

PRETENDING AN OPERA TOGETHER: FRED ROGERS, COLLABORATIVE  
CREATIVITY, AND TELEVISION OPERA FOR PRESCHOOLERS

by

THERESA BEVERLY CHAFIN

(Under the Direction of David Haas)

ABSTRACT

Fred Rogers is an icon in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American life: his daily television program for preschoolers, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, was on the air for over 40 years. The *Neighborhood* was heavily scored with live jazz and hundreds of original songs sung by Rogers and others characters. Still, few realize that Rogers wrote all the songs himself, or that he held a Bachelor of Music degree in Music Composition, or that he composed 14 original Television Operas, and produced them on the *Neighborhood*, from 1968 to 1989. This dissertation first demonstrates the extraordinary importance that Rogers placed on music in his own life, his television program, and the lives of his viewers. Then, through three case studies [the *Babysitter Opera* (1968), *Spoon Mountain* (1982), and *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* (1989)], it assess the unique musical design, presentation, and idea content of Rogers' operatic productions. It connects these works with the broader issues of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Television Opera, Rogers' experience with collaborative operatic production, and performance traditions throughout opera history. It will consider the operas in light of Rogers' presumed

goals of encouraging creativity and making opera accessible to all, and demonstrate that they are a precise reflection of the rest of the *Neighborhood*.

INDEX WORDS: television opera, opera, television, TV, broadcast opera, children's opera, opera for children, children's television, Fred Rogers, Fred McFeely Rogers, Mister Rogers, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, PBS, Public Broadcasting Systems, Johnny Costa, John Reardon, *Babysitter Opera*, *Spoon Mountain*, *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*

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## DEDICATION

This document is dedicated to my husband, Samuel Walter Chafin, and my son, Samuel Atticus Chafin. Atticus: I love you so much! I'm a little bit sorry I let you eat cheerios off the floor so I could write. I'm glad you're growing up with music, and I promise we'll watch *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* together very soon. Happy first birthday! Sam: I love you the most and could not have completed this process without you; thank you for holding us all together. You make all of life better. Happy ninth anniversary! It's you I like.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

At 9:30pm EST on Christmas Eve, 1951, in the midst of hanging stockings and sharing hot chocolate, families across America gathered around their televisions for the live broadcast premiere of Gian Carlo Menotti's newly composed opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. *Amahl* was intended to appeal to children and families, and centered around the Magi and the Christmas season. Commissioned by the *NBC Opera Theatre* and finished earlier that week by Gian Carlo Menotti, *Amahl* was the first and most successful commission that the program dedicated to bringing operas to the small screen ever produced. Some involved in the production knew that it was special from the beginning. Years later, the Assistant to the Producer of the *Opera Theatre* would recall overhearing conductor Arturo Toscanini tell composer Gian Carlo Menotti after the dress rehearsal, "This is the best you've ever done."

In his own Emmy TV Legends interview for the *Archive of American Television* nearly fifty years later, this one-time producer's assistant claimed to have applied to any job that would get him to New York and into television, as he was determined to learn the medium. The *Opera Theatre* hired him primarily because they were seeking a musically literate candidate, and he boasted a newly-minted Bachelor of Music in Composition degree. While Fred Rogers would not remain Assistant to the Producer for long, his first love was music and his first

6television experience was producing opera—or at least getting coffee for the people who were producing opera. Therefore, we should not be surprised to learn that opera conceived and produced specifically for television broadcast, which was intended for children to watch with their parents at home, would continue to be an integral part of his career, even (and especially) when his name was in the title of the show.

In 1968, seventeen years after *Amahl's* sensational premiere, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* began broadcasting on WQED in Pittsburgh, and Rogers would once again have the chance to marry his loves of opera and television. In that year, Rogers produced the first of a series of operas inside “the *Neighborhood*,” as he invariably referred to his program. This first opera was about babysitters, but other material would follow: everything from grandparents to seatbelts, bubbles and sweaters to Twirling Purple Kitties, cows wishing to be potato bugs, and one very sad short-necked giraffe proved to be creative fodder for his charming operatic projects. And this time around, Rogers would be no mere coffee porter. He put his composition training to good use, writing the librettos and scores himself, just as he did with the scripts and songs for all nearly 900 episodes of the show.

Rogers and his collaborators produced thirteen operas and one extravagant musical miniseries, which ranged from a ten-minute segment to three-episode length performances, from 1968 to 1989. These operas were broadcast during the regular time slot of the popular daily *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* program, which was written and intended primarily for preschoolers. At different times during the show's run, the preschool age group

was defined as two-to-five or three-to-six years old. In addition to the target audience, the producers expected that children of a wider age range, probably up to eight years old, would also be included in the regular audience. Finally, they assumed that at least some of the children would be watching together with their parents.

With these fourteen productions, Fred Rogers became the unassuming heir to the otherwise short-lived mid-century Television Opera experiment. In doing so, he produced operas that simultaneously reflected his experience in opera production; his principles of experiential education, expression and healing through music, and nonviolent affirmation of the value of all humanity; and his delight in creating something lovely and fun for and with his audience. If opera is life writ large, then the *Neighborhood* operas are the *Neighborhood* writ large: they occupy and magnify the imaginative, honest, safe space that Rogers created each day on his show.

### GOALS OF THIS PROJECT

This dissertation is an attempt to demonstrate the unique musical design, presentation, and idea content of Fred Rogers' series of operas. It will connect these works with the broader issues of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Television Opera, Rogers' experience with collaborative operatic production, and performance traditions throughout opera history. It will consider the operas in light of Rogers' presumed goals of encouraging creativity and making opera accessible to all, and demonstrate that they are a precise reflection of the rest of the *Neighborhood*.

I have limited my detailed analysis to three representative examples: the *Babysitter Opera* (1968), *Spoon Mountain* (1982), and *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* (1989). Each one raises unique questions of music, content, personal experience, history, and culture, and as such each invites unique critical perspectives. The dramatic framing of *The Babysitter Opera* demonstrates the greatest emphasis on the importance of rehearsal in the production process. It also shows the strongest direct connections with *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and, of the three case studies undertaken here, is the only one to feature puppets as main characters. *Spoon Mountain* is representative of what I have come to think of as Rogers' compositional "middle period," and is undoubtedly the most operatic production the *Neighborhood* ever saw: that is, it contains the greatest number of examples of historically self-conscious choices that demonstrate the composer's intense familiarity with opera techniques and conventions. *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* forces us to confront the blurred line that separates twentieth-century American opera and musicals. Its musical choices and visual extravagance set it apart from the other operas discussed here. Finally, *Josephine's* prevailing messages are clearly close to the composer's heart, and this production may indeed be considered the crux of his *Neighborhood* and his life's work.

Given the stated purposes of this project, it will not be necessary to provide an exhaustive analysis of the libretto design or harmonic structure of any of the operas. I will not engage in assessing the performances' success in the realms of psychology or education. Finally, neither a complete history of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* or children's opera will be useful in accomplishing the

goals set forth here. Though this project provides an analysis of an operatic repertoire, it takes an interdisciplinary approach, and as such is not based solely on the methodological frameworks typically associated with opera scholarship. Thus, I will not provide a compositional history or extensive musical analysis of forms, harmonic structures, or melodic idioms. Given the extremely short run of these works, a performance history is also not required.<sup>1</sup> While I will establish a reception history as well as provide interpretation of the narratives, characters, and thematic content, these will enter only as they prove useful for each case study, and will not constitute the majority of my analysis.

Rather, I will attempt to determine the parameters and guidelines of writing for a preschool audience. Unfortunately, Rogers did not leave behind a collection of personal correspondence explaining his creative process. I have, however, had access to scores and scripts, including both the librettos and teleplay scripts that frame and introduce the operas, as well as interviews Rogers granted throughout his career. Finally, I will identify and assess the strategies employed for enhancing the viewers' listening experience through explanation and behind-the-scenes tours of the opera-making process.

In order to accomplish the aforementioned goals, this dissertation will provide descriptions of and commentary on the manuscript scores, typed scripts, and recordings of the broadcasts themselves. It will demonstrate how each opera is integrated into the established format that each episode follows, relying for this

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from *Spoon Mountain* and *Potato Bugs and Cows*, which were re-performed in adapted versions featuring audience participation at the Vineyard Theater in New York City shortly after their premiers in the 1980s, none of these works were performed except when they were recorded for broadcast.

portion on secondary literature discussing *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and its significance. It will also demonstrate how each opera responded to the established norms of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American Television Opera, using secondary literature owing its greatest debt to Jennifer Barnes. Finally, using both primary sources and secondary literature, I will discuss how Rogers responded to the abilities and limitations of his audience without “dumbing down” his operas.

### BIOGRAPHY AND CREATIVE CONTEXT

Fred Rogers' background in music and opera is surprisingly rich, yet little known. He was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania on March 20, 1928, and was surrounded by a loving family throughout his childhood. According to Rogers, “Music was my first language. I was, at times, scared to use words. I didn't want to be a bad boy. I didn't want to show people that I was angry—or rather, tell them, but I could show it through the way I played on the piano.”<sup>2</sup> He has gone on record in interviews discussing his early musical experiences and memories, repeatedly explaining how he “played [his] feelings at the piano” as young as five years of age.

In those days, you didn't speak your feelings as much as express them artistically, you know. And so I was always able to cry, or laugh, or say I was angry through the tips of my fingers on the piano. I would go to the piano, even when I was five years old, and start to play how I felt, and so it was very natural for me to become a composer. And, having written all of the music for the *Neighborhood*, I feel as if that's one of my gifts to children: ‘Here is

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers, interview footage included on the documentary *Lessons from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (Pittsburgh: Expressive Media, 2014), 38:39.

a way—that doesn’t hurt you or anybody else—to say who you are and how you feel.’<sup>3</sup>

In footage included in the documentary *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, Rogers sits for an interview at a piano, playing and singing examples when the mood strikes. While speaking of his childhood, when he was shy, pudgy, and asthmatic, Rogers tells the familiar story of how he could laugh and cry “through [his] fingers” when he was uncomfortable with or unable to laugh and cry otherwise. He goes on, however, as if to emphasize the point, to caress the keyboard in front of him and insist, “This was my friend.”<sup>4</sup> He further elaborated in a different interview, explaining that playing the piano was not merely a means of expressing his negative feelings, but actually an opportunity to change his own mood.

I would go the piano in my home alone, and start out—you could almost figure out what was going on in my head, and I wouldn’t be conscious of it, by the titles of the songs that I would play... and ending up with something much more benign than what I had begun with. It was very important.<sup>5</sup>

This process of playing the piano proved cathartic and allowed Rogers to process, resolve, and control his emotions.

Rogers’ Bachelor of Music Composition degree from Rollins College in Winter Park, FL (1951) demonstrates an expertise in the field; his senior recital

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television*, (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 1 of 9, 5:31.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Rogers, interview included on the documentary *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 15:50.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Rogers, interview on *Lessons from Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, 25:36.

program boasts a variety of standard chamber music forms. A stack of composition exercises saved away for years and now housed in the Fred Rogers Center archive (Latrobe, PA) evince a meticulous student with a solid grasp of counterpoint. Rogers' experience as Assistant to the Producer of the NBC Opera Theatre, where he worked on the premieres of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and *Trouble in Tahiti*, among others, helped to shape his musical knowledge and television production values, which can be seen in all the Neighborhood episodes, but perhaps most specifically in the operas.

We cannot consider an overview of Fred Rogers' musical experiences complete without giving credit to him and his wife Joanne for the fact that Bernstein's 1952 Television Opera *Trouble in Tahiti* even enjoyed its own live premiere at the appointed time. In telling the story, he relates a little-known morsel of television and opera history, then spins the experience into a life lesson for anyone who cares to hear it.

We did a Bernstein opera at NBC; Leonard Bernstein was commissioned to write one, and he wrote an opera called *Trouble in Tahiti*. And I remember the lead ... something happened at the dress rehearsal, and the lead said, 'I'm not gonna do it.' Well, I mean, it was scheduled be broadcast that night, and as you say, everything was live then. Well, my wife took the lead to our apartment, and gave her a cup of tea, and talked – Joanne is a wonderful person –and somehow, magically, you know, brought her back to the studio and they went on with the program. I don't know... maybe it was just to get some attention, I don't know what it was, but that was one of the dramas—not on screen.

The major dramas in life are never center-stage, and they're rarely under the bright lights. They're always happening off-camera.

And I think for people who might be wading through all of this material in the archives, that might be one of the best things to

remember. That the best things of life are way off-stage, never highly touted. It's the little epiphanies of life that matter most.<sup>6</sup>

Rogers was prone to find an object lesson in nearly any biographical anecdote, and in telling this story he certainly does the same thing. Rather than take credit for the success of the evening's premiere, he offered an observation to benefit his viewers, but his role in that performance is important nonetheless.

Rogers' eventual degree and career path look quite different from his original plan, which was studying linguistics at Dartmouth in order to enter the diplomatic corps, but those skills and training were not lost on this project, either. Rogers engaged in multiple simultaneous processes of translation, as the operatic genre was adapted for his young audience and for a short format television show. He also performed diplomatic work of a type—introducing two apparently mutually exclusive entities, children and opera—and finding that, despite assumptions to the contrary, the two would form a pleasant, fruitful, and lasting relationship.

Other organizations were also concerned with introducing art music in general and opera in particular to a young audience around the same time that Rogers began composing to that end. The tradition of the American music-appreciation style outreach program owes a great debt to Leonard Bernstein, and his introduction of Young People's Concerts into the New York Philharmonic's programming during the 1950s and 1960s. Some time later, opera companies also began similar projects. Two of the most common examples of operatic

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television*, (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 2 of 9, 20:00.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

outreach programs included special abbreviated productions of standard repertoire presented in daytime performances marketed toward school field trips, and “run-out” concerts of specially composed children’s operas—commonly settings of familiar stories, such as fairy tales—and often performed by a small cast of company singers. Both of these formats were usually geared toward the elementary and junior high ages, however, and the *Neighborhood*’s target audience is the youngest age group for whom operas have ever been specifically produced.

Rogers was unique among composers of children’s opera of his time in his absolute commitment to the intelligence of his audience, and he crafted for them operas that are high in whimsy, but absolutely shot through with sincerity. Though the plots included silly elements, there was no dumbing down of the music, either in composition or in improvisation. One also does not have the sense in watching these operas that Rogers was pandering to his audience: it seems that the silly portions were as much for his own amusement as for theirs. Finally, fourteen different times over the course of two decades, Rogers presented his preschool audience with the full operatic experience, complete with enticing glimpses behind the scenes and a commitment to introducing the genre as the creative, cooperative, collaborative enterprise that, at its best, opera should always be.

Rogers’ operas hold a place within several American operatic movements of the late twentieth century, most notably the sub-genres of televised opera and children’s opera, as well as hearkening back to an older and more European art form, puppet opera. In fact, though Television Opera is generally considered to

have been a short-lived experiment of the 1950s and 60s, supplanted by live simulcasts and overrun by budget cuts and the lower tastes of a burgeoning television audience, I will argue that Rogers' *Neighborhood* operas should be considered both the heir to and continuation of the tradition of opera intended solely for broadcast on television.

Several questions arise in response to these operas, ranging from the incredulous ("Mister Rogers wrote opera?") to the curious ("What are they about?" / "Did he sing?"), and of course the ultimate ("Why?" and "Did it work?") These questions will be duly addressed in the coming pages, beginning with his goals. With these productions, Rogers hoped simultaneously to present immediate life lessons such as safety, creativity, and empathy and to introduce opera as a genre to the preschool audience.

This repertoire is significant due to both its scope, which was large, and its scale, which was small: while reaching a larger audience simultaneously than any other children's opera project of its time, it also represents a process of nearly complete miniaturization. The result was modern American grand opera, except that the running time (most around 28 minutes), the age of the target audience (3-6 years), and the performance medium (an average mid-century household television set) were merely a fraction of what the standard operatic repertoire typically entails.

*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* broadcasts were conceived as weekly five-episode sets revolving around a consistent theme, giving Rogers ample opportunity to introduce opera to the audience each time one of his original works was slated for performance during the Friday episode. Each of these Friday

opera episodes was thus presented to a young audience that was no longer ignorant of the genre and its conventions, but had been carefully prepared to participate in a full operatic experience. At the same time, each of these original operas gave Rogers the opportunity to introduce children to traditions of operatic conception, commission, composition, rehearsal, performance, and reception. The preliminary introductions of the genre took place in both the reality neighborhood, where Rogers conversed directly with the audience on the subject, and in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where the human and puppet characters carried on discussions about opera, brainstormed plot ideas, rehearsed the new works, and sang excerpts from famous arias. In 1973, Assistant Producer Hedda Sharapan explained the goals behind this introductory process, and the lessons, such as tenacity and collaboration, that they hoped children would take away from the narrative, to Nancy Ross:

In this process, children are exposed to much more than the opera itself. There is the creative process, sticking with a project through the routine work that is needed even though it's tedious, using everyone's contribution on the level he's best suited for, coping with frustration at not being able to think of an idea. By introducing the arias early in the week ... we get the children in our audience so familiar with the melodies that they even sing along during the opera.<sup>7</sup>

The cast and crew responsible for the daily children's program certainly understood the importance of sticking with a project through the tedium as a part of the creative process. Showing the creative process, even the tedious or frustrating parts, prepared the audience for the reality of responding with their

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<sup>7</sup> Hedda Sharapan, quoted by Nancy Ross, "Make-Believe Opera," *Opera News* 37 (January 13, 1973): 9.

own creative works much better than if they had only seen the final performed product.

Rogers' operas reflect the standard repertoire in a variety of ways, including examples of recitative, aria, choruses, and dance. Each, in its way, is also a kind of elegant fusion of the conceptions of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (with Rogers serving as librettist, composer, producer, director, and eponymous star of the show) and *Gebrauchsmusik* (as the operas were intended for one-time broadcast and embraced cast members of varying musical training), two ideas that have tended historically to be mutually exclusive. The influence of *Gebrauchsmusik* is evident in a number of statements in which Rogers promotes a view of opera, not as elitist, but as collegial, accessible to all, and useful for creative personal expression. "See? You can make up all kinds of things and sing them, and you can call that opera," concludes Rogers as *Spoon Mountain* (1982) ends. This approach sets Rogers apart from most audience-building run-out projects, which tend to take the self-Othering attitude that opera is beneficial at least partially because it is unfamiliar to the children in its audience. They present opera as a "higher" art form, inherently complicated and requiring explanation, and betray an attitude, intentional or not, that opera can—or should—serve as a class marker. Rogers, by contrast, seems genuinely to expect that the preschool-aged neighbors—regardless of race, class, or musical literacy—will adopt opera as an opportunity for collaborative creativity with their friends, just as he does with his visible social circle, the *Neighborhood* cast.

