

ART OF PUPPETS AND MARIONETTES

Hansel and Gretel

Art Form: Theatre

Style: Contemporary/Classical

Culture: North American/Western European

MEET THE ARTIST:

Jim Gamble, founding director of the **Art of Puppets and Marionettes**, is an internationally respected puppet designer and performer known for his appealing productions and beautifully crafted puppets. His dynamic company, founded in 1972 and composed of accomplished puppeteers and puppet makers, has an eclectic repertoire that includes *Peter and the Wolf*, *Carnival of the Animals*, *The Nutcracker*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Tales of the Ashanti* and *Myths of the Aztecs*. Each production features familiar classical music or an original score. Strongly committed to education, the company performs in hundreds of California schools annually and in theatres and festivals throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In 2001, Jim Gamble was the only American to perform at the Obratsov Puppet Theatre in Moscow in celebration of 100 Years of Russian Puppetry. National appearances include the Children's Theatre Series in Hawaii and the International Children's Festival in San Diego. Among the company's many awards are the *Parents Choice* and *Golden Apple* awards for their video series, and the *President's Award* from the *Puppeteers of America*.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Hansel and Gretel is a marionette production of the opera by Englebert Humperdinck. The opera is based on the classic fairy tale written by the Brothers Grimm and slightly revised by Englebert's sister, Adelaide Humperdinck. In this enchanting 19th century revision, the mother is not the wicked stepmother and Gretel does much of the problem solving. Englebert Humperdinck's rich music and songs serenade the brother and sister throughout the presentation as they take their famous walk into the woods and encounter the witch's delectable gingerbread house. Skilled puppeteers bring *Hansel and Gretel* to life, making the children dance and the witch fly in this colorful and magical puppet theatre performance.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The first opera was performed in Italy in the late 1500s. Originally enjoyed by the royal, noble and landowning classes, the appeal of opera gradually widened; by the late 1600s, composers such as Claudio Monteverdi and Alessandro Scarlatti were creating operas popular with the public. By the mid-nineteenth century, opera had evolved into "Grand Opera," so-called because the sets and costumes were spectacularly elaborate. A number of the most beloved operas were written at this time including Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello*, based on the play by William Shakespeare, and Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* and *La Bohème*.

The composer Englebert Humperdinck was born in Germany in 1854. Initially a student of architecture, Humperdinck quickly discovered his passion for music and distinguished himself by winning many prestigious awards. Although he wrote music for German orchestras and chorus, Humperdinck is most famous for his opera, *Hansel and Gretel*. The music was originally composed to accompany his sister's adaptation of the fairy tale into a play for the family's children. Convinced that it was worthy of operatic production, Humperdinck sent his manuscript to Richard Strauss who agreed to conduct its world premiere in December 1893. Now a children's classic, *Hansel and Gretel* took the opera world by storm. Its charm continues to enchant audiences around the globe.

Puppets have been part of every culture around the world, although puppet theatre as we know it has its roots in 17th century Italy. At that time, troupes of traveling actors created stock characters in performance, and those characters evolved into standard puppet characters. There are many types of

puppets; their names indicate the ways in which they operate. Hand puppets are manipulated by the puppeteer's hands, rod puppets are worked with rods, and shadow puppets work with the use of light and its projected shadow. The marionette, unique because it portrays the character from head to toe, moves very freely, and is manipulated by strings, wires or rods attached to hand-held controls above the puppet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What character or musical segment of *Hansel and Gretel* did you find most memorable? Why?
- Did the differences in the rhythms, melodies, or moods of the music affect the movement of the puppets? In what ways?
- The puppets used in *Hansel and Gretel* are called marionettes. What are some of the unique characteristics of a marionette?
- What kinds of feelings did you have as you watched the performance? Did the music help you understand Hansel and Gretel's experience? Have you ever taken a journey, gotten lost, then found your way?
- Do you know any other fairy tales? Where did you learn them? Do they share wisdom, advice, or teach lessons?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

In the fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel* by the Brothers Grimm, the balance between good and evil characters is clearly drawn. Read the story to your class and discuss the following questions.

Is it helpful to have villains and heroes in stories? Do we learn things by their actions? What kinds of things?

Is the violence in fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel* disturbing, or have students become numbed by the violence they routinely see on television and in feature films?

How do Hansel and Gretel help each other in their crises? How are they rewarded?

How have your students' impressions of the story changed since first reading or hearing it, and then reviewing it with a more critical eye?

Legend:

- 🎭 Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- ✳ Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

🎭 Reciting poetry out loud as a group is a good way to experience the musicality of language. It can also build confidence in students who are reluctant to read aloud by themselves, but feel comfortable in a group.

To practice a choral reading, divide your class into 2, 3, or 4 groups to perform rounds. Give each group a poetic phrase or musical jingle. Introduce signals for start, stop, loud, and soft. Conduct the class like an orchestra. Have students perform their 'poetry symphony' for another class.

⇒ ✳ Often, a culture's beliefs are passed down through its stories, folk tales and fairy tales which can be instructive, express certain values, or offer wisdom. What are the lessons woven into the story of *Hansel and Gretel*? Do you think they contain good advice? Why or why not? Have students work in groups, select a folk or fairy tale, reflect upon it, and discuss the same questions.

⇒ Composers write music in a spectrum of styles. The opera *Hansel and Gretel* was written by the renowned composer Englebert Humperdinck. Have students research the life and works of a composer of their choice. The composer may be contemporary or otherwise, well-known or obscure. Ask students to share what they have learned with the class, augmenting their presentations by playing examples of the composer's work. Students should include any other pertinent information, such as the musical style of or significant contributions made by their chosen composer.

❖ Hold a storytelling hour with your class using some of their favorite folk or fairy tales. Ask students to select a character from one of the stories to transform into a puppet. On a simple puppet stage or platform in the front of class, have students use their puppets to pantomime the action of the story as you read along. Or, have students take on the voices of the puppet characters and bring the story to life in a puppet play.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Buetter, Barbara MacDonald. *Simple Puppets from Everyday Materials*. Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1998.

Randel, Don Michael (Ed.) *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1986.