



Matt Peacock
Chief executive of Streetwise Opera
Photo: Tadashi Okouchi

Streetwise Opera
<http://www.streetwiseopera.org/>



Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

2009.12.4

Homeless and Artists Working Together Streetwise Opera

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Streetwise Opera (SWO) is a British social art organization established in 2002. In addition to presenting a full-scale opera production once a year with a cast of professional musicians and participants from homeless centers, SWO also holds music workshops on a regular basis at cooperating homeless centers as a means to help homeless people toward social independence and self-reliance. SWO’s founder, Matt Peacock, was recently among 30 top social entrepreneurs and community activists featured in Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s book *Britain’s Everyday Heroes*. Still in his mid-30s, Peacock started SWO as an outgrowth of his experience from years of working simultaneously as a music journalist and homeless shelter worker with the aim of using his expertise in the field of music to help homeless become involved in society again and change people’s preconceptions about the homeless and the reasons for homelessness. We spoke with Peacock about SWO’s activities on the occasion of his recent visit to Japan with his organization’s first video work, *My Secret Heart*, created in collaboration with more than 100 homeless from around the UK.

(Interviewer: Kyoko Iwaki)

In the United Kingdom today there are said to be about 700,000 households needing welfare support, including some 500 “rough sleepers” (homeless living on the streets) and approximately 400,000 homeless living in temporary welfare shelters. Streetwise Opera (hereafter SWO) was founded in London in 2002 with the aim of providing support to these people living in harsh conditions through music. As the founder and Chief Executive of this group, can you tell us about its present activities?

At present, SWO is engaged in two basic types of activities. The first is the stage performances we mount once a year created through the workshops with professional artists and homeless people and performed mainly by the homeless people as the actors and stagehands. These performances have been held each year since the first production, *Canticles*, performed at Westminster Cathedral in 2002, using music by Benjamin Britten. That first production was very well received artistically, with the theater critics of a national newspaper giving it a 5-star rating. On the same page of that newspaper a concert by Madonna was given only a 3-star rating (laughs). In other words, our approach is different from many social art groups that say the meaning is in participation, not the artistic quality of the performances themselves. I think anyone who gives homeless the opportunity to participate in works knows that there will

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Workshop for residents in Kotobuki-cho,
Yokohama City (September 2, 2009)



Workshop offered for artists and people who
are working as a workshop leader (at Yoko-
hama Nigiwai-za, September 3, 2009)



be social benefits through the communication and self-esteem it gives these people. But I believe that if you can put on artistic work that is also of high artistic quality it will open up so many more benefits for the participants, because they feel respected. And we actually had participants in this year's SWO performance saying that they felt they had gained respect they don't normally have.

Then there is a second type of activity we are involved in that is even more important than these yearly performances, and that is the workshops we do on a regular basis at 11 centers for the homeless. We have 30 professional musicians working as out workshop leaders, and they do 2-hour workshops every week at the same time on the same day. This regularity is important. That is because of the tremendous passion they bring to this opportunity to perform once a year. That intensity is greater than average people. Seeing how serious they are made me realize how important regularity and consistency is in bringing mental and emotional support to the homeless. So you could say that the two key policies of our project are Respect and Regularity.

In Japan, 90% of the homeless are men and 80% of those are over the age of 50. In the UK, the 90% male figure is the same but the age demographic is very different, with 80% being under the age of 45. What are the main factors that lead to homelessness in the UK?

Often there are a number of interrelated factors involved in persons becoming homeless. So it is hard to make generalizations. But if you do try to analyze it, the majority are people who have been institutionalized at one point in their lives, they may have been children in care, or it could be that they went to prison or were in the army. A large proportion are people who go into the streets have been in the army. This is a kind of interesting fact, because a lot of people who have experienced warfare tend to have emotional damage. And they may have spent several years not worrying about where they are living or buying food and all. So that is a big problem.