Rogers' production tastes were further informed by his studies in child development, and include conscious choices about pacing, transitions, repetition,

commitment to fantasy and make-believe, and communication with the audience. Though the operas still show evidence of some of these concerns, they also serve as opportunities for greater expression and creativity than the regular episodes. Betty Aberlin, long-time cast member and star of many of the operas, stated in 2009 that she “liked [the operas] the very best ... because they were whimsical, they were not straightjacketed by child-development concerns,” later adding, “The operas were Fred at his whimsical best. The operas still focused on the beautiful themes that were pertinent to children, but Fred was allowed to be more expressive.”<sup>8</sup> I will have to disagree with Aberlin on one point. She is certainly correct that the operas represent Rogers at his creative best; they are undeniably whimsical, and his writing is more expressive. However, he never stopped caring about the “child development concerns,” and the operas do demonstrate a commitment to addressing the content themes he addressed repeatedly. In addition, they encourage musical exploration, expression, and creativity, always a cornerstone of Rogers’ creative and educational agenda.

As an enthusiast and an expert, Rogers wanted to share one of his favorite activities, opera, with his television friends. Rogers clearly considered music to have been formative for himself, and believed that magic was worth sharing. However, this process would not be so straightforward as simply recreating a broadcast from his time at the *NBC Opera Theatre*. To present operas inside the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, Rogers faced a series of very real constraints. Nearly everything required to mount an opera (time, money, and spectacular

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<sup>8</sup> Betty Aberlin, Interview with William V. Madison (March 22, 2009). <http://billmadison.blogspot.com/2009/03/interview-betty-aberlin.html>.

singers, to name just the most obvious few) were in extremely short supply. Fortunately, despite the obvious material limitations, Rogers did possess an abundance of assets frequently displayed and/or espoused on the *Neighborhood*: talent, creativity, and tenacity. Thus, embracing a Do-It-Yourself approach both on and off the screen, Rogers and his collaborators succeeded in producing original operas appropriate for the audience at hand.

Through the processes of composition and production, Rogers had to consider what steps would be necessary to complete the translation of this notoriously grand form of entertainment into the vocabulary of preschoolers while neither underestimating their sensibilities nor talking down to them. He also played multiple roles in the creative process, but in keeping with his magnanimous and inclusive nature, even obscured his own role as creator in the goal of including the audience in the experience.

In order to appreciate Rogers' operas, we must consider their content. The medium may be one message, but additional messages abound, none of them shocking for anyone familiar with the *Neighborhood*. Lessons include the reliability of parents, the importance of grandparents, the inability of one person (or star) to own another, and the rather radical idea that villains deserve a listening ear and understanding heart, rather than swift punishment for their actions. We also learn that seatbelts are necessary, that quests of helpfulness are always worthwhile regardless of who is in trouble, and that some products on the market (like aerosol cans containing sweaters for your bubbles) are not worth the money. Lastly, and always, we are reminded that each individual is unique and special—regardless of differences—just as they are.

## THE OPERAS

Rogers' compositions were not produced on a strict schedule; rather, he wrote a new opera whenever he wished to, but for some time they came at a rate of almost one per year. The first two took place during the first year of the *Neighborhood's* broadcast, and were filmed in black and white: the *Babysitter Opera* (1968) and the *Campsite Opera* (also 1968). The *Teddy Bear/Whaling Ship Opera* (1969) was the first to appear in color.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a greater standardization of opera broadcast format, and for that reason I refer to these as his "middle period." *Pineapples and Tomatoes* (1970), *Monkey's Uncle* (1971), *Snow People and Warm Pussycat* (1972), *Potato Bugs and Cows* (1973), *All in the Laundry* (1974), *Key to Otherland* (1975), *Windstorm in Bubbleland* (1980), *Spoon Mountain* (1982), *A Granddad for Daniel (The Grandparents' Opera)* (1984), and *A Star for Kitty* (1986) were all performed on Friday broadcasts, requiring a majority of the episodes' running time. During these operas, the viewers experience Lady Elaine Fairchilde's puppet antics, are reminded of the importance of family, and of course learn that each person (and cow) has been made exactly the way they were meant to be.

*Josephine The Short-Necked Giraffe* (1989) is the *Neighborhood's* only mini-series, and boasts an impressively elaborate set, especially when compared with the consistent household and Make-Believe sets, which did not change in the course of 40 years.

## SECONDARY LITERATURE

Rogers' musical output has been largely overshadowed, both in popular perception and in the existing scholarship, by commentary on his handmade sweaters, red trolley, and kind personality. Despite the pervasiveness of music on the program, authors writing from the perspectives of media studies, psychology, child development, and education overwhelmingly offer only a cursory acknowledgement of its presence. Time and again we are told that "music was very important to Rogers" but no scholar has yet attempted to explore how music functions inside his fictional world. A stark example of this lack of engagement is seen in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, the only collected volume dedicated to the television show. Each chapter presents analysis from a different scholarly perspective, but the portion dedicated to music is merely an edited interview between two well-known performers, Yo-Yo Ma and Eugenia Zukerman, which once again confirms that music was "very important," but lacks both historical perspective and methodological framework. My work draws on existing studies of television opera, children's opera, puppet opera, and children's television, specifically work that has already been done on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. I also rely on selections of scholarship that explore the ideas of genre definition, especially the difficult distinction between opera and musical.

In the category of Television Opera, Jennifer Barnes has made the most significant contributions with "Television Opera: A Non-history" in *A Night in at*

*the Opera*, edited by Jeremy Tambling (1994)<sup>9</sup> and her subsequent book *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (2003).<sup>10</sup> In these, she outlines the historical context of operas commissioned for one-time broadcast performances, many of which were performed live. She spends an appropriately significant amount of space on a discussion of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, recognizing that it was the most successful venture in the genre. The very useful in-depth discussion of technical details such as camera and editing techniques prove valuable as I apply a similar discussion to Rogers' productions. Given that his first professional experience in the television industry was as Assistant to the Producer for the *NBC Opera Theatre*, and that he was on set helping to facilitate the performances of *Amahl* and others during the early 1950s, we must take into account how and to what extent the technical conventions of the *NBC Opera Theatre* were retained or incorporated into his own artistic vision of broadcast opera.

Both Peter Herman Adler's 1952 article for *Musical America* "Opera on Television: The Beginning of an Era"<sup>11</sup> and Herbert Graf's chapter "Opera in Television" from his 1951 book *Opera for the People*<sup>12</sup> may be considered primary sources on the topic of Television Opera production. Adler and Graf worked as

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<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Barnes, "Television: A Non-History," in *A Night In at the Opera*, edited by Jeremy Tambling (London: Libbey, 1994), 25-52.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (Farnham, Surrey: Boydell Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Herman Adler, "Opera on Television: The Beginning of an Era," *Musical America* 72 (February 1952): 29.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Graf, "Opera in Television," in *Opera for the People*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951), 219-231.

producer and director, respectively, of early forays into live broadcast opera performances, and their descriptions of the experience, including necessary choices that differentiate opera on television from opera in the opera house, are invaluable to understanding the work of both the *NBC Opera Theatre* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Their enthusiasm over early successes and optimistic foretelling of opera as a mainstay of American broadcasting are bittersweet in retrospect, but useful for understanding the attitudes of the time. Dorothy Coulter offered a singer's opinion of the production experience in "Opera 'On Camera'" for the *Music Journal* in 1961.<sup>13</sup>

Historical overviews of Television Opera as one facet of arts in broadcasting are available in Brian Rose's *Television and the Performing Arts: A Handbook and Reference Guide to American Cultural Programming* (1986),<sup>14</sup> Richard Butsch's *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (2000),<sup>15</sup> and Peter Wynne's "Video Days: A Historical Survey of Opera on Television" from *Opera News* in 1998.<sup>16</sup> Also in the same category of

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<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Coulter, "Opera 'On Camera,'" *Music Journal* 19, no. 8 (November/December 1961): 40, 61-62.

<sup>14</sup> Brian G. Rose, "Opera on Television," in *Television and the Performing Arts: A Handbook and Reference Guide to American Cultural Programming* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 127-188.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Butsch, "A TV in Every Home: Television 'Effects,'" in *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 252-266.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Wynne, "Video Days: A Historical Survey of Opera on Television," *Opera News* 62, no. 17 (June 1998): 12-20.

repertoire addressed are Jeremy Tambling's *Opera, Ideology, and Film* (1987)<sup>17</sup> and his edited volume *A Night in at the Opera* (1994).<sup>18</sup>

Though she is dealing primarily with the standard operatic repertoire in adaptation into feature films, Marcia J. Citron's contributions to the musicological study of filmed opera cannot be overlooked. Of primary consideration here are *Opera on Screen* (2000)<sup>19</sup> and *When Opera Meets Film* (2010).<sup>20</sup> Citron was among the first scholars to study filmed operas, and while she is primarily concerned with much larger productions (full-length operas adapted to full-length movies, with grand outdoor spaces), her assessments of the generic adaptations required are useful. Her writing about the use of cameras is useful to me mostly in its contrast: filming for a movie theater and filming on a sound stage for television are quite different propositions.

Since the operas always take place in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, and a significant number of Make-Believe's full-time residents are puppets, it is not unusual for them to appear with significant roles, and even as main characters or title characters in Rogers' operas. Musicological coverage of puppet opera is scarce, and John Mohr Minniear has the corner on historical overviews,

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<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Tambling. *Opera, Ideology, and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> Jeremy Tambling, ed., *A Night in at the Opera* (London: Libbey, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

with his 1971 dissertation “Marionette Opera: Its History and Literature”<sup>21</sup> and the *New Grove* article on the same subject.<sup>22</sup> One article on puppet opera that has proven particularly useful is Basil Maine’s “Puppets in Opera” from *The Musical Times* (1929).<sup>23</sup> More a call for his personal preference in opera performance than a historical take on how they have functioned in the past, it nonetheless offers one possibility for interpreting Rogers’ marriage of puppets and opera. Multiple other recent articles and dissertations on puppet opera that appear in my bibliography address its various uses at different times and in different locations, and taken together paint a picture of the many ways that puppets can function in opera.<sup>24</sup>

Scholarship on children’s opera as a genre is scant at best, and limited primarily to two kinds. The first is found in journal articles aimed at music educators offering advice on how to incorporate opera into the curriculum, either as a participatory event or as a workshop/field trip where elementary and middle-school aged students are introduced to performances by professional

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<sup>21</sup> John Mohr Minniear, “Marionette Opera: Its History and Literature,” PhD diss., North Texas University, 1971.

<sup>22</sup> John Mohr Minniear, “Puppet Opera, Puppet Theatre,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by Stanley Sadie, 29 vols., 20:602-603. (London: Macmillan, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Basil Maine, “Puppets in Opera,” *The Musical Times* 70, no. 1036 (June 1929): 508-9.

<sup>24</sup> Janice Grimaldi, “A Night at the Opera,” *Puppetry Journal* 57, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 32.; Alan Lloyd Kagan, “Cantonese Puppet Theater: An Operatic Tradition and its Role in the Chinese Belief System,” PhD diss., Indiana University, 1978.; Malena Kuss, “The Confluence of Historical Coordinates in Carpentier/Caturla’s Puppet Opera *Manita en el Suelo*,” *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 44, no. 1 (May 2011): 136-142.

singers.<sup>25</sup> The second scholarly category is dominated by DMA dissertations produced by singers, which vary widely in scope, tone, and quality.<sup>26</sup> The dissertations have proven most useful primarily as bibliographic resources, as they provide lists of works composed for outreach and education. In this scholarship produced by and for educators and singers, the term “children’s opera” is applied both to works intended to be performed by children and to works intended to be consumed by children.

In the absence of valuable analysis of children’s opera, then, we must cast a slightly wider net and draw on recent scholarship of children’s musical cultures. This interest in musicological circles is a new one, to which this project is both indebted and hopes to contribute. This field, which thus far has been primarily ethnomusicological in nature, draws on work from sociology and anthropology, which argue that children constitute their own social class and should be seen as having separate, real, and valuable cultural experiences, rather than as partially-formed adults who are exposed to, but may not fully understand the products of

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<sup>25</sup> Roy E. Aumiller, Jr., “Arts: Afternoon at the Opera,” *Teacher* 94 (May/June 1977): 64-67.; Josanne La Valley, “Opera: Not for Adults Only,” *Music Educators Journal* 64 (September 1977): 36-41.; Bernice Nyland, “Pre-School Children’s Encounters with *The Magic Flute*,” *International Journal of Early Years Education* 19, no. 3 (October 2011): 207-217.; Patti M. Valkenburg, Marina Krcmar, and Sandy de Roos, “The Impact of a Cultural Children’s Program and Adult Mediation on Children’s Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards Opera,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 42, no. 3, (Summer 1998): 315-326.; Harry James Wignall, “Marionettes, Children, and the Magic of Opera,” *Music Educators Journal* 75, no. 4 (December 1988): 55-58.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Louise Malone, “Opera for American Youth: A Practical and Analytical Study,” DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 1994.; Dawn Marie Pawlewski, “*The Looking Glass* by Amy Tate Williams: A Critical Analysis Evaluating the Work’s Value in the Field of Opera for Youth,” DMA diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2005.

adult culture. Also influential in these developments is the field of literature, where children's literature and the accompanying children's literary studies have been recognized as separate entities for decades longer than children's music has been pursued from a scholarly perspective.

Notable pioneers for children's music studies include Roe-Min Kok, Susan Boynton, Patricia Shehan Campbell, and Trevor Wiggins. The first two collaborated to edit *Musical Childhoods and the Cultures of Youth* (2006),<sup>27</sup> while the latter two did the same for *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Musical Cultures* (2013);<sup>28</sup> Campbell also wrote *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Meaning in Children's Lives* (second edition 2010).<sup>29</sup> These volumes, as mentioned above, are primarily ethnomusicological studies of children, and focus on global case studies concerned with children musicking—or, in one notable example, curating their own listening lists.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, they are valuable to me in providing a framework for considering children as a separate and legitimate audience ripe for consumption of a repertoire created primarily for them, and not

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Boynton and Roe-Min Kok, eds., *Musical Childhoods and the Cultures of Youth* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Shehan Campbell and Trevor Wiggins, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Musical Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Songs in Their Heads: Music and its Meaning in Children's Lives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Tyler Bickford, "Tinkering and Tethering in the Material Culture of Children's MP3 Players," in *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Musical Cultures*, edited by Patricia Shehan Campbell and Trevor Wiggins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 527-542.

as secondary consumers of the adult culture to which they are necessarily or inadvertently exposed.

In addition to the various adjectives applied to the musical genre (“children’s” opera, “Television” Opera, “light” opera, etc.), we must consider the requirements for understanding opera, as opposed to musical theater or any other musical or dramatic classification. Two very recent dissertations on the distinctions inherent in opera and Broadway are Christopher Lynch’s “Opera and Broadway: The Debate over the Essence of Opera in New York City, 1900-1960” (2013)<sup>31</sup> and James Ryan O’Leary’s “Broadway Highbrow: Discourse and Politics of the American Musical, 1943-1946” (2012).<sup>32</sup> Also addressing the same issue, focusing on specific works, are John Andrew Johnson’s 1996 dissertation “Gershwin’s ‘American Folk Opera’: The Genesis, Style, and Reputation of *Porgy and Bess* (1935)”<sup>33</sup> and “The Border Territory Between Classical and Broadway: A Voyage Around and About *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *West Side Story*,” Ralph P. Locke’s contribution to the festschrift *Liber amicorum Isabelle Cazeaux: Symbols, Parallels, and Discoveries in Her Honor* (2005).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher Lynch, “Opera and Broadway: The Debate over the Essence of Opera in New York City, 1900-1960,” PhD diss., SUNY Buffalo, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> James Ryan O’Leary, “Broadway Highbrow: Discourse and Politics of the American Musical, 1943-1946,” PhD diss., Yale, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> John Andrew Johnson, “Gershwin’s ‘American Folk Opera’: The Genesis, Style, and Reputation of *Porgy and Bess* (1935),” PhD diss., Harvard, 1996.

<sup>34</sup> Ralph P. Locke, “The Border Territory Between Classical and Broadway: A Voyage Around and About *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *West Side Story*,” In *Liber amicorum Isabelle Cazeaux: Symbols, Parallels, and Discoveries in her*

Finally, in the course of this project I will draw on the scholarship already produced on Fred Rogers and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The only collected volume on the subject is Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel's *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers* (1996).<sup>35</sup> Bringing together essays focusing on such topics as the reality of make-believe, the importance of transitions, the significance of story, and the use of puppets, among others, this book paints a multi-faceted picture of the show, and I have drawn from it to demonstrate specific ways in which the operas help to create and reinforce the regular messages and milieu of the Neighborhood.

A glut of pieces followed Rogers' death in 2003,<sup>36</sup> including memorial posts to online message boards made by thousands of fans, which were quickly followed by several analyses of these memorial writings.<sup>37</sup> A decade then passed before another resurgence of scholarly interest in Rogers' life. In 2015, Michael G. Long released his book *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural*

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*Honor*, edited by Paul-André Bompéchat (New York: Pendragon Press, 2005), 179-226.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel, eds., *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> Margaret Mary Kimmel, "A Rose for Fred: Remembering Mr. Rogers," *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children* 1, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2003): 32-35.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Bishop, "The World's Nicest Grown-Up: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of News Media Coverage of Fred Rogers," *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 1 (March 2003): 16-31.; Stephen Perry and Amanda L. Roesch, "He's in a New Neighborhood Now: Religious Fantasy Themes About 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,'" *Journal of Media & Religion* 3, no. 4 (2004): 199-218.

*Mister Rogers*.<sup>38</sup> He discusses Rogers' "countercultural" ideals, including pacifism, vegetarianism, race relations and diversity, embracing homosexual friends, feeding hungry children around the world, and encouraging individuality and personal expression rather than strict gender roles. He outlines Rogers' stances, usually taken via narratives in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, against the Vietnam War, the arms race, the Cold War, the Persian War, and the War on Terror, the first of which occurred during the very first week *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was broadcast.

Two dissertations were also completed in 2015 focusing on Fred Rogers: Kerry B. Mockler's work for a PhD, "Neighborhoods of Make-Believe: Place, Play, and Possibility in Disneyland, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and *The Magic City*,"<sup>39</sup> and Jeana Lietz' EdD document "Journey to the 'Neighborhood': An Analysis of Fred Rogers and his Lessons for Educational Leaders."<sup>40</sup> The presence of two such documents in close chronological proximity demonstrates a renewed interest in scholarly assessment of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Additional interviews and articles in journals from various disciplines are also useful to consider, as well as trade and popular press publications, which focus on what the *Neighborhood* can contribute to an understanding of

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<sup>38</sup> Michael G. Long, *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Kerry B. Mockler, "Neighborhoods of Make-Believe: Place, Play, and Possibility in Disneyland, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and *The Magic City*," PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Jeana Lietz, "Journey to the 'Neighborhood': An Analysis of Fred Rogers and his Lessons for Educational Leaders," EdD diss., Loyola University-Chicago, 2015.

individual disciplines such as parenting, preaching, management, or education. “Make-Believe Opera,” Nancy Ross’ contribution to *Opera News* in January 1973,<sup>41</sup> holds the distinction of being the only article ever published specifically on Rogers’ operatic productions. It is valuable for several reasons: it offers an opera enthusiast’s take on the performance, urges its readers to view the upcoming broadcast (*Snow People and Warm Kitty*), features quotations from the *Neighborhood* production team that indicate some of the educational goals, and even provides an ever-so-brief reception history in the form of quotations from the author’s four-year-old son and his friends discussing which of the *Neighborhood* operas were their particular favorites.

