and students at three schools for Let's Create an Opera, which will culminate in an original children's operas performed in English, French, and Blackfoot.



Throughout its 52-year history, Calgary Opera has championed new works and Canadian artists and stories. We have produced:

- 8 new works, including the internationally acclaimed opera "Filumena"
- 27 new productions (new versions of existing operas), and
- 8 Canadian premieres.

Calgary Opera's mission is to serve its entire community with innovative and inspiring stories told through the bold medium of opera. We're thrilled you'll be joining us!

**To stay connected and learn more, sign up for our newsletter [here](#).**

# PHOTO CREDITS

**Page 5** Sara Gartland, Blythe Gaisser, and Joel Sorensen in San Diego Opera's 2020 performance of *Hansel and Gretel*. J. Kat Photo, Inc.

**Page 6** Vancouver Opera, *Hansel and Gretel*, 2016. Tim Matheson.

**Page 7** Illustration of Hansel and Gretel by Frank Adam, 1925.

**Page 9** Portrait of Engelbert Humperdinck. Sourced from Kennedy Centre website.

**Page 10** Portrait of Adelheid Wette. Sourced from Wikipedia.

**Page 13** *Right:* Lucia Cesaroni and Talise Trevigne in Calgary Opera's *The Marriage of Figaro*. HarderLee Photography. 2023. *Bottom:* Audience members attending Calgary Opera's WonderLand. 2024.

**Page 14** Students participate in Calgary Opera's *Let's Create an Opera*.

**Page 15** Canva image used with permission.

**Page 17** *Upper right:* Calgary Opera's Amahl and the Night Visitors  
*Lower left:* Students participate in Calgary Opera's Let's Create an Opera

**For more information, contact:**

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