A huge amount of young people get into trouble. A lot of women go through Women's Aid—which is a charity NPO—when they become the victims of violence. And they find themselves in a homeless situation. And you have marriage breakdown, which is a big factor. And then you have men whose marriage is finished. What usually what happens in the UK in the case of a divorce is that the woman almost always gets the house, especially if there are children involved. Then the men don't have anywhere to live, they lose their jobs and spiral downward from there. Alcohol and drugs is another factor, but that usually happens as a secondary problem after people have been on the street.

You also have a lot of refugees and other people who have fallen out of the benefit system. There is also a huge amount of mental problems. About 40% of the people we work with have mental health issues that can learning problems or undiagnosed psychosis or schizophrenia or various levels of depression. And once people get on the street there is a massive increase in depression, as you would expect. A study I read recently said that something like 80% of the people on the streets do self harm or have suicidal tendencies.

The support structure in the UK is very sophisticated, in a way. It started off with churches mainly and the Christian religion helping out. Today there is nationwide system of homeless centers and people can go to them and get lodging and go through a structured strategy of support. Those who are ready to move forward they will be

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put on a housing list and if they are lucky they can get a house or a flat in about six months. But that is only for those who are 100% ready to move forward. If they are not, it will be meaningless even if they get a place to live.

Community art activities (creative activities using art for community activation or for improving quality of life for the handicapped, elderly and children) have been popularized since about 30 years ago in the UK. Have there also been art activities to improve conditions for the homeless for some time now?

One of the organizations that inspired me to start SWO, an organization named Card-board Citizens, had been doing theater with the homeless from as long as 25 years ago. There are also two or three other arts organizations supporting the homeless. But what they do is called Forum Theater. What they do is make plays about the problems confronting the homeless, like drugs. So it is completely different method from what we are doing when we stage operas with the music of Britten and Mahler.

In any event, it has only been in about the last five years that the government has begun to recognize that arts can be used to help the homeless. Before, it was very clear what to do: you give them a house or a job. But there were problems with that. When these people got a flat they didn't even know what to do with the new shiny pots and pans. They didn't have the social skills to stay there, so a lot of people come back to being homeless. So they began to realize that along with the practical help these people needed more personal help. That is where the art came in, and it came to be used to help the homeless.

Can you give us an example from experiences in your creative work in the SWO program of how homeless people can make progress through encounters with the arts?

I often give the example of one person we worked with who had been living on the streets for a long time. He had very serious mental health problems. He always went around in the same clothes and had all of his possessions were in his coat pockets. And he never took off that coat. But we were doing a [SWO] performance and I asked him to take off the coat, because I wanted to put a costume on him. I told him that I knew he didn't ever do that but could he do it just this once. And he did take it off. When the people from the homeless center saw that, they couldn't believe it. He had only taken off his jacket, which may not seem very important, but that was the biggest change that he had had in ten years, to feel that he didn't need that coat. So, sometimes it is very difficult to measure the value of what the arts can bring. You have to think in a more holistically about what it means for a person. It is not always just about a house.

At present, what projects are SWO cooperating with the government on?

I am having conversations with the Department of Communities Local Government (DCLG) through which the government has developed a strategy for homelessness, and there is now a big section about positive activity and SWO has a section in that and through that we have been able to educate and drive policy in the government for them to recognize the value of the arts.

The government wants to reduce rough sleepers (people who sleep in the street) down to zero by 2012, which is the year of the London Olympics. If you are a cynic, you might think that this is just because the spotlight is going to be on England [with

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the Olympics] and you don't want any poor people on the streets on the television [coverage]. This is a good aim but there are some aspects of it that I consider problematic. Because if you get these people off the streets, then the government will get a pat on the back and society will think that the homeless problem has been cured. But that will not eliminate the problem of homelessness. In the UK there is a large population of the "hidden homeless" who are not sleeping on the streets but in temporary facilities or homes for the homeless. There are 800 times more of this type of homeless than those that are actually sleeping on the streets. These people are very isolated, and if you don't solve this problem, you can't say that the homeless problem has really been solved. I am not saying that the government's policies are all bad. The government is clearly beginning to recognize the value of the activities of groups like SWO in the arts. And we are glad that this brings attention to SWO, because it helps us get funding and move forward. Because we can then say that we are working in line with government policy when we are doing fund raising.