## METHODOLOGY

Analysis of the type I have undertaken here would be impossible without access to scores, scripts, fan mail, professional correspondence, and recorded broadcasts, for which I am indebted primarily to the archive of the Fred Rogers Center in Latrobe, PA, and its archivist, Emily Uhrin. Many of the broadcasts I mention are currently publicly available through various websites, including pbskids.org, netflix.com, and amazon.com (the first is truly public; the latter two are of course behind subscription paywalls). However, many of the early black-and-white episodes of the *Neighborhood* have not been released for public consumption, and I was able to view the *Babysitter Opera* and its four preceding episodes through the kindness of the Center and the McFeely-Rogers

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<sup>41</sup> Nancy S. Ross, “Make-Believe Opera,” *Opera News* 37 (January 13, 1973): 29-31.

Foundation, which holds the copyright to all the materials, both print and videotaped, that I have examined. I also rely on primary sources including articles and books by Fred Rogers himself, filmed interviews, and documentaries featuring his own words. These sources have been invaluable to me throughout the project, but constitute the backbone of Chapter 2, where I establish guiding principles addressing a variety of issues, including music, that Rogers held dear in constructing his life and his *Neighborhood*. I have also applied the existing secondary literature regarding Rogers' pedagogical convictions to his approach to music and framing the operas. My use of the primary and secondary sources to Fred Rogers' relationship with music constitutes what I believe to be the most comprehensive treatment of the subject yet accomplished.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Building on the introduction and background established in this chapter, in Chapter 2 I will outline a number of beliefs which Rogers held dear, drawn from his own writings and interviews he gave as well as the writings of others about him. This chapter offers a framework for claims I will make about his goals and motivations in composing operas. I will also establish a reliably comprehensive assessment of the oft-repeated statement that "Music is very important to Fred" and demonstrate through this variety of writings that music held an important place in his heart and mind. In this chapter, I will address such issues as his beliefs about the role he should play in preschoolers' education, the value of simplicity, the importance of transitions, television's responsibility to society, and the importance of rehearsal. I also demonstrate how Rogers thought

about music, including his use of musical terminology for non-musical ideas, his “innate” musical nature, his thoughts on the use of music for personal emotional expression, whether and how he chose to shape the musical taste of his viewers, and the value he placed on silence.

Chapter 3 is the first of my three case studies, and focuses on the first opera, the *Babysitter Opera*, produced on the *Neighborhood* in its inaugural year, 1968. The dramatic framing of this episode demonstrates the greatest emphasis on the importance of rehearsal in the production process. It also shows the strongest direct connections with *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and, of the three case studies undertaken here, is the only one to feature puppets as main characters. The particular significance of this fact, in addition to connections with the tradition of puppet opera, is that Fred Rogers, as puppeteer, lent his voice to the performance, despite not appearing as himself inside the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.<sup>42</sup> Here I will employ the literature of Television Opera to demonstrate that Rogers’ time at the NBC Opera Theatre influenced his *Neighborhood*—and not just on opera days! I also introduce John Reardon, outline his career outside the *Neighborhood*, and establish his importance to the operatic productions.

Chapter 4 is the second case study, focusing on the 1982 production. *Spoon Mountain* is representative of what I think of as Rogers’ operatic “middle period”: the productions of the 1970s and early 1980s (in truth, the bulk of the repertoire) all employ a similar aesthetic that renders them much closer to one another than to the earliest and final examples; thus, observations on items such

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<sup>42</sup> A few “middle period” operas, after *Babysitter*, also feature puppets.

as musical style, casting, and—to a certain extent—set design could apply similarly to several of the others. What sets *Spoon Mountain* apart, however, and the reason I selected it for particular scrutiny, is that it is undoubtedly the most operatic production the *Neighborhood* ever saw. This is not to question the veracity of the label as applied to any other performance, but rather to say that *Spoon Mountain* contains the greatest number of examples of historically self-conscious choices that demonstrate the composer's thorough familiarity with opera techniques and conventions. This chapter also introduces Johnny Costa, the *Neighborhood's* talented pianist and musical director, explaining his training and style preference, and the impact those had on the daily soundscape of the show. *Spoon Mountain* is the only opera addressed here that features a frightening and indeed “Wicked” villain. The moral—and musical—treatment of this character raises questions of Rogers' philosophy and convictions on the issues of war, violence, and capital punishment.

*Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* is perhaps the most distinctive example, and will be addressed in Chapter 5 as the third case study. It is in some ways more of a musical than an opera, judging by a checklist of required characteristics, but, as I will argue later, should be considered as part of and in light of the official set of thirteen operas. The story of *Josephine* stayed with Rogers for decades, and appeared in nearly all possible creative forms—short story, LP performance with songs, picture book—before finally warranting treatment as a three-part musical mini-series and taking its place as Rogers' magnum opus in 1989. Its prevailing messages (that looks are not most important and that each individual is special just as they are) are clearly close to

the composer's heart, and may indeed be considered the crux of his *Neighborhood* and his life's work. In addition to providing background information on Betty Aberlin, star of Rogers' operas, this chapter will take on Rogers' approach to difference, as well as the way his choices over the years made statements both subtle and overt about racial equality.

Chapter 6 is the conclusion, where I will summarize the issues addressed throughout the previous five chapters, construct a reception history of this repertoire, introduce recent performances inspired by the *Neighborhood* and its operas, and offer suggestions for future scholarly examination of the musical works of Fred Rogers.

## CHAPTER 2

### WHAT DID MISTER ROGERS THINK?: GUIDING PRINCIPLES REFLECTED IN *MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD* AND ITS OPERAS

Before undertaking to examine the opera case studies individually, we must establish a basic understanding of several important facets of Rogers' life and work. The way he thought about music; his philosophy of the role that television should play in the life of a child—and of society; his responsibility for educating his audience; and the importance of silence are but a few characteristics that weigh heavily into Rogers' construction of his *Neighborhood*, his operas, and himself. Time and again throughout his own writings, speeches, interviews, and the program itself, Fred Rogers demonstrates that music was one of the most important aspects of his life. He thought musically, even about non-musical topics, and incorporated music seamlessly into his own life, conversations, and *Neighborhood*. Music reflected his personality as well as his convictions about emotional expression, show structure, and personal relationships.

This chapter will demonstrate the value Fred Rogers placed on music, and will also introduce convictions that, when enacted, made his *Neighborhood* a unique place on television. The issues examined here include Fred Rogers' Innate Musicality, Music as Metaphor, Music as a Tool for Emotional Expression, Philosophy of Television, The Question of Education, Intentional Simplicity, Recurring Form and Careful Transitions, Gender and Domesticity,

Experimentation, Failure, and the Importance of Practice, Introducing Artisans and Encouraging Creativity, A Non-Hierarchical Musical Aesthetic, and Silence.

### FRED ROGERS' INNATE MUSICALITY

It seems that music has always been at the root of who I am and what I do ... Some people might be surprised to know that first and foremost I consider myself a musician.<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that Fred Rogers had a musical mind—and apparently a musical body, as well. “The insides of me, from the very beginning, have been connected to music,” he told Roderick Townley in an interview.<sup>2</sup> Nearly everyone who knew Fred Rogers also agreed that he was innately musical. Eugenia Zuckerman and Yo-Yo Ma, whose dialogue is included in the *Neighborhood's* only scholarly treatment as the chapter on music, agree that his compositions seemed to flow naturally. Zuckerman states,

There is a real inner-logic to his music-making. It's almost as if the thoughts just come out musically, so it's part of our everyday life instead of something extraneous to it.<sup>3</sup>

Ma later adds, “Music is so much a part of Fred Rogers' life, it's an extension of himself, an expression of his values.”<sup>4</sup> Nancy Curry, with whom Rogers worked and studied at the Arsenal Family and Children's Center during their graduate studies in child development, also agrees: “His musical talent

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Rogers, quotation featured at the Fred Rogers Center Museum, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, PA.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Townley, 71.

<sup>3</sup> Zuckerman, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Yo-Yo Ma, quoted by Zuckerman, 87.

spills over into every aspect of the show and is so much of the background that it could get overlooked.”<sup>5</sup>

Fred Rogers also recognized the characteristic in himself, and late in his career expressed once again his feelings on the value of music, as well as referencing the tremendous amount of music he had memorized over the years.

I don't know what I would do without music. Well, I never have to be without music now, because I have it here [indicating his temple]. It's just such an integral part of my being ... <sup>6</sup>

It is easy to understand why others thought of Rogers as inherently musical. As seen in Chapter 1, he once declared in an interview that a piano was his childhood friend, and the presence of a piano in that interview was not unique. In *Mister Rogers and Me*, filmmaker Benjamin Wagner relates that his first meeting with Rogers was on the weekend of his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2001, and he was offered a tour of the Rogers' Nantucket cabin, The Crooked House. Rogers asked him a direct question about his parents' divorce, which no one had done before, then after listening to the response, rolled his chair over to the piano and began to play “It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” and “Happy Birthday.”<sup>7</sup> That meeting was coincidental—a neighborly chat after a chance meeting on the beach—but Rogers still worked his piano into his daily life and conversation.

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<sup>5</sup> Curry, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999,) Part 7 of 9, 16:00.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Wagner, narrator, *Mister Rogers and Me: A Deep and Simple Documentary Film* (New York: Wagner Brothers, 2014).

When Davy Rothbart wanted to feature Rogers during an episode of *This American Life* on the topic of “Neighbors” the same year Wagner first made Rogers’ acquaintance, he found that setting up the interview was not a particularly easy task. He states during the episode,

It’s taken six months to arrange this meeting. Mr. Rogers is an incredibly busy man. And his staff, though they’re kind and well meaning, is protective of his time. There had been some debate about where we’d meet with Fred. We finally settled on the WQED studios, where Mr. Rogers has filmed his show for the last 30 years. Because, as his chief assistant told me, *Fred feels most comfortable around a piano*.<sup>8</sup>

Many times in the course of his 4.5-hour Archive of American Television interview, Rogers spoke fondly of music. He also spoke fondly of his wife, and related her observation that, despite her career as a concert pianist, playing the piano daily was more essential to him than it was to her.

You know my wife is a concert pianist—she’s part of a two-piano team, Rogers and Morrison. She and Jeannine Morrison play concerts together all over the place, and they do master classes at colleges and everywhere. Joanne was a student of Ernst von Dohnányi, who was a great Hungarian musician. ... As you have surmised, music is essential to our being. And it’s fun to hear Joanne practice, and I play. I mean, I don’t play the way Joanne plays, but she said to me one time, ‘You know, I could go without playing the piano for months at a time, but I know you couldn’t.’ It’s true. I couldn’t. [Interviewer]: Do you play every day? [Rogers]: Oh, yes. There’s one song that Johnny [Costa] arranged, called ‘Isn’t It Romantic?’ It’s a very popular song, but he made this arrangement and I memorized it, and it’s as if I’m visiting with Johnny each time that I play it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Davy Rothbart, Episode 184 “Neighbors,” *This American Life*, May 11, 2001. <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/184/transcript>. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 9 of 9, 5:25. <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

## MUSIC AS METAPHOR

“It has a musical grid, this Neighborhood.  
It’s sort of the heartbeat of it all.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the obvious ways that Rogers expressed himself musically, including composition and performance, he often used musical metaphors to explain non-musical ideas. This is especially evident in the way he spoke of the “form” of the program and the development of “themes.”

Fred... began crafting ‘theme weeks,’ where a full five-day cycle would be devoted to a single topic... which is then interwoven into every aspect of the programs. In the old days such planning was not as premeditated— ‘It has gotten more and more conscious as I have grown more and more facile,’ he says now. ‘Something will pop up in fantasy that I dealt with in reality. *It’s like variations on a theme*; the more that you live with something, the more varied you can make it. If you live with it long enough, you can find things that you never expected to find.’<sup>11</sup>

He also thought of the transitions, mentioned in detail earlier, in terms of modulations—again, as if each episode had a form, and harmonic underpinnings, even separate from its live, improvised soundtrack.

I’ve always had the analogy of *moving from one key to another* in the program... In order to *modulate* from the living room to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe... you want to find as many notes in the new key that are the same as the notes in the old key. And you play with those and almost imperceptibly get into the new key. In the modulation from C to F ... only the B-flat is new. There are a lot of notes you can play as if you were playing in both keys. So little by little you get into F. ... If you’re taking a child to a new school for the first time, it’s very helpful for that child to see the mother and the teacher together and to know that they have good feelings about

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<sup>10</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), part 7 of 9, 15:45.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>

<sup>11</sup> Curry, 36. Emphasis added.

each other. That's a little like playing in both keys at the same time for a while.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in addition to individual moments of modulation, it is clear that Rogers is thinking of each episode as demonstrating another giant of classical form: it's a rondo.<sup>13</sup> He explains the structure, referring to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe as a dreamlike state:

The form of the show... is usually A-B-A-C-A. ... We start in my room [A] and from there we go to some place like Brockett's Bakery [B], as a way of collecting things for the dream. Then we come back [A] and talk about what we have just seen, and then we introduce this dream and go into it [C]. And when we come back [A], we reflect on it.<sup>14</sup>

"When you think about it," he added in 1999, "the *Neighborhood* is just one great big composition, isn't it?"<sup>15</sup>

The *Neighborhood* certainly appeared to be one big composition, and so were the lives of Fred Rogers and his television audience. The 2016 documentary *Lessons From Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* opens with black-and-white footage from the 1967 documentary *Creative Person: Fred Rogers* of Fred Rogers seated at a grand piano. He plays a couple of scales, then turns to address the camera, playing examples of the ideas he describes.

One of my main jobs, it seems to me, is to help, through the mass media, to help children through some of the difficult modulations of

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Townley, 71. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> How unfortunate that Townley incorrectly identified it as theme-and-variation.

<sup>14</sup> Townley, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 7 of 9, 19:20.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

life. Because it's easy, for instance, to go from C to F, and it's easy to go from F to B-flat. Those are all easy modulations, but there are some modulations that aren't so easy. For instance, to go from F to F-sharp, you've got to weave through all sorts of things, and it seems to me if you've got somebody to help you as you weave—maybe this is just too philosophical. Maybe I'm trying to combine things that can't be combined, but it makes sense to me.<sup>16</sup>

This early footage is evidence that he was thinking in a musical way, and even as he recognized that his analogy might not have the same effect for everyone, it was what made sense to him. We can also see here that he was thinking of the difficult transitions in the lives of his audience very early in his career, even before the American version of the *Neighborhood* went on the air. He continued, offering a specific example:

One of the things that I feel is tough for a child is the time when a new baby comes to the house, and this is a period of modulation. Especially if it's a first child and an only child, he has got to modulate his theme into becoming the first child but not the only child.<sup>17</sup>

Everyone has times in his or her life when “modulating” from one place or role or experience to another is necessary. These changes are part of growing up, and improving in emotionally healthy ways. Rogers’ musical and emotional understanding proved valuable both to his own maturation process, and to aid his audience in their growth.

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<sup>16</sup> Fred Rogers, interview included on the documentary *Lessons from Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, 0:20.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Rogers, interview on *Lessons from Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, 30:00.

## MUSIC AS A TOOL FOR EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

The music is a huge part of my work. That was always my way of saying who I was and how I felt.<sup>18</sup>

Much as he clung to the hope and outlet for emotional expression that music had offered him as a child, Rogers sought to provide the same release for children with whom he had contact. Fellow graduate student Nancy Curry related the following experience of seeing him with the children in the Arsenal classroom:

Fred used not only his puppets to relate to the children's emotional concerns but also his music. We were privileged to hear his old songs and a steady stream of new ones he was creating. The children listened to and sang the songs; they also danced to the improvisations he developed to their rhythms. One child, whose father was killed that year, turned to music and dancing for relief and for expression of the deep emotions that were tugging and pulling at her. Often Fred would take special time to match his music to her whirling and twirling, in recognition of the inarticulate nature of her feelings.<sup>19</sup>

Rogers did not outgrow his need to express his emotions musically. It is not as if he thought that playing his feelings at the piano was an immature, childish means of self-expression, which he happily replaced with speech or other more adult media. Amy Hollingsworth wondered what Mister Rogers did if and when he ever got angry, so she asked his friend, public relations specialist, and co-star David Newell, who would be able to answer from many years of experience on set.

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<sup>18</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 1 of 9, 4:55.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>19</sup> Curry, 55.

Because of his serene nature, it's hard to believe that Fred Rogers ever got angry. When I asked David Newell, who plays Mr. McFeely on the program, what Fred did when he was angry, he told me that he played the piano, a coping mechanism he'd had since he was a child.<sup>20</sup>

Art Vogel, broadcast engineer and cameraman, shared a similar memory:

Fred was such a great person. I could read music ... and I'd come in and I'd play Fred's piano, and it was fine. I say Fred's piano, because, it was Fred's. He made that a piano. Johnny Costa made the piano talk, but Fred would sit there and, when he got angry, he played so beautifully. And I would just sit there and think, "Why can't I do that?" [Wiederhorn]: When he got angry, you say, I thought you were going to say he played so quickly or he played so loudly, but you say he played so beautifully. [Vogel]: I think that's the way he brought himself down to a calmness. No, no, he didn't pound or bang. [Wiederhorn]: What kinds of things did he play? Do you remember?[Vogel]: Well, it could be anything from what he had written for the shows, it could be show tunes, it could be classical, and I'm sure he played a lot of classical because of Joanne.<sup>21</sup>

When Rogers encouraged his viewing audience's use of music as a healthy means of expressing anger, he was not merely speaking from his childhood, but from his own ongoing experience.

## PHILOSOPHY OF TELEVISION

In his essay "The Significance of Story," George Gerbner discusses the ubiquity of television and influence that it has had on American children since the mid/late twentieth century.

The first and most important characteristic is that television is a ritual. Most people watch television by the clock and not by the

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<sup>20</sup> Hollingsworth, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Art Vogel, interview by Jessica Wiederhorn, *Fred Rogers History Interviews*, Pittsburgh: June 13, 2007, 0:01.  
<http://exhibit.fredrogerscenter.org/early-life-education/videos/view/947/>.

program. Its true predecessor is not radio or film, but preindustrial religion. Children today are born into a home in which the set is on an average of seven hours a day... It is like wallpaper: you are born into it; you absorb its patterns without knowing; and you learn a great deal about your surroundings.<sup>22</sup>

Fred Rogers was also aware of the power that television held. Through the years, he made numerous statements about his philosophy of television: how it should function in the life of a child and a family; the vast potential it held for exposing everyone—not just the upper class or the urban dwellers—to fine arts; and the responsibility incumbent upon such a powerful medium to project positive messages to its viewers.

His own path into television, as he tells it, was motivated by a negative experience: he was home for spring break during his senior year at Rollins College, when he encountered the medium for the first time.

I was accepted to Pittsburgh Theological—well, it was called Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh—and was supposed to go there the following fall.<sup>23</sup> But I went home my senior year for a vacation in Latrobe and I saw this new thing called television. And I saw people throwing pies in each others' faces, and I thought this could be a wonderful tool for education. Why is it being used this way? And so I said to my parents, "You know, I don't think I'll go to seminary right away; I think maybe I'll go into television." And they said "But you've never even seen it!" and I said, "Well, I've seen enough of it here that I'd like to try." So I applied for any position I could get at NBC in New York, and I was accepted, probably

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<sup>22</sup> George Gerbner, "Fred Rogers and the Significance of Story," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Western Theological Seminary was a seminary of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 1959, the denomination merged with the United Presbyterian Church of North America, and their seminaries merged as well. Western and Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary joined to form Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Thus, Rogers was accepted to Western in 1951 but eventually graduated from Pittsburgh in 1963; they may be considered to be the same school.

because I had this degree in music, and they wanted an assistant to work on the music programs. ... I didn't watch much else, I just thought, hey, let's see what we can do with this.<sup>24</sup>

Rogers' parents were surprised that he decided to delay his studies at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, later completed in 1963, in favor of taking an entry-level position at NBC, but 23-year-old Fred had seen enough. Television could be better than people demeaning one another on the air, and he had found his calling.

Rogers was concerned that parents had to spend time worrying about monitoring and limiting the content their children absorbed through TV, preferring that the industry itself choose to produce only positive, high quality programming.

I wish I knew how we could better point to all the riches of our society and how the media—television, radio, computers, magazines—could take an assignment to do our best to make goodness attractive. We're so caught up in glorifying the opposite. It is so unfair for parents to have to be so vigilant. They have so much that they have to do besides being police people."<sup>25</sup>

He still recognized, however, that a television's presence in any given home would be understood by the children as having the endorsement of the parents.

Just like a refrigerator or a stove, television is seen by children as something that parents provide. In a young child's mind, then, parents probably condone what's on the television set, just like they choose what's in the refrigerator or on the stove!<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television*, July 22, 1999, Part 2 of 9, 3:20. <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>. This is a standardized narrative, told repeatedly to different sources, in nearly the same way each time.

<sup>25</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Wendy Murray Zoba, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Bianculli, "The Myth, the Man, the Legend," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark

It quickly becomes clear that when Rogers speaks of television's greatest asset, the ability to share "cultural riches," he is mostly speaking of disseminating music.

Fine art, civilized speech, thoughtful ways of interacting with people—children's introduction to such things can come early, on television. Some children wouldn't have the opportunity of some of those cultural riches—even to know what an opera or a symphony or a cello was—if not for television.<sup>27</sup>

In his acceptance speech upon being inducted into the TV Hall of Fame in 1999, Rogers stated two of his most heartfelt convictions: the weighty responsibility of the television industry and the importance of spreading music, when he began,

Fame is a four-letter word. And like tape or zoom or face or pain or life or love, what ultimately matters is what we do with it. I feel that those of us in television are chosen to be servants. It doesn't matter what our particular job, we are chosen to help meet the deeper needs of those who watch and listen day and night. The conductor of the orchestra at the Hollywood Bowl grew up in a family that had little interest in music, but he often tells people he found his early inspiration from the fine musicians on television.<sup>28</sup>

This example of a high point of television's success—inspiring a young viewer toward a successful career in music—is quickly followed by an example of the opposite effect that negative ideas, when broadcast, can have upon children. He then issues a call to a higher standard of quality productions:

Last month, a 13-year-old boy abducted an 8-year-old girl, and when people ask him why, he says he learned about it on TV. 'Something different to try,' he said. 'Life's cheap, what does it

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Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 48.

<sup>27</sup> Rogers, quoted by Bianculli, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Rogers, "Acceptance Speech: TV Hall of Fame," surprise presenter Jeff Erlanger's entrance at the beginning of video, speech begins at 2:15. <http://exhibit.fredrogerscenter.org/advocacy-for-children/videos/view/970/>.

matter?’ Well, life isn’t cheap. It’s the greatest mystery of any millennium, and television needs to do all it can to broadcast that, to show and tell what the good in life is all about. But how do we make goodness attractive? By doing whatever we can to bring courage to those whose lives move near our own. By treating our neighbor at least as well as we treat ourselves, and allowing that to inform everything that we produce.<sup>29</sup>

Mary Rawson relates another example of Rogers explaining the good effect that television can have, and the moment he chooses to highlight is unsurprising:

He tells the story about a two-year-old who, after watching the Neighborhood visit with Yo-Yo Ma, started using a Popsicle stick on an old guitar and begged to learn to play the cello. Fred tells this story to illustrate what television can offer. He says, “The question is not, ‘What can we sell them?’ ... or even ‘What can we give them?’ ... but rather, ‘*Who are they?*’ What do they bring to the television set?”<sup>30</sup>

Speaking of David Sarnoff, the television pioneer responsible for a variety of successes, including bringing Arturo Toscanini to conduct the NBC Opera Theatre orchestra, Rogers paid him a high compliment:

I think he took it seriously that broadcasting could enhance the public. ... I mean, those operas—somebody sitting out in Kansas who had never been to New York, for instance—to see *Amahl and the Night Visitors* or *Trouble in Tahiti*, or *Pique Dame*, or any of the ones that we produced... talk about enhancing culture! Television has such a great chance to do that!<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Rogers, Acceptance Speech: “TV Hall of Fame.”

<sup>30</sup> Mary Rawson, “Other Viewers, Other Rooms,” in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 180. Ellipses and italics in the original.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 3 of 9, 8:40.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

Pulitzer Prize—winning *Washington Post* television critic Tom Shales equated *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* with the sort of programming that Rogers himself saw as ideal for what television should hope to accomplish:

I saw him one day with Yo-Yo Ma, and you know, Yo-Yo Ma should be on TV more often, well, here he was on *Mister Rogers*, and he has opera people come on, and stuff like that. It's a cultural event, it's not just a show.<sup>32</sup>

In a 2000 interview with Wendy Murray Zoba, Rogers again offered contrasting examples of television's roles in the world. This time the "bad" is not kidnapping, but lack of empathy, crassness, and rampant commercialism. The "good," of course, is music.

At its worst television can be "degrading, reducing important human feelings to the status of caricature or trivia" and even "encouraging pathology." ... "Television started out by attempting to bring cultural riches to its viewers, like NBC's *Opera Theatre*. But that was before there were millions and millions of viewers. Then it became a tool for selling."<sup>33</sup>

The "tool for selling" aspect of television was one that Rogers did not engage in personally. Recognizing that his message held great sway over his audience, and wishing to reserve that power and his integrity for messages of great importance, he never personally endorsed any products. He did make one commercial in the early 1960s before *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was created, but it was King Friday who was the actual spokesman.

I'm just very grateful that I haven't had to do commercials. I'm so concerned... particularly about selling things to children. I would've never done it on my own. I would've said, 'I'm going home' if they

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Shales, interview included in the documentary *Fred Rogers: America's Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 42:10.

<sup>33</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Zoba, 41.

said it had to be Fred who did it, but King Friday set aside his crown that day... I disapprove of hosts of children's programming pitching anything, because they're to be trusted by the children, and they're not to use that trust to be hucksters.<sup>34</sup>

He was so determined not to have his likeness associated with any particular commercial enterprise that in 1984 he personally called Burger King's Vice President for Marketing, Don Dempsey, in response to their commercial in which "Mr. Rodney" taught the audience the word "McFrying." The parody, it seems, was a little too convincing: "To have someone who looks like me doing a commercial is very confusing for children," Rogers explained.<sup>35</sup> He was not offended by parodies per se, at other times claiming to find Eddie Murphy's "Mister Robinson's Neighborhood" segment amusing, but the implication of his endorsement was not acceptable. Fortunately, Dempsey was receptive to the request, and the commercial was pulled from the airwaves within 72 hours, without legal action or even threat of a lawsuit.

In 1955, Leland Hazard, Vice-President and General Counsel of the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company and President of WQED, wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* advocating for non-commercial educational television, of which WQED was of course a leading example. He spoke of *The Children's Corner*, then only a year old, and the potentially confusing mix for children if it were mixed with commercial interests:

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<sup>34</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 5 of 9, 26:15.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>35</sup> AP, "Mister Rogers Evicts Burger King's TV ad," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Wednesday May 9 1984): Business/Economics p. 30.

How would its delectable puppet, Daniel S. Tiger, President of the ‘Tame Tiger Torganization,’ that humanitarian tiger of good will - how would he fare commingling his young wisdom with plugs for Acme Flakes? Who knows? But he has already proved in Pittsburgh that television does not live by commercials alone.<sup>36</sup>

Gerbner follows his introduction of television omnipresence with an assessment of how Rogers’ approach is different, and his refraining from commercial endorsements is an important part of what sets him apart from what the rest of the airwaves had to offer.

In a world of too many manufactured dreams, Fred Rogers is hand-crafting—for us as well as for our children—the dreams that heal. Just how does Fred craft these dreams? First, he always has something to tell, rather than something to sell. He has a purpose, a message that respects the viewer and what the viewer may need, rather than what the viewer may be induced to buy.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, Rogers truly believed that relationships of a certain type were necessarily formed between the creators and viewers of television, and that the medium’s influence on the public is undeniable. “I’ve never thought I needed to put on a funny hat, or jump through the hoop,” he told Margaret McFarland in the early years of the *Neighborhood*, “to have a relationship with a child.”<sup>38</sup>

Television is an exceedingly personal medium. It reflects the story back to us. And the story that we bring to the screen – whatever we happen to be watching, we bring our own story to the screen – and so consequently it’s like a dialogue. And there are those people who sometimes say that television doesn’t affect us all that much. Well, all I can say then is why would advertisers pay so much money to

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<sup>36</sup> Leland Hazard, “Educational Television,” *The Atlantic* 196 (November 1955): 62. “Tame Tiger Torganization” was indeed the name of the group that Daniel led.

<sup>37</sup> Gerbner, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Fred Rogers, interview included in the documentary *Lessons from Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* by Judy Rubin (Pittsburgh: Expressive Media, 2012), 17:30.

put their messages on a medium that doesn't affect us all that much? I do feel that what we see and hear on a screen is part of who we become.<sup>39</sup>

## THE QUESTION OF EDUCATION

Numerous articles discuss Rogers' "educational" goals for his program, most of them presenting the contrast between the *Neighborhood* and the other famous locale on PBS, *Sesame Street*. In 1971, Ruth Schlarbaum reflected on the differences between the two shows, which included asking other mothers which of the two they preferred. One mother in the group said, if forced to choose between the two, she would have her children watch *Sesame Street*, and offered the following explanation: "*Sesame Street* teaches my kids about vocabulary and counting and all, things I just don't have time to sit down and work with. *Misterogers* provides things the children already get at home."<sup>40</sup> Upon reflection, Schlarbaum concludes that this mother's approach is short-sighted, and reminds us, "Very few times are numbers and letters emphasized or even mentioned. What is emphasized is the way the individual child feels about his family, his world, and, most important, himself."<sup>41</sup> Historian David McCullough recognized the same message in Rogers' work:

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<sup>39</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 1 of 9, 18:15.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>40</sup> Ruthanne Schlarbaum, "*Misterogers Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street*," *Colloquy* (September 1971): 1. Schlarbaum's rendering in her title reflects the spelling of the initial title of the *Neighborhood*.

<sup>41</sup> Schlarbaum, 2.

What's so important about what Fred Rogers does on television is that it is unlike anything else on television. ... And what is he teaching? How to count to ten? No! How to name all the capitals to the United States? No! Here's what he's teaching: 'You are like nobody else. There is only one person in the world like you, and ... people can like you exactly the way you are.'<sup>42</sup>

Rogers did not make it his business to teach the alphabet or colors or numbers during his television visits, and at times he took criticism for it. His thoughts on the matter were that formal schooling would come soon enough, but the opportunity to teach positive self-worth, accurate self-knowledge, and healthy self-expression—"to be able to say 'This is who I am and this is how I feel' without hurting yourself or anybody else," as he put it, must be seized as early and as often as possible. "Margaret McFarland used to say that the difference between *Mister Rogers* and most television for children is that 'it is less a show for children and more [a show about] real communication.'"<sup>43</sup>

Hedda Sharapan, by then Director of Early Childhood Initiatives for the Fred Rogers Company, shared in an interview with *Apples Video Magazine* an incident when Rogers was asked about his lack of "education" on the show:

A reporter once asked him, early on, 'Why don't you spend more time with numbers and letters, [with air quotes] 'teaching the children' those kinds of things?' And Fred said, 'It's because I would like to give children the tools of learning.' There are things like curiosity, wondering, trying to figure things out, problem solving, getting along with others, being able to talk about your feelings ... the ability to calm yourself down, control yourself ... to cooperate with others, to listen – even to listen to an adult talk to you so you can process what the adult is saying, to focus your attention. Those

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<sup>42</sup> David McCullough, quotation featured at the Fred Rogers Center Museum, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, PA.

<sup>43</sup> Wendy Murray Zoba, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?: At the Center of Mister Rogers' Cheery Songs and Smiles Lies a God-Ordained Mission to Children," *Christianity Today* 44, no. 3 (March 6, 2000): 45.

are the things we need to ... promote in young children. ... Because if they learn the tools, they'll be more likely to learn the facts, and they'll be motivated to learn the facts, but more importantly, they'll use the facts to build and not to destroy.<sup>44</sup>

In an interview with T.L. Warburton for *Journal of Popular Film & Television* in 1988, Rogers explained the primacy of emotion in his work:

I'm about to write a week about dance. ... I would never do a week of programs that was simply cognitively oriented. There's plenty of that. There's nothing wrong with giving children cognitive stimulation, but that's not the only thing that I am. And there are so few communicators who really care to add feelings to the cognitions that I feel that that's what I must do. So it will be a week in which the dance expresses feelings. And I hope that that's what I'll be able to do in all of the special weeks, and the books, and everything that we produce.<sup>45</sup>

Joan Ganz Cooney, founder of Sesame Workshop, offered her assessment of Rogers' work, and compared her own show with the *Neighborhood*:

I admire everything he does. I think if I chose that which I loved the most about his work, it would be his music: his lyrics and music. We were saying when we started that we were interested in the cognitive development of children primarily: letters, numbers, preparing them for school. I think Fred would have said that he was interested in the affective development of children, the psychological, emotional development of children. So we saw this more as operating in two different spheres.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hedda Sharapan, "The Fred Rogers Legacy: A Dialogue with Hedda Sharapan," *Apples Video Magazine* 175 (Western Illinois University, 2012), 20:00.

<sup>45</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by T.L. Warburton, "A Visit with Fred Rogers: A Guided Tour through a Special Neighborhood," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1988), 38.

<sup>46</sup> Joan Ganz Cooney, interview, included on the documentary *Fred Rogers: America's Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: The Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 10:50.

Referring to the same two spheres, Dr. Milton Chen also said, “Fred believed that education for the heart is as important as education for the mind.”<sup>47</sup> Rogers told Charlie Rose in a 1994 interview, “I’m very concerned that our society is much more interested in information than wonder; in noise rather than silence.”<sup>48</sup> He didn’t see it as his primary job to transmit information, especially since his audience could get that elsewhere. He preferred the considerably more challenging task of facilitating and encouraging wonder. This is not to say, of course, that no one ever learned anything while watching Mister Rogers on television: I myself recall learning how crayons are made from Picture Picture, and the procedure for a favorite childhood snack (peanut butter balls with graham cracker crumbs) from the lips of the man himself. However, unlike many (or indeed most) other children’s programming on PBS for decades, Rogers had no interest in taking the place of a kindergarten classroom.

We must then consider all these facts together: as a gifted musician also trained in child development, Rogers chose not to teach facts but to model a healthy way to be in the world. Thus, his ideas on music and opera for the youngest of children were revolutionary, especially since the music was so pervasive. He was not teaching musical literacy, note names, or lists of “operas you should know to be a cultured person.” Music was not something that needed to be learned in order to enjoy it or benefit from it, but something that simply is, and can be appreciated by anyone. Rogers believed that his music was the

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<sup>47</sup> Dr. Milton Chen, quotation featured in a display at the Fred Rogers Center Museum, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, PA.

<sup>48</sup> Fred Rogers, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, September 20, 1994, 3:50. <https://charlierose.com/videos/5544>.

greatest gift he had given to his viewers, and it served as one of his own most powerful tools in modeling the person he hoped all children would grow to be: thoughtful, emotionally aware, and honestly expressive. Yo-Yo Ma agrees:

He is not there to entertain kids, and the parents don't have to entertain their kids, either. But I think kids also pick up on their parents' passions if the parents care to share them. If you are genuinely interested in something then you'll say something about it. It's not pandering and it's not saying 'this is something you have to know.' Instead, it's saying 'this is something that is important to me and I want to share it with you.' In Fred's case, I know he loves music.<sup>49</sup>

Taken with his philosophy toward his role of teaching, Rogers can hardly be accused of running an audience-building campaign for its own sake. He was beholden to no particular opera company, and while he certainly would have been pleased with the idea of his viewers growing up to be patrons, producers, and performers of the arts, he did not set out simply or even primarily to build future audiences.

## SIMPLICITY

Many people don't associate children's television (or *any* television) with "art." But no one who seriously examines the work Fred Rogers has done over three decades can doubt his artistry, unpretentious and understated though it may be.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Yo-Yo Ma, quoted by Eugenia Zukerman, "Musical Notes: An Interview with Yo-Yo Ma," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 79.

<sup>50</sup> Roderick Townley, "Fred's Shoes: The Meaning of Transitions in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 67.

Simplicity, in composition as well as in life, is often maligned and just as frequently misunderstood. Arvo Pärt has spoken of his youthful tendency to use a lot of notes in his compositions, which he likens, when reflecting back, to a careless scattering of coins or jewels on a page. As he matured, Pärt preferred a different approach to his relationship with his compositions, one that used fewer notes and forced him to consider each one carefully, as if holding it in his hands. “Every note is decisive, every note is telling,” he told Alex Ross in 2002.<sup>51</sup> Stripped of lush Romantic orchestration and bombastic harmonies, his works force both composer and listener to appreciate each individual note, for each is of vital importance. This sparseness of texture and scarcity of pitches does not indicate a lack of thought on the part of either composer or performer, however. In fact, one might say that for many composers of the twentieth century, the compositions with fewest pitches sounding simultaneously are actually evidence of the most complex systems of thought behind their creation.

Rogers’ dedication to self-discipline, schedule, ritual, and the ability to understand and communicate the essence of things echoes the rigorous ideals of other twentieth-century composers. The *Neighborhood*, as much as it has been dismissed as “simple,” has also been defended as “deceptively simple” – and the same can be said for his music.