What is the current annual budget of SWO and the breakdown of how it is used?

Our total annual budget for SWO is about £500,000 (approx. 820,000 USD). About 20% of that comes from the government funding from the Arts Council. Then about 60% comes from trusts and foundations, which is grants from private, not government sources. The rest comes from earned incomes from the centers and some corporate support. In all we have a diverse range of about 30 funding sources. About 90% of the production cost for our once-a-year performances comes from this funding. Last year we charged an entrance fee for our performance, but that still only amounted to about 10% of the actual production cost. And even that has to be recorded a surplus instead of profit and used for the next year's performances, because SWO is a charity. We don't have any core income at all. So, in some aspects we try to get funding from a diverse range of funders. It reduces risk. Even our largest grants are only for three years, so we can't afford to become too dependent on a single funder. Because, if that grant ends, we can't operate anymore. So, we have to avoid that kind of situation.

You also work with the Arts Council England. What kind of support do you get from them specifically?

The Arts Council England has been really supportive of us. But, we are not like many of the organizations they work with. The way the Council is structured in the last few years, they have several major programs; one of which has the Music department and the Visual Arts department, etc., and then they have another program is about social engagement through the arts. We are involved in these programs, so it is hard for people to work out who we should be talking to.

Also there are regional centers, and since our office is in London we usually talk with the London but our biggest work is in Newcastle. That makes it difficult as well, because we are talking in London about things going on in Newcastle. So that makes communication complex. But each year we apply for funding and each year they are giving us more. So, they are very supportive of our work. They give several kinds of grants. One of them is project grants (Grants for the arts), which is what we are getting, and another is Regular funding for organizations, or RFOs, but we are not a part of that yet. Eventually, I am looking to become a RFO.

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SWO does workshops in 11 homeless centers around the country, in Newcastle, London, Luton, Nottingham, Manchester, etc. What kind of partnership do you have with these centers?

We run our workshops in the centers, so we are a resident company in the center. In all the workshops that we run, we always insist that the center support people are on hand to look after the practical needs of the people we are just supplying the art. That is the relationship we have. We can't work without the support workers there. So we choose centers that have that kind of support system to do our workshops. As for how we chose the centers we work at, there is no single reason the 11 centers we are presently working at were chosen. We don't necessarily choose centers that have a high appreciation of the arts. Sometimes we have identified areas that we wanted to work in. There are some very deprived areas in the UK and it is often more interesting to work in those areas. It is more challenging.

On the positive side we have a model that works and it has a good track record and quite a good reputation. We need more funding but, practically, on the ground, we could work in 50 centers next year. On the downside, I wonder if that would dilute the quality of what we do, the quality. Do I want to be in charge of a charity that becomes so large that I don't now the quality of work that is going on in all the centers we are working with? We are going through a strategic review with consultants to trying to decide how to grow in the future.

Next, I would like to ask you about your personal background. I have heard that before you launched SWO in 2002, you were working as an art journalist in the daytime and working as a support worker for the homeless center at night.

Yes. Actually when I was young I wanted to be a doctor, but I failed the exam to get into medical school. I happened to find a college in the Yellow Pages for retaking the university exams in the music and arts, and that is how I got into art school. I found music suited me better than medicine. After university I spent a year working in Paris as a singer for a year. I even worked at Euro Disneyland near Paris for a few months as a singer. But I wasn't good enough to have a brilliant career as a singer.