In a slow voice and dead-on stare, Fred Rogers has spoken to unseen millions of children about self-respect and respecting others. It’s a deceptively simple message about tolerance and self-respect that’s been honed from a complex life, fully and generously lived. Such simplicity isn’t easy. Simplicity is nature’s complex

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<sup>51</sup> Arvo Pärt, quoted by Alex Ross, “Consolations: Arvo Pärt,” *The Rest is Noise* December 2, 2002, accessed April 2, 2016.  
[http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/arvo\\_prt\\_1.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/arvo_prt_1.html).

economy of effort and focus. Polymer crystals are ‘simple.’ So are electrons. ... Simplicity isn’t a failure but something to be sought. “Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free,’ the Shaker hymn begins... It’s the clarity that Thoreau spoke of—not an easy life but one that edges toward the core of existence, one that sheds the layers of possessions and prepossessions. It’s an omnipotent simplicity that looks past our material accoutrements to our true mettle, the stuff that makes us who we are.<sup>52</sup>

Simple is not the same as easy. True simplicity is not easy to achieve, nor is it easy to imitate. While Rogers aspired to embody the straightforward truth, determined not to be encumbered by self-consciousness or pretense, his songs often speak truths that are easier to sing than they are to speak. And yet—despite the apparent simplicity of his melodies—many of his songs are actually not, in fact, easy to sing. In addition to the sophisticated, chromatic, and harmonically interesting accompaniments realized by the *Neighborhood*’s live accompanist, jazz pianist Johnny Costa, Rogers’ songs regularly featured large melodic ranges and difficult or unusual intervals. “What Do You Do (With the Mad That You Feel)” features repeated ascending and descending minor-sixth leaps, and “Let’s Think of Something to Do While We’re Waiting” has a melodic range of exactly an octave and a half. These are only two examples of several hundred songs Rogers wrote and performed on the *Neighborhood*, many of which feature elements that would be recognized by even some trained singers as challenging to perform.

Many peripheral viewers of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* might come away with the idea that Mister Rogers was purposely one-dimensional and simplistic, for children’s sake. I admit this was my first impression of the program. But the more I watched with my children the more I realized that simplicity and simplistic are two different things. In fact, if Mister Rogers was doing anything, he

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<sup>52</sup> Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel, “Preface,” in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), xvii.

was underscoring the need for authenticity and acceptance of the complexity of human nature. For him, this self-knowledge was always the starting point.<sup>53</sup>

The National Education Television series *The Creative Person* profiled Fred Rogers in 1967. The narrator described his program, then entitled *Misterogers*, as “gently-paced, non-violent, non-sweet, adult in language, child in substance.” He continues:

It is not simple, however: a first glance is deceiving. A single unit of sight and sound may combine a child’s preoccupation with water play, his fascination with mechanical toys, his delight in song, and his concern about his behavior in relationship with the adult world.<sup>54</sup>

The *Neighborhood*’s simplicity is not due to a lack of thought, planning, or effort: in fact, it is quite the opposite.

It is mind-boggling to think that he writes the songs and the scripts and performs in front of the camera as well as supplying most of the puppet voices. The show appears to be low-keyed and relaxed, and its pace does not reflect the tremendous energy its creation requires.<sup>55</sup>

Rogers explained some of the energy required, especially in proportion to what is seen on camera:

We figure that for every minute that’s on the air there is at least an hour of production. That’s just a rule of thumb. On some of the remotes, it’s much more than that, of course, but that’s just an

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<sup>53</sup> Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World’s Most Beloved Neighbor* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2005), 62.

<sup>54</sup> *Creative Person: Fred Rogers*, 1967, included on *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh, 2004), 1:30:32.

<sup>55</sup> Nancy Curry, “The Reality of Make-Believe,” in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 58.

average. And that doesn't count the script writing and all the telephone calls and all of the production meetings and all of that, it's just production. It looks so effortless—and that's the way it should look. But it's a lot of effort. There are some scenes that I'll do in my room, for instance, and every time we tape a scene, then I go and sit and look at it. And invariably there might be something—I might do a scene seven times. I just want it to be comfortable and right. ... I want something to be as clear as possible, and unencumbered.<sup>56</sup>

The musical soundtrack was improvised live during taping, so each time Rogers wished to do a re-take, Johnny Costa and his fellow trio members would play again with the new iteration. Rogers' commitment to the highest quality was not simply a matter of his own time and effort, but his entire staff's, and many more hours of jazz were produced than actually made it on the air.

Fred Rogers did not craft a simple show—or a simple life—by accident. He knew work was required to present the world in this way, but he also knew the benefits that would come from the effort. In a conversation while on vacation on Nantucket Island, he told MTV producer Benjamin Wagner, “I feel so strongly that deep and simple is far more essential than shallow and complex.”<sup>57</sup>

## RECURRING FORMAT AND CAREFUL TRANSITIONS

While Rogers took an unconventional approach to education for his daily program, and he covered a wide range of topics over the years, the episodes did

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<sup>56</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 7 of 9, 24:05.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>57</sup> Fred Rogers, paraphrasing Bo Lozoff, quoted by Benjamin Wagner, *Mister Rogers and Me: A Deep and Simple Documentary Film* (New York: Wagner Brothers, 2014), 5:35.

not feel unconventional or unfamiliar to the audience: he intentionally maintained a sequence of events that provided familiarity to the viewers.

Closely tied with his educational goals and well-considered simplicity, providing welcome, comforting transitions was a clear priority in Fred Rogers' approach to television production. This idea is explored and enacted in different ways in each of the operas, which I will discuss more fully later on, but it is still important to mention here, as a regular, daily characteristic of the *Neighborhood*. It is difficult to find an analysis of Rogers' program that does not eventually address how carefully he handles moments of change, whether moving to a new location, beginning a new activity, or introducing a new idea for consideration. The mainstay transitional objects/moments are clear: Mister Rogers changes out of his coat and into a sweater; Mister Rogers removes his loafers and ties on his blue tennis shoes; when it is time to visit the Land of Make-Believe, the trolley—and the trolley's familiar music—will convey us there safely.

Rogers himself has said that 'the matter of transitions is one of the most important aspects of the whole thing.' But 'the whole thing' here refers not only to the *Neighborhood*, but to the cycles of life... Margaret McFarland—his longtime mentor and psychological consultant to the program—...considered transitions as one of 'the most important aspects of people's lives.'<sup>58</sup>

Of course, it does not take long before the inevitable comparison is made: Rogers is the undisputed king of unbroken eye contact, of pauses that invite reflection, and of modulations prepared with the utmost care. What, then, in light of these accolades, are we to say about *Sesame Street*? Townley is not the first to offer *Sesame Street* as a foil to the *Neighborhood*'s occupation of time and space,

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<sup>58</sup> Townley, 68.

but he describes it well, referring to the “quick-cutting visual chaos... zinging past the child’s consciousness without any time to make connections, if indeed connections exist.”<sup>59</sup>

...such recurrent modules, popping out of the visual maelstrom at unpredictable moments, hardly add up to a sense of continuity. Such an approach encourages children to accept disorder as a representation of the way the world really is. ... It’s hard, therefore, to see the advantage of teaching preschoolers letters and numbers if one is ultimately compromising their ability to concentrate. ... Looking back, Rogers identifies *Laugh-In* as the program that introduced the pseudo-psychedelic quick-cut to the TV lexicon. In the late 1960s, the device was effective in shocking adults into laughter. It was never intended as a tool for early childhood development. ... ‘I’ve resisted that,’ says Rogers. ‘I’m interested in continuity. There’s something that goes against my existential being to have things cut up like that.’<sup>60</sup>

Rather than have things cut up like *Sesame Street* or any number of children’s television shows since, Rogers ensured that his program provided time and space for thought.

Each episode of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, save for “special events” such as the opera performances, followed a reliable form. A standard episode opens with Johnny Costa performing an embellished interpretation of the theme song, “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” while the camera panned over a model neighborhood with superimposed title screen. Once the camera delivered the viewers to the outside of Rogers’ house, he appeared wearing a coat and tie, and sang the theme song, an invitation to friendship and neighborliness. Meanwhile, he entered the house, retrieved a zippered sweater from the closet,

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<sup>59</sup> Townley, 68.

<sup>60</sup> Townley, 69.

hung his coat in its place, and exchanged his dress shoes for blue sneakers sitting on a bench.

Often, Rogers arrived with an object of some kind, and began his “television visit” by explaining how the toy or tool could be used, while inviting the viewers to imagine different ways they might use it as well. Speedy Deliveryman Mister McFeely would often arrive after a few minutes to deliver a letter or some other item, which might complement or complete the device Rogers was working with already. Sometimes, Mister McFeely delivered a guest to demonstrate a special skill or occupation. Alternatively, he would arrive with a “video tape” containing a pre-recorded documentary on a topic that could not be performed on-set, often with footage of a factory making some familiar household object such as bread, crayons, or tennis shoes. After this “trip” to a location outside the Neighborhood, Rogers would return his house and verbally process the new information that had been presented. He discussed more than mechanical processes, however; he would often speak frankly about struggles he had faced as a child, asking his neighbors whether they also experience negative feelings or challenges, such as jealousy, anger, or fear.

A second opportunity to “travel” would then occur in the latter part of the episode, when the trolley, which had tracks that connected the living room and the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, moved into the imaginary kingdom populated by humans and puppets alike. The Make-Believe residents were always addressing situations or ideas that paralleled the discussions Rogers had already undertaken in the earlier segments. When the day’s narrative (which was serial and connected throughout the week) was complete, the camera would follow the

trolley back through the tunnel and into the living room. After some concluding remarks about the goings-on in Make-Believe, tying them in with his earlier conversations, Rogers would usually walk into the kitchen set and feed the fish. He made sure to verbalize the process of feeding the fish after a blind child wrote in and asked him to say aloud when he was doing it, since that was her favorite part of the show. Throughout the entire show, Rogers and other characters always sang several songs, and the action was underscored by a jazz trio headed by pianist Johnny Costa playing live in studio.

As the half-hour drew to a close, Mister Rogers would pack up his things and conclude the day's proceedings, emphasizing the opportunity to look forward to coming back together tomorrow. Finally, he reversed his procedure with his coat and shoes, sang a concluding song ("Tomorrow" in the early days, and "It's Such a Good Feeling (To Know You're Alive)" for many years), and waved goodbye.

Each of the regularly occurring segments was prefaced with anticipation and accompanied by visual and aural cues which aided in emphasizing the idea of travel and transition. The recurring processes of changing outer clothing items, using the trolley for access to Make-Believe, and "moving" through the model neighborhood helped to prepare the audience for each new experience Mister Rogers would bring them.

## GENDER AND DOMESTICITY

Rumors persist, despite their utter falsehood, that Mister Rogers was actually a Navy SEAL / had been a sniper with [insert outlandish number]

confirmed kills / was covered in tattoos (the tattoos are said to explain his need for the ubiquitous sweaters). These ideas may be spread as a way of explaining Rogers' persona: it is easier to believe that the gentle, affirming exterior is all an act; the sweaters—part costume, part armor—shield their wearer from criticism and shroud his true self from our view. These rumors, which with the aid of the internet refuse to die, reveal nothing of Rogers' character, but instead tell us something of their creators, and their belief that Mister Rogers could not possibly be the way that he appears, that surely he must be hiding something, and it must be the total opposite of his on-screen representation. On the other hand, rumors and assumptions are made which take Rogers at face value, but likewise assume that he must still be hiding something. Surely, the second set of rumors begins, no man so understanding and passive could be straight. Michael Long addressed this assumption in a blog post written in tandem with his 2015 book.

'Wasn't he gay?' That's what people often ask me when they learn that I'm working on a book about Fred Rogers — the beloved creator, writer, and host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. I've come to believe that the question, however intended, reveals just as much about the questioners as it does about Rogers.<sup>61</sup>

In *Peaceful Neighbor*, Long includes a chapter entitled "I'm Tired of Being a Lady: Tough Girls, Sensitive Boys" in which he provides the following description:

Mister Rogers was the opposite of macho. He showed no hint of physical brawn; his chin was weak, his muscles toned but underdeveloped, and his face eternally smooth. A model of male softness and sensitivity, Rogers cut a striking figure on and off

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<sup>61</sup> Michael G. Long, "Wasn't He Gay?: A Revealing Question About Mister Rogers," *Huffington Post* October 21, 2014 / Updated February 2, 2016. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-g-long/wasnt-he-gay-a-revealing-\\_b\\_6014538.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-g-long/wasnt-he-gay-a-revealing-_b_6014538.html).

television. He was not aggressive in any way. He talked softly and carried no stick; his spirit was gentle and tender, patient and trustworthy, and receptive and loving. He truly loved children, and loved connecting with them on their own level.<sup>62</sup>

Whether or not this passage is lovely, as I find it to be, is all a matter of perspective. For champions of aggression, developed muscles, talking loudly, carrying big sticks, or—perhaps most common of all—the idea that “real men” are emotionally distant, it would read as an insult. Of course, Rogers was neither gay nor a veteran of the military (in fact, he was a staunch pacifist, vegetarian, and teetotaler, as Long also outlines) but his particular construction of masculinity provided room for boys and girls to explore their own interests, thoughts, and feelings.

Kerry B. Mockler explores the same ideas of Rogers’ gender performance in her 2015 dissertation:

The kind of masculinity performed by Rogers and, in varying degrees, his neighbors and guests, runs counter to most mainstream notions of acceptable male behavior. Popular media comments on this routinely, using adjectives from ‘quiet’ or ‘gentle’ to ‘wimp’ or ‘sissy.’ Though many writers explain Rogers’ performance of masculinity as one that enables him to convey his message, none suggest that this performance may in fact be the message. Yet one of the foundational beliefs of everyone working on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* comes from Margaret McFarland, professor of developmental psychology at Pitt and Fred Rogers’ mentor: ‘Attitudes are caught, not taught.’ Week after week, for decades, Rogers appeared in millions of homes as a gentle, emotional, artistic man. He rarely offers meta-comments on these qualities on-air; instead, he allows the audience to see that this kind of masculinity not only exists as a possibility, but in fact is encouraged, embraced, and valued by all kinds of people. It’s a kind of normalizing that carries radical meaning. Rather than tell viewers that these kinds of masculinities are just like any other (thus using a normative ideal as a baseline while collapsing the

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<sup>62</sup> Michael G. Long, *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Counter-Cultural Mister Rogers*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 119.

unique value of difference into conformity), Rogers shows, again and again, a range of masculinities in all kinds of men, giving equal worth to each one of them. Because these other men are presented to viewers as deserving of our attention and admiration, as viewers we accept this premise almost unquestioningly.<sup>63</sup>

Long later continues his description, citing specific episodes and moments where Rogers adopted ostensibly feminine characteristics or activities.

As Rogers used *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* to support profeminist identities and roles for girls and women, he also created many episodes through the years that celebrated boys and men as sensitive and nurturing. Rogers himself modeled the softer side of the male gender in many and varied ways. It's not uncommon to see Mister Rogers playing with baby dolls and rag dolls, making clothes for them, wearing female wigs and hats, cooking and cleaning, and sewing and knitting. In 1996, right in the middle of 'Brave and Strong Week,' Mister Rogers walks through the door with a bag of knitting supplies and shows us his skills in knitting. 'Do you know anybody who knits?' he asks, refusing to suggest that only girls and women knit. It doesn't take too long before we learn that Mister Rogers has learned to knit from Brad Brewer, an African American puppeteer who knits all sorts of clothes for his puppets.<sup>64</sup>

It is no secret that Rogers did not care about constructing a particularly macho identity for either his personal life or his on-screen persona, but I wish to explore one additional significant way in which he performed his individualism: through music. In "'Girling' at the Parlor Piano," Ruth Solie makes use of Judith Butler's terminology to discuss the phenomenon of nineteenth-century girls and young ladies whose hours were spent and futures were pinned on that monolithic combination of instrument and furniture: the piano. She describes the ideal of

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<sup>63</sup> Kerry B. Mockler, "Neighborhoods of Make-Believe: Place, Play, and Possibility in Disneyland, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and *The Magic City*," PhD diss. (University of Pittsburgh: 2015), 105.

<sup>64</sup> Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, 131.

femininity of the time, defined, of course, in opposition to the rise of masculinity then (and still) in vogue:

As the businessman or the bureaucrat, practical-minded and uniformed in that nineteenth-century innovation, the business suit, became the Everyman figure of middle-class consciousness, those aspects of his personality and imagination that had to be repressed in competitive professional life gradually formed into the image of a counterpart, an Everywoman who was conceptualized as his opposite: she was intuitive where he was reasonable, artistic where he was pragmatic, nurturing where he was aggressive, delicate where he was robust, domestic and shy where he was public and gregarious, and so forth.<sup>65</sup>

According to her description, Fred Rogers fits more easily in the ideal of Everywoman: his most striking Everyman feature is the suit, which of course he exchanges for the more comfortable—and more domestic—sweater and tennis shoes for the duration of each episode. Drawing on letters and diaries, as well as books and pamphlets of the time, Solie provides a compelling description of the piano “as furniture, as discipline, as emotional confidant, and as medium of sexual apprenticeship,”<sup>66</sup> of which the third is also striking in relation to Fred Rogers. He once declared emphatically during an interview that his piano was his friend, which puts him in the good company of many women who have relied on their pianos for companionship and emotional expression.

Much earlier in the century, and indeed even in the eighteenth, a whole genre of poetry grew up in Europe ... consisting of apostrophes to the piano as friend and companion. ... Originally this little poetic convention seems to have applied to both sexes and to have represented a sentiment that was conventionally expressed in public situations. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, and

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<sup>65</sup> Ruth Solie, “‘Girling’ at the Parlor Piano,” in *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 92.

<sup>66</sup> Solie, 116.

especially in Anglophone cultures, the tradition had shifted: it became both unpublic and decidedly unmanly.<sup>67</sup>

I submit that the Anglophone tradition of the piano-as-friend trope reading as unmanly remained in full force through the twentieth century as well, and that Rogers was operating outside the established demonstrative norms for his gender with that declaration.

Long also includes examples of Rogers portraying men and women working against their presumed norms: these sub-sections cover “Working Moms” and “Fathers and Music.” Lynn Swann was a Pittsburgh Steelers receiver who also studied ballet, and demonstrated his dancing, rather than football, skills on the show.

For Rogers, ballet, music, painting, photography, and other artistic expressions are ways we nurture our souls. By showing [Lynn] Swann and [Sam] Weber [professional tap dancer], and coupling fathers and music in 1990, he supported his longtime mission of showing a softer, gentler side to the male gender. Unsurprisingly, the coupling also reflected his personal background and history: Rogers played the piano for his sons, and his own father had introduced him to the nurturing power of music. ‘My father used to sing to me when I was a baby,’ Mister Rogers says in an episode during the special series on fathers. ‘That helped me to feel so good.’ He says this shortly after pretending that a rag doll in his care—a little black boy doll—is sick. Mister Rogers covers him with a blanket, puts his head on a pillow, and sings ‘I Like to Take Care of You.’<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Solie, 111.

<sup>68</sup> Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, 136. Describing *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 1622, “Mister Rogers Talks About Fathers and Music,” PBS, July 31, 1990, written by Fred Rogers. “I Like to Take Care of You” is Henrietta Pussycat’s aria from the *Babysitter Opera*, used again here and in a few other episodes when appropriate to discuss caring for children.

Other guests during “Fathers and Music Week” included Ellis Marsalis with his teenage-to-adult sons Branford, Delfeayo, and Jason, as well as Yo-Yo Ma and his youngster Nicholas.

Through Jim Rogers, Ellis Marsalis, Yo-Yo Ma, and his own Mister Rogers character, Fred Rogers has shown us that good fathers hold and hug, kiss and care, nurture, and love—and are daring enough to dance and play music.<sup>69</sup>

Dancing and playing music may indeed be considered daring actions when demonstrating that one may embrace their own personality, even if it proves to be in opposition with the cultural expectations of one’s gender.

Rogers made a series of decisions in the creation of his television program that gave the entire show a domesticated quality. The living room setting in particular gives the viewing experience a “homey” feel. He could have fashioned himself as a teacher, and made his home base a classroom setting, but he chose instead to present the program as not only familiar, but also familial. With his operatic projects, Rogers was doing more than domesticating his own persona: he was domesticating opera itself. The *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* audience was merely a third, or at the most half, the age of the target audience for an opera company’s school production. In addition to the fact that he was able to introduce opera to the youngest target audience in history, Rogers truly did deliver the performances directly to them, in their own comfort zones. The examples of recitative, aria, chorus, and musical quotations arrived in the living rooms of thousands of American children, straight from that parent-approved appliance, the television set. Ideally, a child’s own house is the safest and most comfortable

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<sup>69</sup>Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, 137.

place for them to be,<sup>70</sup> and Mister Rogers' television house was also intentionally constructed as a safe space to imagine new ideas and play about things that are scary or unfamiliar. Because it was introduced to them first at home, likely in the presence of their parents, opera—just like fathers who make music with their children—would be seen as a normal part of life. Rogers took pains to make the opera days special, but by virtue of the medium, his audience still experienced the operas in their own homes, directed by the ritual of watching television at the same time every day.

#### EXPERIMENTATION, FAILURE, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE

Rogers' commitment to showing rehearsal, not just a polished final product, is evident in an episode where he receives a visit from folk music educator Ella Jenkins in a May 1985 episode<sup>71</sup> during a week dedicated to Music. Rogers welcomes James, a recurring *Neighborhood* guest, to teach some rhythms—songs with associated clapping patterns—to him and Chuck Aber. Her demonstration just outside his house includes “One Potato, Two Potato,” “Hambone,” and “Head and Shoulders,” a rhythmic clapping game that also involves touching various body parts when they are named, similar to “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes.” While Neighbor Aber quickly grasps the rhythms and choreography, joining James like an expert performer, Rogers genuinely

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<sup>70</sup> There are numerous stories of children who, heartbreakingly, did not feel safe in their own homes, yet found solace in the calm promise of the *Neighborhood*.

<sup>71</sup> *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 1548, “Mister Rogers Talks About Music,” PBS, May 15, 1985, written by Fred Rogers.

appears to have been introduced to the rhymes at the same time as his audience, and he struggles with the patterns. He appears lost and behind, and grows comically out of sync with his companions: when they are bending down toward their toes, he is standing up tall touching his shoulders, and when he quickly dips to join them they have already returned upright again. Still, he maintains a good attitude, chuckling at his own errors as he tries without much success to keep up with his friends. Most importantly, Rogers never gives up: he never quits trying to follow along; he does not stand up to wait out the end of the song; he does not make the others stop and start over; and he does not even call “cut.”

Even more surprising to the production crew on set that day was the fact that Rogers chose to not re-tape that segment of the show for a smoother and more professional final result. Surely a performer committed to the highest quality of professionalism would not wish to air an episode in which he was unable to master the performance. Instead, Rogers chose to let the segment stand, realizing that there was a larger lesson at play than the polished performance of a song and clapping routine: he thought in this case it was more important to show children that learning new things can be a challenge that requires repeated efforts, no matter one’s age, than to show them a song with motions performed perfectly.

Hedda Sharapan referred to this moment in an interview in 2012:

The piece that Fred did with Ella that day was remarkable in that he did not say, ‘Let’s do this over.’ And we didn’t tape *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* [as] a whole program all the way down to the end. We taped it in small chunks, and it would’ve been nothing for him to say, ‘Oh, let’s—we’ll do this over.’ Or maybe he could’ve said to Ella, ‘I’ll bet you’ve got an easier song in your repertoire. Give me an easier one to do.’ He left it in because it helps us know—it reminds

us that, even as adults, we can understand how hard it is to learn new things, and that you make mistakes at first.<sup>72</sup>

As Aber and James make their way toward “the neighborhood school” and Rogers makes his way inside, he continues to practice the motions, both repeating the words and physically acting out the routine. He then faces the camera and says, “It’s hard, isn’t it?” adding, “This one down here was the really hard one... knees and ankles, baby, one, two, three.... I like to learn things, don’t you? And there’s so much in this world we can learn, no matter how young or how old we are.” The message remains clear that music is something worth learning, but it does require learning, which in turn requires time and commitment; you can’t always perform a new skill correctly the first time you try it, but it’s important to not give up. If you keep practicing, you will be able to master things that are challenging.

We should consider this example together with the scripted rehearsals that appear in advance of opera performances. In the latter, Rogers shows that rehearsal is a necessary part of preparing for a live performance, and in his initial failure—completely unscripted, yet wholeheartedly embraced—we can be sure that he practices<sup>73</sup> what he preaches. We can also be sure that no one, not even Mister Rogers, can do everything right the first time. It is a truism of teaching and parenting that children should be taught how to fail well, and with his commitment to improvement through rehearsal and tenacity, Rogers both teaches and demonstrates that ideal.

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<sup>72</sup> Hedda Sharapan, “The Fred Rogers Legacy: A Dialogue with Hedda Sharapan,” *Apples Video Magazine* 175 (Western Illinois University, 2012), 17:15.

<sup>73</sup> No pun intended.

## INTRODUCING ARTISANS AND ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY

One of Fred Rogers' stated goals for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was that it encourage creative expression from its viewers. "The sky's the limit when creativity is involved,"<sup>74</sup> he said in 1999. In the preface to *Mister Rogers' Playbook* from 1986, he wrote,

Play provides a foundation for so many things that are important to us throughout life. Self-expression is certainly one of those, and I associate it very closely with creativity. Finding ways to express who I am has been –and still is—a significant part of the work I do. People sometimes say to me, 'It must be great to write music and make television programs like you do, Fred. I envy creative people, but I just don't happen to be one of them.' ... I believe that everyone is creative because I believe that creativity is part of being human. ... I'm not sure how to define creativity any more than I'm sure how to define play. I feel fairly sure, though, that creativity has to do with rearranging known pieces into new forms. And it has to do with problem-solving. Rearranging and solving... those are two important aspect of play as well. It's not surprising because play, almost always, is a direct expression of creativity.<sup>75</sup>

When he introduced guests on the show to demonstrate their vocations, professions, or hobbies, he always treated the artistic or productive skills with respect and pointed out the similarities between the on-screen guests and the television neighbors: all were creative humans, and the children could use their own human creativity to create things and ideas, just as the adults had demonstrated.

Through the Picture Picture video segments, we are introduced to production and labor: each short video documents the making of an

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<sup>74</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers, " *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), part 9 of 9, 9:10.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>75</sup> Fred Rogers and Barry Head, *Mister Rogers' Playbook: Insights and Activities for Parents and Children* (Pittsburgh: Family Communications, Inc.: 1986), 6.

everyday object: sneakers, teddy bears, bicycles, crayons. Picture Picture is one of the major modes of revelation, of demystification, operating in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Rogers very particularly seeks to demonstrate that all things are created by people, through their work; sometimes it is the work of a team, sometimes the work of an individual, but in every case, the effort, time, and labor of creation (both of artistic endeavors and more utilitarian material products) is made obvious and valuable.<sup>76</sup>

In an article that features the byline “Jonathan V. Last, neighbor,” we are reminded that,

Part of Mr. Rogers’ mission seems to have been to honor people who work with their hands. In nearly every episode he toured some workplace—a metal-working plant, a factory making rain slickers, a mushroom farm, a paper mill. He approached the workers as though they were artisans, performing interesting and valuable work. Which, of course, they were.<sup>77</sup>

Opera, too, went into the category of the product of worthwhile work undertaken by skilled artisans and craftsmen. When King Friday XIII commissions his first opera, the one “about someone missing someone,” he asks John Reardon to “make” him an opera. This same terminology is repeated by other characters: he is not composing, a term the audience likely would not have been familiar with, nor was he writing, which they probably were aware of but were likewise aware that they lacked the skill. Rather, he was *making* an opera, and they had experience with making things. Perhaps making an opera would be their next project.

When Rogers welcomed his numerous musical guests on the program, ranging from young children to professional performers, he often made a point of

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<sup>76</sup> Mockler, 83.

<sup>77</sup> Jonathan V. Last, “Mister Rogers Among the Savages,” *The Weekly Standard* June 6, 2001. <http://www.weeklystandard.com/mr.-rogers-among-the-savages/article/571608>.

asking them about the work that went into their craft. Musicians of all ages and styles would comment on how much dedication was required to attain the level they had. Furthermore, they did not intend to stop rehearsing just because they performed on a regular basis. Time, effort, and dedication were required to make music, just as they were necessary to make any other kind of art or useful item.

### A NON-HIERARCHICAL MUSICAL AESTHETIC

Fred Rogers did not underestimate his audience's ability to understand sophisticated music, and as such did not write "down" to their musical sensibilities. While this particular project is primarily concerned with the operas, music was pervasive on each of the program's numerous episodes. Nancy Curry claims that his role in providing children exposure to music is likely record-holding:

His early interest in music, spawned by his parents, is shared with his audience through his guests (opera stars, famous instrumentalists like Van Cliburn and Yo-Yo Ma, dancers). He has probably done more to introduce music to children than any other performer.<sup>78</sup>

When Rogers spoke of his musical guests, it was to express his gratitude and delight at their participation on his program.

Yo-Yo Ma and Van Cliburn and Itzak Perlman and all of these people... have so generously come and given their talents on the *Neighborhood*. It delights me to be able to offer that to children. And I hope they delight in receiving it.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Curry, 58.

<sup>79</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 7 of 9, 17:35.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

Guitarist Marvin Falcon praises the variety and maturity of music to be found on the *Neighborhood*.

The show promotes neighborliness, reliability, love of learning, and (underscoring it all) a pervasive love of music and music making. In a time when synthesizers and DJs have changed the music industry, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* features and honors musicians as knowledgeable professionals. Staff musicians ... are outstanding players, and musical guests from the jazz, classical, and world-music arenas reflect their good taste as well as that of Fred Rogers himself ... he shares with each child the intricacies of music making and the realities of life as a musician. ... Children's capabilities are often underestimated. If the only music a child is exposed to is 'fun music' ... and the ear only responds to the simplest harmonies, then musical growth is not stimulated. ... Fred Rogers is a living testimonial that there is room on television for a low-key, reasoned approach toward viewers ... He is a teacher and a musician, and he does honor to all who teach and love music.<sup>80</sup>

Even with this variety of music made available to his audience, one might assume that such a well-educated musician as Rogers was would be interested in crafting a cultured or highbrow musical taste in the children over whom he held sway. If he was going to take the time to write operas for his neighbors, he surely would have wanted them to appreciate that opera was a higher art form than what they were exposed to on the radio. This was not the case, however: Rogers once again demonstrated his commitment to the intelligence of his audience, and left choices of taste and preference entirely within the hands of the listeners. Zukerman and Ma discussed Rogers' framing of musical performances on the show, and the various roles that music can play for individuals:

... He sets the mood. 'We really love this music, we respect it, and this is a special person coming to play something—let's really enjoy it.' I think that's all it takes. ... Music deals with feelings or memory of feelings or abstract things or spatial feelings—you know, feelings

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<sup>80</sup> Marvin Falcon, "Musicians in the 'Hood: In Praise of Music on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*," *GFA Soundboard* 20, no. 1 (1993): 74.

of space, feelings of something grand. Fred Rogers uses it in all kinds of ways, as well as to make a point with a story. He uses music to show all these things are possible within you. It creates the space of *possible* knowledge, of feeling with words, stories, fears, all those things. Kids can do whatever they wish to do with it.<sup>81</sup>

They were also interested, as performing classical musicians, in the idea of children's development of taste, and the role Rogers might be playing by providing a platform for exposure to music and musicians.

*Zukerman*: Do you think of Mister Rogers as an arbitrator of musical taste to our children? *Ma*: Maybe as an arbitrator of taste for two-to-five-year-olds ... well, I think he opens the path. Rather than say, 'this is better,' or 'you're good, but this is better.' Taste ends up essentially the choice of the individual but Fred Rogers provides a lot of possibilities on the *Neighborhood*. I think he creates possibilities, not taste. In the show's own musical compositions, a lot of improvisation goes on, so there are always lots of possibilities. *Zukerman*: Right. He invites the kids into his neighborhood and he invites them into the music as well.<sup>82</sup>

... I think children are so open to all kinds of levels of thinking, yet sometimes it passes by. ... I don't think he's proselytizing. I don't think he's saying, 'This is the only way to go.' He's saying that it's a possibility. Music is a possibility to a different way of thinking.<sup>83</sup>

Scott Pratt quoted Roger Sessions' *Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener* as he presented his view of "Opera as Experience,"

Just as performers and composers need to prepare for musical experience, so too do the listeners. Musical understanding is crucial, but it is not acquired through narrow study: Any effort to help [the listener] must be in the direction of liberating, not of conditioning, his ear ... the listener's real and ultimate response to music consists not merely in hearing it, but in inwardly reproducing

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<sup>81</sup> Ma, quoted by Zukerman, 82.

<sup>82</sup> Zukerman, 86.

<sup>83</sup> Ma, quoted by Zukerman, 82.

it, and the understanding of music consists in the ability to do this in [the listener's] imagination.<sup>84</sup>

By presenting music frequently, Rogers assisted his audience in preparing to listen to the works he and others had composed.

Fred Rogers' commitment to presenting a wide variety of music to his neighbors reflects this ideal of liberating, rather than conditioning, the ears of the listeners. Ma praised Rogers' approach in exposing children to music, and in an interview with Charlie Rose, Rogers mentions Ma in much the same vein. Asked what he hoped the *Neighborhood* accomplished, he said,

Oh, I hope that it's given a few more honest adults in the lives of the children who watch, because I do think that that's a great gift. If adults can show what they love in front of kids, there'll be some child who'll say, 'I'd like to be like that!' or 'I'd like to do that!' I remember Yo-Yo Ma being on our program, and he's come to visit several times, and there have been families who have written to us to say that their kids want to learn the cello. [Rose]: Because they saw him on your program? [Rogers] [leaning forward for emphasis]: Because they saw him love his work on the program!<sup>85</sup>

Five years later, he again made a similar statement, "The best teacher in the world is somebody who loves what he or she does, and just loves it in front of you."<sup>86</sup> We must acknowledge, as Ma did, that Rogers spent many years on screen, loving music in front of children, and should surely be credited for sparking that interest in many of his viewers.

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<sup>84</sup> Scott Pratt, "Opera as Experience," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 85.

<sup>85</sup> Fred Rogers, interview with Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose* September 20, 1994, 7:00. <https://charlierose.com/videos/5544>.

<sup>86</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 2 of 9, 6:00. <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

Of all the musical genres for which one might assume education is a necessary precursor to appreciation, opera is inevitably at the top of the list. And yet, the operas—while special and unique and impressive and beloved—are, at the same time, merely one facet of a kaleidoscopic soundscape that also includes the pervasive jazz alongside guests such as Ma himself, Francois Clemmons' Harlem Spiritual Ensemble, and the cast of "Stomp." By not declaring himself the arbiter of musical taste, Rogers does not impose his own preferences onto his viewers' inner worlds, nor limit the pleasure and emotional gratification they may receive from music to a single genre, or even several arranged in a hierarchy.

In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that, to Rogers, not imposing a hierarchy of "better" music upon his audience was a matter of personal conviction and even morality. Music and emotion are indelibly linked in his mind and experience. He reminds his neighbors repeatedly that no one can see or hear their thoughts (even with an x-ray or an otoscope),<sup>87</sup> and that no one can tell them what to imagine. "No one has to tell you exactly what to think or what to do, what stories to make up."<sup>88</sup> A firm believer that each child's inner world and thought life belonged to them alone, Rogers would likely have seen the establishment of a "better" or "best" musical style as tantamount to attempted

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<sup>87</sup> Mark Shelton, "A Neighborhood with Forest *and* Trees," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 188.

<sup>88</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by William Guy, "The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 108.

emotional manipulation or mind control. Rogers' favorite composer was Bach, and he certainly made no attempts to hide that fact.

There's something mystical and wonderful about how music can touch us. You know, it's elemental. I wonder if that's why I don't feel so close to people like Yo-Yo Ma. ... Sometimes I'll put on one of his tapes that is an Unaccompanied Suite of Bach, and I think "This must be what heaven is like."<sup>89</sup>

Numerous times on the *Neighborhood*, characters and guests performed selections by Bach, so he was certainly in the mix of composers children were exposed to on the show. Rogers' fervent endorsement of Bach did not mean that he could not fully enjoy whatever music was available to him, however, and he did not attempt to convince his neighbors that they should also conclude that Bach's compositions were the height of human achievement.

Since the Neighborhood of Make-Believe is representative of the viewer's own imagination, Rogers does not appear there, in order to avoid having the narrative taken over by his authorial presence.

As Mister Rogers invites his television neighbor to take the trolley to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, he is in a sense reenacting a process as ancient as mankind... he is helping children to feel comfortable making interior journeys... And always there is the kind, quiet figure of Mister Rogers to help them on their journey. He plays the role of Virgil to the viewer's Dante, Heurtebise to Orpheus, Moses to the Israelites. Like Moses, he does not enter the Promised Land of the child's imagination ... It is in this role that we see Rogers' true generosity. He is always seeking to empower children, encouraging them to make up their own stories ... That is

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<sup>89</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 1 of 9, 6:45.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>. Rogers' use of "don't" here seems to imply that he does not feel close to Yo-Yo Ma, but it is clear while watching the interview that he is using the negative as a sort of intensifier: he does indeed feel close to the famous cellist.

Rogers' greatest ambition—to invest each child with power over his own inner life.<sup>90</sup>

Instead, he encouraged individual exploration in the realms of make-believe and music-making. He also encouraged individual and group exploration in the intersecting realms of make-believe and music-making... and he called that opera.

In the same generous spirit through which he chose not to himself be the visible figurehead of Make-Believe, Rogers does not even claim authorial credit for his own operas. It would have been all too easy for him to say “I have written you an opera and I hope you enjoy it” when introducing each new production, but instead Rogers chose to deflect the creative process elsewhere, sharing the creative credit with either the collective cast (“I like it when they make up an opera in Make-Believe”) or, more incredibly, with the audience themselves (“Let’s pretend an opera together.”)

Just as he refused to endorse, explicitly or implicitly, the Whopper or any number of other products that came his way, Rogers did not put his overt mark of approval on any particular music lest he sway the thoughts and feelings of his audience. It must have been to the same end that he refused to verbally claim his own compositions, preferring instead, once again, to present opera as something that simply is.

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<sup>90</sup> Townley, 76.