So after I returned to London I needed a job and started working for the advertising department of a publishing company that published music magazines. And after a while I naturally wanted to get a better job. As I was looking for another job I phoned up my flat mate one day and asked him to fax my curricula vitae to my office for me, but for some reason that fax ended up on the desk of the editor of *Opera Now* on the top floor of our building and the editor came down with my CV in hand and asked if I was interested in applying to be the assistant editor. It sounds ridiculous, but it's true (laughs).

For a while I was living in different cities, in Paris or London and I became interested in the homeless. They always looked so lonely. But after a while one of my flat mates said I was always talking about homelessness but I never did anything. So I volunteered to work at a center near Victoria Station at night once a week. That was around 1996. Eventually I went to night school to get training as a support worker, outside of my day job. So I ended up having two professions. I was a journalist in the daytime and a support worker for the homeless at night.

However, after a while I wanted to do something more than writing reviews of operas. I wanted to do something that would be more of a contribution to society. It

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was around that time that some politician made a comment that the homeless are the ones that people coming out of the opera house have to step over. And that became a big issue at the homeless center. So I was talking to the people at the center and I said, "Let's do an opera and raise money for the center." That led to the idea of starting SWO. I wanted to show that we could turn the tables on the politicians and have homeless do an opera. So in 2000 I managed to get some funding to do an opera version of *The Little Prince* for children with homeless people. The result was that the show was very well received and we had people lining up on the street to see it. With that success I was able to start SWO in 2002 by myself. Now we have six people working for the company fulltime and two temporary staff and we work with 30 freelance workshop leaders.

The people who lead your SWO workshops are all professional musicians like opera singers or pianists. Why do you choose top artists to work with the homeless?

One of the problems with [programs for] the homeless is that they always get low quality stuff. For example they get clothes donations of second-hand clothes, and for meals they may get sandwiches that are past the sell-by date. So why not give them the best opera singer in the UK to work with for a change? That makes them feel special and is really inspiring. And it is only by having artists lead our workshops that we are able to create music on the spot. So, when I choose our workshop leaders I want the best musicians I can find. I don't choose them on the basis of their skill in leading a workshop. They just have to have basic social skills and need to outgoing and enjoy working with people. But that's about it.

I have heard that your workshop leaders go through a nine-week training period before that start working for your program.

Rather than nine weeks, it is more accurate to say that they go through nine training sessions. For the first two sessions we just have them watch and understand the overall structure. After that we have them run just one of the exercises of the workshop, like having them lead the "chair game" (where participants rush to sit in the empty chair that the person who is it is heading for) or the "Night Fever" game (where everyone makes a circle and one chosen person stands in the middle and strikes a pose like John Travolta's famous pose from *Saturday Night Fever* and all the others have to immediately copy that pose). Then they gradually increase the number of sections they are able to lead, until by the end of the ninth session they are capable of leading the entire workshop. The effectiveness of these games has already been proven, so if you have the tool box can put all the parts together and get the overall flow of the workshop, it is not really so difficult to lead one. The difficult part is actually learning how to keep the right amount of distance. At first I didn't know how to do that and I did things like telling people my cell phone number. But that is not really fair. Because I can't become friends with all of them. And these are people who have serious emotional problems, so it can actually have a reverse effect if I act friendly with them in the wrong way. It took me about five years to learn and now I am able to keep a professional borderline with them.

Could you tell us about the Evaluation Tree you use to quantify the progress of workshop participants?

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My Secret Heart



First I would like to talk about how we came to construct our evaluation model. I felt that the arts did a very poor job of showing its results. You can understand how important it is society some way of expressing themselves and the joys and emotions that art brings. But when it comes to helping people who are disadvantaged, I just didn't come across any model that explained that very well. And we were having funders ask us things like, "If we give you £50,000 (approx. 82,000 USD) what results are we going to see? Are people just going to having a good time?" It's a really good point actually.