## SILENCE

Fred Rogers had enough experience producing television to know that dead air is live broadcasts' cardinal sin. Despite this knowledge, he proved successful with an exceptionally long run of a program liberally infused with exceptionally long pauses. Having worked as floor manager for *The Gabby Hayes Show*, Rogers asked the popular cowboy how he felt about speaking to his enormous audience. The answer would shape Rogers' own on-camera presentation for the next half-century: Hayes "only ever thought of one little buckaroo."<sup>91</sup> "That must have gone straight to my heart," he added, "because when I look at the camera, I think of one person. Not any specific person, but one person. It's very, very personal, this medium."<sup>92</sup>

By presenting each episode as if in conversation with a single child, Rogers left room for dialogue, response, and reflection. When asked by Charlie Rose in 1997, "How many kids do you think are out there who, in thirty years, you've influenced, you've made a difference, and made them feel something special?," he responded,

I don't care how many, even if it's just one. We get so wrapped up in numbers in our society, and the most important thing is that we're able to be one-to-one, you and I, with each other, at the moment. If

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<sup>91</sup> Rawson, 181. Also related in numerous other interviews.

<sup>92</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 3 of 9, 1:45. <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>. Rogers also referred to Hayes together with the familiar cultural riches, sharing that the famous cowboy would change from his western clothes after a taping into a suit. He had a box at the opera, and on the nights when he had tickets, would go directly to the opera from the studio. The moral here, of course, is that you often do not know the full depth of people you see on television.

we can be present at the moment with the person we happen to be with at the moment, that's what important.<sup>93</sup>

He often offered space for reflection when asked to speak in public, and his audience found to their surprise that the moments of silence he superintended were often the most moving parts of his speeches. When addressing honorees of graduation ceremonies, Rogers offered the opportunity for the students to reflect upon those who had supported their success. He did the same for audiences of more famous individuals. His acceptance speeches for both the Lifetime Achievement Award, presented in 1997 at the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Daytime Emmy Awards, and his induction into the Television Hall of Fame in 1999 contain very similar episodes wherein Rogers, in a moment of great personal honor, introduces silence and asks the audience to reflect not on him and his achievements, nor even on their own, but on those who helped them grow—who “loved them into being.”

Who in your life has been such a servant to you? Who has helped you love the good that grows within you? Let's just take ten seconds to think of some of those people who loved us and wanted what was best for us in life, those who have encouraged us to become who we are tonight. Just ten seconds of silence. I'll watch the time. [Looks at his watch; the moments tick by.] No matter where they are, either here or in heaven, imagine how pleased those people must be to know that you thought of them right now. We all have only one life to live on earth, and through television we have the choice of encouraging others to demean this life or to cherish it in creative, imaginative ways.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Fred Rogers, interview with Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose* May 13, 1997, 24:30. <https://charlierose.com/videos/20540>.

<sup>94</sup> Rogers, Acceptance Speech: “TV Hall of Fame,” (New York: March 11, 1999). <http://exhibit.fredrogerscenter.org/advocacy-for-children/videos/view/970/>.

Camera pans of the audience reveal high-profile celebrities of the late 1990s growing teary-eyed during this time of quiet reflection. Tom Junod described the scene at the Daytime Emmys, where Rogers received his Lifetime Achievement Award, in his *Esquire* profile:

Yes, at seventy years old and 143 pounds, Mister Rogers still fights ... when television handed him its highest honor, he responded by telling television—gently, of course—to just shut up for once, and television listened. ... He lifted his wrist, and looked at the audience, and looked at his watch, and said softly, “I’ll watch the time,” and there was, at first, a small whoop from the crowd, a giddy, strangled hiccup of laughter, as people realized that he wasn’t kidding, that Mister Rogers was not some convenient eunuch but rather a man, an authority figure who actually expected them to do what he asked ... and so they did. One second, two seconds, three seconds ... and now the jaws clenched, and the bosoms heaved, and the mascara ran, and the tears fell upon the beglittered gathering like rain leaking down a crystal chandelier, and Mister Rogers finally looked up from his watch and said, ‘May God be with you’ to all his vanquished children.<sup>95</sup>

Asked by Fr. John Catoir “What has been your greatest satisfaction?,”

Rogers responded,

To be able to offer silence through television. There isn’t a lot of it out there on the tube ... there are times when I don’t say anything. I might be doing something, and they just watch me. I might be fixing something, or building something, but I don’t speak. I used the technique of silence in my book, *You Are Special*. I think the spaces between the words on a page are sometimes more important than the words themselves.<sup>96</sup>

He did indeed offer silence through television, as recognized by Jonathan Last in 2001:

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<sup>95</sup> Tom Junod, “Can You Say ... ‘Hero’?,” *Esquire* 130, no. 5 (November 1998): 22.

<sup>96</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Friar John T. Catoir, JCD, *Encounters with Holiness* (New York: Alba House, 2007), 109.

He believed in the importance of form and tradition. And silence. In one episode, Mr. Rogers sat on his couch, addressed the camera, and said, ‘Sometimes I like to have quiet time, to just sit and think. Do you ever like to sit quietly and think?’ He then sat in silence for a full 45 seconds. No one, before or since, has so blasphemed against television. It was glorious to behold.<sup>97</sup>

He also believed—and, again, demonstrated—that intentional silence was essential to fully appreciating music.

When acclaimed musician Yo-Yo Ma visited the Neighborhood and played Fred’s composition ‘Tree, Tree, Tree’ on his cello, Fred took some time afterward to reflect. ‘Let’s take some quiet time to remember,’ he invited his television neighbor, ‘to sit and think about what we’ve heard.’ And he did. It wasn’t dead air to him; it was thanking the God who inspires and informs all that is nourishing and good.<sup>98</sup>

Hollingsworth goes on to relate an episode that happened when she was interviewing Rogers on camera for the second time, when he said to her with “quiet exasperation,” “I just feel that there isn’t enough silence, you know, and I’m always asking people if they can just give some silence. And we’re in a medium that allows so little of that.”<sup>99</sup>

John Cage also capitalizes on silence, and leaves space between words in his printed works. In 2004, Paul Zevelansky included an analysis of a 1998 episode on secrets in his article for the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*. This episode opens with Rogers unstacking a series of nesting boxes, and noting that the smallest might be said to contain “nothing,” but that it is also full of air.

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<sup>97</sup> Last, “Mister Rogers Among the Savages.”

<sup>98</sup> Hollingsworth, 8.

<sup>99</sup> Hollingsworth, 10.

Zevelansky later drew a connection between Rogers' affect on television and Cage's "Lecture on Nothing."

What is called 'music' or 'talking' is organized sound that we choose not to characterize and catalog as noise. Or, you could say that noise is every sound that is not called music or speech. Acknowledgement of this immanence in silence creates a space, an opening through which the intangible and indeterminate may emerge. The *nothing* in the "Lecture on Nothing" is another word for everything. Like those of Fred Rogers, Cage's methods, critiques, and enactments—infused by what Italo Calvino calls a "lightness of thoughtfulness" (1998, p. 10)—are always advanced in an optimistic spirit of play, and that is why they can engage transience, uncertainty, and transformation. Nowhere is somewhere. Nothing is something. In silence is the fullness of sound. The red box is not empty, but contains air.<sup>100</sup>

Hollingsworth's book includes examples from her multi-year correspondence with Rogers. A letter he sent in 1997 included the following excerpt:

We've been blessed with the most beautiful days—clear skies, warm swimming water, and spectacular sunsets. In fact the sun is making its way to the sea as I write to you. Wish you, Jeff, Jonathan and Emily were right beside us this very instant. We'd probably all burst forth with the *Doxology*, either that or simply stand in silent wonder.<sup>101</sup>

Fred Rogers understood that the most transcendent experiences in life warranted only two appropriate responses: music and silence.

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<sup>100</sup> Paul Zevelansky, "The Good Thing: Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 64, no. 2 (June 2004): 207.

<sup>101</sup> Hollingsworth, 13.

## CHAPTER 3

### NIGHT VISITORS AND EVENING GUESTS: FROM *AMAH*L TO THE *BABYSITTER OPERA*

In 1968, his first year on the air in the United States with *Misterogers' Neighborhood*,<sup>1</sup> Fred Rogers composed and produced the first of 13 operas written specifically for his television audience. With even a straightforwardly descriptive name, the *Babysitter Opera* was quite a modest affair in contrast to the more extravagant productions that would follow. However, it served as an introduction of the genre to the preschool-aged television neighbors, and reflects a multitude of Rogers' personal and professional values and experiences in a remarkably compact 10 minutes of sung narrative. Of Rogers' operatic output, this is the one that seems the most self-aware of its simultaneous nature as both an opera and a product of television. Besides likely being the first opera its audience would ever see (on television or otherwise), this episode also introduces viewers to several ideas that would prove to be recurring themes in the *Neighborhood* and in Rogers' life.

The actual opera is the shortest one we see on the *Neighborhood*, at only ten minutes, or approximately the middle third of the episode. The rest of the episode's running time is devoted to introductory material, rehearsal time, and

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<sup>1</sup> The elision was later eliminated in favor of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* because Rogers thought children might be confused when they heard two words but only saw one. My use of the contracted version reflects the title screens of the episodes I viewed.

preparations being made beforehand and followed by compliments, discussion, and conclusion afterward. The opera, therefore, appears as the middle portion of the larger narrative arc of the episode, yet still contains its own small-scale narrative.

The *Babysitter Opera* plot might be summed up as a perspective of what takes place on the home front during a hero's quest: she went away and she came back again. Betty Aberlin (the Mother) and John Reardon (the Grandfather) discuss with Donkey Hodie (the Son or Prince) that the mother will have to go away for a short time, but will return. During her absence, the son will be in the care of the Grandfather and the Babysitter (played by Henrietta Pussycat). Donkey Hodie protests his mother's departure, but she insists she must go, singing a reassuring song about how "It's hard to say goodbye to someone special." Henrietta also sings of her confidence and qualifications for the task at hand: "I will take care of you ... I was little once too..." While Mother is gone, she makes two phone calls to check on her son and assure them all of her upcoming return. After a discussion wherein the son is eventually convinced that both his caregivers were small once, and that he will care for others once he grows up, the three play a game of peek-a-boo using the stage's curtain to hide from one another in turn. Grandfather sings "Tree, Tree, Tree" (a song previously introduced and used throughout the series) as a lullaby, during which Henrietta rocks the Son to sleep, a moment that is reminiscent of the rocking referenced and discussed in connection with Reardon's performance of "Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja" earlier in the week. Henrietta Pussycat meows a reprise of "Tree, Tree, Tree," and the Grandfather falls asleep along with the prince. When the Mother

returns, she sings a reprise to demonstrate that she kept her promise, which her son sleeps through. Grandfather takes the Babysitter home, and Mother closes the curtain, then turns to deliver the moral: “And so you see, ladies and gentlemen, by this opera, that mothers can go out, but they come back.”

This plainly-stated moral clearly addresses a pervasive fear among preschoolers, and once again ties into Rogers’ careful approach to transition and return. “We talk about very important things,” Rogers told Charlie Rose in 1994, “You know, we talk about going away, and coming back, and wanting to know what things are going to be like.”<sup>2</sup>

‘I’ll be back when the day is new, and I’ll have more ideas for you’ comprises a transition of its own, setting up anticipation for his next visit. Issues of disappearance and reappearance are very important to young children, who want to be reassured that when parents go away they will return.<sup>3</sup>

Just as Mister Rogers always returned for a new episode, parents are reliable to keep their promises.

Lest anyone assume that a ten-minute libretto filled with reassurances, “missing someone badly,” and fully half of the cast falling asleep does not constitute an appropriate plot for a legitimate opera, we must remember the

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose* September 20, 1994, 13:05, <https://charlirose.com/videos/5544>. “I Like to Be Told” is another song Rogers wrote later, which takes on the perspective of a child addressing a parent on the same idea: “I like to be told when you’re going away, when you’re going to come back, and how long you will stay ... It helps me to get ready for all those things, all those things that are new. I trust you more and more each time that I’m finding those things to be true. I like to be told ’cause I’m trying to grow, ’cause I’m trying to learn and I’m trying to know. I like to be told.”

<sup>3</sup> Roderick Townley, “Fred’s Shoes: The Meaning of Transitions in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*,” in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 73.

audience. A successful opera requires an emotional, musical, dramatic experience, and for a three-year-old who does not have regular experience with a babysitter (or even for one who does), the fear of a mother leaving represents the height of dramatic tension. In this sense, the *Babysitter Opera* could be considered an example of verismo, with the struggles of daily life acted out in larger-than-life fashion.

Musical characteristics of opera evident in this performance include recitative and emotional expression through arias. Even more important than these checklist items, however, are the fact that Rogers and the rest of the cast discussed and presented the composition as an opera; simply put, it is an opera because they say it is. Most important, the *Babysitter Opera* provides its audience with a full musical, emotional, dramatic, aesthetic experience. Scott Pratt presents a case for an aesthetic experience as the basis for defining opera, which forms the basis for my understanding of these works. A deeper examination of genre distinction takes place in Chapter 5, surrounding *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*.

The *Babysitter Opera* 's musical content is comprised primarily of three arias, performed by three of the main characters: the Mother, the Son, and the Babysitter.<sup>4</sup> Each one is only a few phrases long, but they are repeated multiple times throughout both the opera performance and the preceding episodes. We hear the Mother's song, "It's Hard to Say Goodbye" (figure 1) twice on Friday

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<sup>4</sup> Though WQED and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* had some interest in saving production materials for historical purposes, some of the papers from the early years are sparse, and indeed no manuscript score is known to exist. The melodies that appear here are transcribed from the recorded episode, which I viewed courtesy of the Fred Rogers Center Archive.

before the opera even begins. “I know it’s hard to say goodbye to someone special, but I’ll be back, yes I’ll be back tonight” Aberlin sings, repeating the same text on both antecedent and consequent phrases.



Figure 1. Fred Rogers, “It’s Hard to Say Goodbye,” *Babysitter Opera*.

Henrietta Pussycat characteristically meows many of the words to her AABA aria “I’m Taking Care of You” (figure 2), but we know what the words are supposed to be because John Reardon sings the song in its entirety both early in the week and again during the opera performance. The reassuring phrases say, “I’m taking care of you, taking good care of you. For once I was very little too; now I take care of you.”



Figure 2. Fred Rogers, “I’m Taking Care of You,” *Babysitter Opera*.

The Son’s aria about missing someone, “I Am Missing Somebody Badly” (figure 3) is performed by Donkey Hodie. Like the Mother’s aria, this one also features antecedence and consequent phrases with repeated text: “I am missing somebody badly; yes, I am missing, missing her now!”



Figure 3. Fred Rogers, “I Am Missing Somebody Badly,” *Babysitter Opera*.

John Reardon as the Grandfather does not have his own aria which advances the narrative or describes his character’s feelings, but he does repeat both “It’s Hard to Say Goodbye” and “I’m Taking Care of You” to the Son, substituting “She’ll be back” and “She’s taking care of you” when referring to the Mother and the Babysitter, respectively, and later “We’re taking care of you,” referring to himself and Henrietta as caregivers during the Mother’s absence. He also performs “Tree, Tree, Tree” as a lullaby.

The only moment of polyphony in the opera occurs while the Mother is away. While the Son repeats “I Am Missing Somebody Badly,” Grandfather joins in with “It’s Hard to Say Goodbye.” The two melodies fit together well, and Donkey Hodie’s final cadence is slightly altered to achieve harmony between the two lines. This *Neighborhood* opera is also unique in its use of secco recitative. Though the accompaniment does not last through all of the dialogue, recitative is a clear marker of the opera performance section of this episode, and both Aberlin and Reardon sing the majority of their dialogue.

The accompaniment for *Babysitter Opera* is more straightforward than many other segments of the show, and is limited to piano and celesta. It is clear in this operatic performance that the vocal lines dominate the texture, and the accompaniment sounds like just that—accompaniment. The piano is limited to

some doubling of the melody, and mostly arpeggiated accompaniment patterns. This is quite different from Costa's usual improvised contributions featuring high-energy, virtuosic, chromatic jazz riffs. As Aberlin's voice grows from a tentative first attempt to a full-voiced performance with each repetition (discussed in detail below), the piano expands proportionally, featuring a wider range, more doubling of octaves, and a louder dynamic choice that reflects and reinforces the musical and vocal choices being made by the visible performer. The tempo of each aria remains consistent throughout, and though there are some dotted rhythms, the most rhythmic interest in any of the pieces is the syncopation in the Mother's aria created by her off-beat entrance.

The astute observer will realize that not much modulation has taken place in the course of this opera. We might subtitle this work "Opera in D," as every aria is performed in D-Major. Rather than mark this as a compositional shortcoming, we may well assume that it was a conscious decision—perhaps one motivated by those "child-development concerns" that Aberlin said might not be at play in the operas. Given the musical experience of the musicians and singers performing in this episode, the lack of modulation is certainly not due to a lack of ability on the part of the performers. Because the melodies and harmonic underpinnings are the same through each repetition of the arias, the changes that are present—in confidence, dynamics, and ornamentation—are more readily evident.

Additionally, we must once again remember that this broadcast was almost guaranteed to be the entire audience's very first operatic experience, even more so than any other *Neighborhood* production: there was no "last year's

opera,” after all. When sung dialogue is an entirely new concept, one would not be too likely to protest that the lack of modulation reflects an insufficient emotional journey. All the choices to simplify various musical aspects of this performance as compared with the rest of the *Neighborhood* serve to emphasize the main focus of opera: the singing of a dramatic story. For this initial foray into opera, Rogers chose to spell out the expectations of opera very clearly over the course of the week, and to rein in the musical extravagance, all in the service of introducing opera for the very first time.<sup>5</sup> In the coming years, we do see that the creativity of composer and performers are allowed to run a bit more wild. When asked about his compositional style, specifically “Do you use certain kinds of melodies or rhythms [for children]?” Rogers said,

Some of the things I write for children are very difficult and complex pieces of music. I don’t ‘write down’ ... there isn’t adult music or children’s music; there is only *music*. However, it is especially pleasurable to give children something musical they may not get elsewhere. I work for a whole variety of styles within my own style to illustrate again the many ways there are to do something... like write a song, for instance!<sup>6</sup> Within the programs, though, there is a plan to repeat the songs over and over so that children will come to recognize them and be able to sing them, themselves, as they learn the words and melodies.<sup>7</sup>

We see through the complete set of operas that there are indeed many ways to write an opera, as different style choices are evident in each one. During

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<sup>5</sup> The week’s preparations will be discussed in detail presently.

<sup>6</sup> Rogers had already referenced his song “There Are Many Ways to Say I Love You” earlier in the interview.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Rogers, “Educating Children through Music: Mister Rogers Talks with ASCAP,” *ASCAP in Action* (Fall 1985): 31. Emphasis original.

*Babysitter*, we hear a ten-minute opera entirely in the key of D, but it is an opera nonetheless.