So I did a lot of work with an evaluation consultant and she asked some really interesting questions. She asked if we were finding any patterns with our work. Because we were doing some evaluations and interviewing people before and we knew that there were transitions happening in people's lives but we couldn't see any patterns. In our talks with the consultant, she asked us to go through our interviews again and look for key words, and the patterns that emerged became the roots of the Evaluation Tree method.

We found that there were a number of common results that came out. The participants were feeling more confident, feeling that they had more skills, that their social networks were expanding, they had new self-esteem, and there was enjoyment and the creativity.

Beyond that the words became quite diverse and individual. There was the man who was able to take off his jacket, and there were ones who reduced their drug intake. In one project there was a participant who reduced his drug intake 70% and now he's going to university. And there are workshop participants who have progressed to the point where they are now singing solos on stage in front of a 1,000 people. It is quite varied. In the Evaluation Tree, the workshop leader and support workers involved work together to create a Personal Development Plan for participants who have been with us for at least six sessions. We don't evaluate before that. But after that we use the plan and continue to evaluate the participant based on observation and interviews.

Now I would like to ask you about the once-a-year performances that you have mounted since 2002. Up until 2005 you used existing music by Britten, Mahler, Handel and Jimi Hendrix to stage operas. However, since 2006 you have commissioned living composers to for music to create new operas. How do you choose the artists you work with?

Fortunately this work has given me opportunities to go to the theaters often. That allows me to get early information about talented artists. I want to do things experimental. We do popular things like *La Boheme* and *Carmen* in our workshops, but I am not interested in doing popular things in our performances just because they are popular. People would expect us to do *La Boheme*, but they would never expect us to do Mahler, or to work with a young avant-garde composer like Mira Calix who wrote the music for our most recent production, *My Secret Heart*. And as in *My Secret Heart* I want to use more film, because film is a great format that allows us to show our participant's work around the world. In the next production I am choosing six composers and six film directors and saying the only thing that I want this project to be about is "fables." Then I leave it completely up to the artists. I really believe that the job of the artists should just do the art. I can provide the framework and the infrastructure and

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the workshop leaders and the participants and then the artists can come in and work freely. I want the artist to be able to concentrate on inspiring the participants with their talent.

What is the actual process of collaboration when the artists work with the homeless participants to create a work for the stage? Could you use the example of your latest work *My Secret Heart* as an example to explain the process?

First I had a meeting with the composer Mira Calix and the video artist Flat-e. From that I proposed that I wanted to use Allegri's *Miserere* and I want to use film. And then I left it completely up to them. So right away Flat-e said that he wanted to an immense installation with 360-degree wrap-around screen and have the participants doing this and that. And I said yes, great. Then once the general vision emerged we took the score to the different workshop leaders to have them get the participants practice singing this Allegri music in Latin, which is difficult. Then three months later, starting in June in all the centers, Mira and Flat-e come to the workshops and begin the process of recording parts of it. Then we did three weeks of rehearsals, one week in Newcastle, one week in London and one week in the Midlands, and I made sure that the participants went to all those rehearsals during the summer. Then we previewed it in Switzerland in October at a small festival with just ten participants. We sort of tested it. And then we had the world premiere [at Royal Festival Hall] in December with 100 people.

My last question is what your vision is for SWO in 15 years time?

The first thing is to raise enough money to continue. It is really difficult, so we can't be confident that we'll still be there in five year's time. I really hope we will be, and of course I will do everything I can to make that possible. And then I think we have to look at the way we grow in the future. Of course, I'm really happy with the achievements of SWO. And I think we have a very good balance between our workshop and our yearly performances. I am also happy with the quality of the workshops and the performances. But I am also interested in a larger geographical spread. In the future I want to work in Scotland and Wales and Southwest England. We are also looking into accreditation, so that in the future all the participants who come through our program will get some kind of qualification for it.

But all this is undecided. We don't know what the future will bring, but I just want to be able to help as many homeless people as I can.