#### TELEVISION OPERA: EMPHASIS ON TELEVISION

In many ways, the *Babysitter Opera* demonstrates the strongest connection with Rogers' time at the *NBC Opera Theatre*, especially his work on *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. *Amahl* has the curious distinction of being, all at once, the first, the most successful (in terms of viewership, audience response, and re-broadcast/repeat performances), and the most famous Television Opera ever commissioned by the *NBC Opera Theatre*. Rogers explains,

A very young composer by the name of Menotti was invited to write an opera for the NBC Opera Theatre. That's how *Amahl and the Night Visitors* came to be. ... They wanted a Christmas opera, and so Menotti actually wrote it for the *NBC Opera Theatre*. After the dress rehearsal, Toscanini said to Menotti in Italian, 'This is the best you've ever done.' And of course *Amahl and the Night Visitors* continues now on stages, and even puppet theaters have done it, and done it well.<sup>8</sup>

Jennifer Barnes provides a useful framework for discussing televised opera in her 2003 volume *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television*. She discusses the different ways that "televised opera," "Television Opera," "video opera," etc. have been used either interchangeably or in specific ways that have nevertheless changed over the years. She concludes that Television Opera (with both words capitalized) will be her term of choice to indicate an opera commissioned specifically for performance on television, and

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 2 of 9, 16:00.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

my usage of the term reflects her choice. Rogers' operas did not result from a commission, strictly speaking,<sup>9</sup> since he simply composed them for use in the regular time slot of his existing program. They were conceived especially for television, however, and of her list, this term most aptly describes both *Amahl* and the entire set of *Neighborhood* productions.

In pointing out the lack of scholarship on Television Opera, Barnes does consider how attempts at applying a theory of Film Music to this repertoire might be tempting, but would ultimately prove ineffective and useless:

A film score is described as having a *parallel* or *contrapuntal* role in relation to the narrative: that is, it either supports the scene, or comments upon it. Central to the debate in studies on Film Music is the role of 'diegetic' music, that which emanates from a definite, identifiable sources (like the piano in a bar scene), as opposed to 'non-diegetic' music, that which permeates the atmosphere (as in the music which accompanies the shot of a woman walking down a deserted street at night). I describe a basic approach to Film Music analysis for a reason: it is not applicable to televised opera. In opera, the music is the vehicle which conveys the drama. The Television Opera presents a particularly interesting test case. In a film score, the composer is presented with a specific outline, a libretto of scenes to which he/she must respond. Indeed, often the score is composed after the film is shot and edited, to avoid continuity difficulties. In a Television Opera, the composer supplies the script, to be interpreted by the cameras. Rather than the music supporting the production, the production is built around the music. How does the production choose to present the operas? What technology will best convey the opera on the small screen? Finally, what kind of opera makes effective television?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This holds true in terms of Rogers being commissioned to write an opera. Of course, King Friday XIII frequently addresses a demand for an opera performance to Reardon within the narrative .

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2003), 6. While we're establishing the terminology, it is necessary to point out that all the music on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was, in one sense, diegetic. Johnny Costa improvised at the piano during the taping of each scene, so the *actors* heard the music live while they performed their roles. Whether the *characters* were aware of the music going on

Peter Herman Adler, Musical and Artistic Director of the *NBC Opera Theatre* and “a pioneer in the production of operas on television,” according to the accompanying biographical blurb, published an article in the February 1952 issue of *Musical America*. Still flying high after the wild success of *Amahl's* premiere merely two months before, he optimistically entitled his contribution “Opera on Television: The Beginning of an Era” and optimistically concluded it, “I feel that we are at the beginning of a phase of operatic development that will make the United States the greatest center of operatic activity in the future.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it was television’s very newness and lack of identity that he saw as an advantage in the battle against opera’s (obviously otherwise inevitable) decline.

... it is fair to say that no Hollywood producer has ever made a serious attempt to translate any single opera, in its full artistic integrity, to the screen. ... Television, on the other hand, is too young and unformed a medium to have developed the motion picture’s frozen conventions and resistance to experimentation.<sup>12</sup>

He goes on later to describe the requirements for successful televised operatic productions.

If it is to be a success, television opera must make every necessary adjustment to the stipulations of the new medium. The essential feature of television is closeness. It cannot at present handle successfully large, panoramic ensembles, and perhaps it will never

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around them is a little less clear, and even variable: they certainly reacted to and interacted with the accompaniment when performing a song, but a case can be made for or against them really being aware of the other scoring, including interludes and motives such as the ones that always accompany Mister McFeely or the trolley.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Herman Adler, “Opera on Television: The Beginning of an Era,” *Musical America* 72, no. 3 (February 1952): 29.

<sup>12</sup> Adler, 29.

be able to. Ballet interludes, complications of plot, orchestral interludes, and cast hordes of minor characters are also likely to be excess baggage on television, weighing the production out of shape either by making it too long or by asking for effects the camera cannot naturally achieve.<sup>13</sup>

After describing some of the radical alterations required to fit an opera into an hour's time slot, he gives even more specific directions.

In staging operas for television, it is necessary to start from a fresh viewpoint—one that abandons the broad gestures and stylized poses that are often needed to create effects across the vast spaces of an opera house. In television, communication depends fully as much on acting as on singing. All the acting must be simple, direct, understandable, and believable; and all the singers must look their parts.<sup>14</sup>

Herbert Graf, stage director for the Metropolitan Opera, also had some success directing opera for television in the early 1950s. He outlines nearly the same challenges inherent to bringing such a large art to such a small medium.

... in television the close-ups of the performing musicians reveal details that more often detract from the musical content than enhance it. The gestures and facial expressions of some conductors and players may reflect the interpretation of the work, but those of others, interesting in themselves perhaps, may produce the opposite effect.<sup>15</sup>

Graf also agrees with Adler on the requirements for believable, appealing televised opera.

Successful telecasting of opera calls for realistic handling of the story, including the use of English rather than foreign languages and of dialogue rather than recitative. A physical appearance that fits the role and genuine acting ability are essential criteria in selecting the cast... as in the legitimate theater and the motion

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<sup>13</sup> Adler, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Adler, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Graf, *Opera for the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951), 220.

picture, stars who can keep neither their weight nor their ego in bounds will not be acceptable in television ... Because of the piercing eye of the close-up camera, scenery, costumes, make-up, and lighting must be more realistic in concept, and this will mean replacing some aspects of operatic routine with more up-to-date technical methods similar to those used in motion pictures, though by necessity simpler and quicker to apply.<sup>16</sup>

Graf is ultimately also very optimistic in his outlook of opera's potential on television: though his book also includes chapters on "Opera on Broadway," "Community Opera," "Opera in the Schools," and "Opera in Motion Pictures," he concludes his chapter on "Opera in Television,"

The artistic, technical, and economic problems are great, but they fade almost to nothing in comparison with the opportunity for bringing opera to bigger audiences than ever before. For whether by telecasting from the theater, from the studio, or from film, television can be the most decisive medium for forcing opera to take off its top hat and enter the American home.<sup>17</sup>

Barnes, writing 50 years after Adler's and Graf's initial descriptions of their approaches and success, echoes many of the same ideas on the unique qualities of opera as experienced via television. Proximity and scale—necessarily in proportion with one another—are foregrounded in her analysis as well. The following passages are especially enlightening when one considers how well they apply to performances of both *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and *The Babysitter Opera*.

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<sup>16</sup> Graf, 230.

<sup>17</sup> Graf, 231. On p. 220, he recommends "the dramatization of concert music by visual illustration of its content," taking as his example Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home": "cotton fields, rivers, darkies, plantation houses, could all be shown on film or in still pictures." So his approach is not entirely modern, nor is it without problematic overtones. Still, his enthusiasm about television's potential is encouraging to those concerned about the future of American opera.

Combining the energy of live theatre with the proximity possible with a camera lens, television's new-found power revolved around dissecting intimacy. Responses from both audiences and critics to the developing style was overwhelmingly positive. The name chosen to describe this type of drama was borrowed from theatre: 'realism.'<sup>18</sup>

Television's version of realism was not only an ideological but a pragmatic development... In no sense could television compete with the elaborate spectacle Hollywood films could provide; instead the early broadcasts emphasized the new medium's specific strengths, concentrating on nuance and specializing in conflict between individuals.<sup>19</sup>

Musically... the operas allied themselves with traditional rather than innovative structures; each involved set pieces, arias, ensembles and recitatives. However, two aspects of realism remain. In each case, even when the subject matter was ostensibly whimsical... the storyline was linear and direct. Governed by the resources of the time, the presentation was also simple. In short, while the operas themselves were not concerned with realism, the camera work presented the operas in a straight-forward, realistic style.<sup>20</sup>

All of these descriptions were written about early Television Operas—primarily about *Amahl*. Their descriptions include: closeness, brevity, ensemble cast; simple, direct, understandable, believable; intimate, realistic, nuanced, individual; linear, straight-forward. As a bonus, Barnes even mentions ostensibly whimsical story lines. The above descriptors could be lifted just as they are and

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<sup>18</sup> Barnes, 7. Of course, most readers familiar with the live simulcasts popularized by the Metropolitan Opera Company will certainly think of that experience when considering the combination of liveness and the closeness of the camera. Since these broadcasts straight from the opera house to the silver screens of the world's movie theaters did not begin until 2006 –after Rogers had ceased producing television for children—further discussions of the simulcast medium will not add value to this assessment of television opera. Nevertheless, I do hope that future discussions of television opera will take both Rogers' contributions and the simulcast phenomenon into consideration.

<sup>19</sup> Barnes, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Barnes, 8.

apply precisely to any given episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Rogers' primary motivation had to do with the way children learn to trust, but his years at NBC were filled with excellent learning opportunities, and we can easily see numerous examples of how his artistic vision, realized in *Babysitter*, was influenced by his time on the set during *Amahl*. After all, it was there that he learned both how to broadcast a television show and how to produce an opera, so the two were indelibly linked.

The first and most obvious (but in some ways most easily overlooked) connection between these two productions is that both *Amahl* and *Babysitter* were broadcast in black and white. This is significant because they required similar sorts of decisions to be made about costuming and sets, and it also serves as a concrete visual reminder that the two occurred in fairly close historical proximity. Despite being color-blind himself, Rogers oversaw some of the first tests for color broadcasting while still at NBC during the 1950s. While color broadcasting was available in 1968, it was not the norm nationwide until a few years later, and certainly was not an option for a fledgling public television network. WQED in Pittsburgh was the first PBS station in the nation, and Rogers was a driving force in its creation. High quality programming was a priority for WQED, but color broadcasting equipment would not have been financially viable.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, while the *Neighborhood's* musical scoring was chromatic from the beginning, the first few years of broadcast—visually—were not.

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<sup>21</sup> At the very beginning Rogers was doing everything from stuffing envelopes and taking phone calls to fully producing a daily, live, hour-long children's show (which had a budget of "one legal pad per season") with Josie Carey, and made \$75/week.

While later operas continued to demonstrate a sort of fictionalized version of collaborative opera brainstorming and preparation, the *Babysitter Opera* is the only one to include a bit of behind-the-scenes action specifically associated with the technical side of both opera production and television broadcast. Such technical interests include the portrayal of a stage manager/floor manager (a position Rogers himself held for the *NBC Opera Theatre*, *The Gabby Hayes Show*, *The Hit Parade*, and *The Kate Smith Hour*) and an extreme interest in precise time management.

X the Owl acts as the stage manager, a role not mentioned in later productions. He takes the role seriously, and Rogers acknowledges to him, “there’s a lot to do at the last minute” when they speak on the can phone prior to the performance. X and others make repeated references to very specific amounts of time, evidence of a television production’s attention to time detail: “Five minutes, don’t be late,” “27 seconds,” “108 seconds,” etc. punctuate the passage of time during this episode. “X is wonderful, he’s helping everybody with everything. He’s the stage manager,” Aberlin tells Rogers before they rehearse her song, and he responds knowingly, “Oh, I know he has a lot to think of.”<sup>22</sup> Describing his behind-the-scenes experience at NBC in 1999, Rogers said, “Well, first of all, I timed programs, and that was scary, because you know we had to get off the air at just the right second, otherwise you’d be cut off the air.”<sup>23</sup> Referring

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<sup>22</sup> *Misterogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 0045, PBS, April 15, 1968, written by Fred Rogers, 4:51. Episodes did not have individual titles at this point.

<sup>23</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 2 of 9, 23:03.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>

specifically to *The Hit Parade*, he later added, “But to think that you would do something like that live! We had seven and eight sets in one studio, and two floor managers.”<sup>24</sup>

Dorothy Coulter wrote in 1961 about the “utterly different attitude toward time” between singing in an opera house and singing live on television:

When you sing an aria for television, a stopwatch clocks to the last second how long it takes in rehearsal. On the air the least change in tempo, or the tiniest variation in the length of a held note means trouble. If you’re as little as five seconds too long, the director will be tearing his hair. If you’re ten seconds over, he may shoot himself.<sup>25</sup>

The *Neighborhood* operas were recorded in-studio for broadcast, so timing issues could be addressed before the performance hit the airwaves. In fact, the opening theme song was re-recorded individually for each episode, and was always the last portion taped. This approach allowed for alterations to be made, as they sometimes were, in the length of the song, based on how much time was remaining after the rest of the episode had been produced. Therefore, the obsessive attention to time—down to an odd number of seconds—was not truly a concern for the cast and crew (and “cast and crew,” within the *Neighborhood of Make-Believe*) in the same way that it would have been for Coulter in her experiences singing live. However, these references do call to mind that manner and media with which Rogers was most familiar and comfortable producing opera: truly live and on the air. Asked to name the shows he worked

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<sup>24</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 2 of 9, 24:40. <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>

<sup>25</sup> Dorothy Coulter, “Opera ‘On Camera,’” *Music Journal* 19, no. 8 (November/December 1961): 62.

on while at NBC, he ticks them off: “*Voice of Firestone, Kate Smith, Gabby Hayes,*” then says,

The *NBC Opera Theatre* became the most important one for me, because when I became the head floor manager of that, then I was in all the production meetings. The best part of that was hearing those operas over and over again. The ones that I floor-managed, I know practically—*Billy Budd*, for instance—I still sing parts of – [singing] ‘Billy Budd, king of the sea!’ This was a Benjamin Britten opera.<sup>26</sup>

Fred Rogers recognized the staying power of an operatic melody, and acknowledged the impact his time at the *NBC Opera Theatre* had on him personally and creatively. He also knew firsthand, crystallized by his role in averting what would have been real trouble in *Tahiti*, that every opera also needs a star. Fortunately, he had access to one of those as well.

#### JOHN REARDON: A REAL-LIFE OPERA STAR

John Reardon and Fred Rogers became friends while they were majoring in music together at Rollins College. Reardon was three years younger than Rogers, but theirs was a life-long friendship, and “Reardon” was a consistent guest star whenever an opera was to be produced in *Make-Believe*.<sup>27</sup>

I was in school with John Reardon; he was at Rollins with us, and he later went to be a part of the Metropolitan Opera Company. And he always enjoyed making up things with us, so when we

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<sup>26</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 3 of 9, 6:25.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>27</sup> When appearing on the *Neighborhood*, he is almost always referred to simply as “Reardon.” The lack of both first name and honorific sets him apart from the regular adult cast members, who are nearly all called by some title: Mister Rogers, Mister McFeely, Handyman Negri, Neighbor Aber, Lady Aberlin, Miss Paulificate, Mayor Maggie, etc.

decided to—I just wanted to try the opera form, I mean, it’s a musical form—so I said, ‘Jack, would you consider taking a part in these little operas?’ ‘Of course I would!’ he said, and so every time we’d do an opera, King Friday would say, ‘Reardon, I would like you to make an opera,’ so Reardon would come and always take a part in them.<sup>28</sup>

Reardon made a career singing, and amassed an impressive list of credits and associations, enumerated briefly in his *New York Times* obituary, excerpts of which are quoted below.

In 1954 he joined the New York City Opera, singing Falke in *Die Fledermaus*. He sang with the company regularly until 1972, amassing a repertory of 33 roles there, and returned for some performances of Danilo in *The Merry Widow* in 1983. His Metropolitan Opera debut came in 1965, and he sang several roles with the company, among them the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro*, which he did on the company’s Paris visit in 1966.

Mr. Reardon’s clear diction and versatile acting style made him a natural for contemporary opera, especially American opera, and for television; these were his specialties. He sang in world or American premieres of works by Douglas Moore, Thomas Pasatieri, Marvin David Levy, Lehman Engel, Gian Carlo Menotti, Hans Werner Henze, Lee Hoiby, Dmitri Shostakovich, Leos Janacek, Paul Hindemith and Gottfried von Einem. Most of these productions were at the City Opera or with the Santa Fe Opera; others, including Janacek’s *House of the Dead*, were for television.

Mr. Reardon was one of the pioneers in this field, singing with the *NBC Opera* frequently in the 1950’s (including a *Magic Flute* in 1956 with Leontyne Price). More recently, he proselytized for his art form in ‘mini-operas’ on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. He also made several recordings, among them a fine portrayal of Nick Shadow in *The Rake’s Progress* with Stravinsky conducting. Among his standard repertory parts were the leading baritone roles in *La Traviata*, *Don Giovanni*, *Faust*, and *Madama Butterfly*. He also made several forays into musical comedy. ... His last performances

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<sup>28</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 7 of 9, 19:35.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

were with the Buffalo Philharmonic in March and the Cleveland Opera (as the Count in *Figaro*) in February.<sup>29</sup>

The *LA Times* further related:

Reardon was noted for a firmly placed, artistically produced lyric baritone voice ... He had an opera repertoire of more than 100 roles and had sung with companies in virtually every major American city, including the Metropolitan and New York City Opera and the Washington, Boston, San Francisco and Dallas operas as well as at the Paris Opera and La Fenice in Venice.

But his easygoing temperament and his willingness to perform in long-running musical comedies made him a journeyman stylist rather than a matinee idol.

Reardon made his debut at the Met in 1965 as Tomsy in *The Queen of Spades* and sang a wide variety of roles there for 11 seasons. Igor Stravinsky chose Reardon to sing Nick Shadow in the recording he conducted of his opera *The Rake's Progress*. Other roles that won him acclaim were Iago in *Otello*, Scarpia in *Tosca*, Pelleas in *Pelleas and Melisande*, Escamillo in *Carmen*, Marcello in *La Boheme* and the title role in *Don Giovanni*.<sup>30</sup>

Nancy Ross wrote an article for the Met's weekly publication, *Opera News*, about Rogers' upcoming opera *The Snow People* in 1973. From this article, we learn that Fred and Joanne Rogers were partially responsible, not only for *Trouble in Tahiti's* successful premiere, but also for John Reardon having pursued a career in music.

... Reardon ... sometimes sings arias from grownup operas as well as appearing in the works created especially for children. John Reardon and Fred Rogers are old friends. Before studying for the ministry, Rogers took a bachelor's degree, magna cum laude, at

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<sup>29</sup> Will Crutchfield, "John Reardon, 58, Noted Baritone and Champion of Modern Opera," *The New York Times* April 19, 1988.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/19/obituaries/john-reardon-58-noted-baritone-and-champion-of-modern-opera.html>.

<sup>30</sup> From Times Wire Service, "Obituaries: Baritone John Reardon, 58; Music Career Spanned 30 Years," *LA Times* April 19, 1988.  
[http://articles.latimes.com/1988-04-19/news/mn-1054\\_1\\_john-reardon](http://articles.latimes.com/1988-04-19/news/mn-1054_1_john-reardon).

Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. He was a member of the class of 1951; Reardon, a year behind him, was assigned a room across the hall. While Rogers was committed to major in musical composition, the baritone planned then to study business: because his was a family of musicians, he said, he wanted to go into a different field. It was thanks to his friendship with Rogers and several other music majors at Rollins that Reardon was persuaded to change his mind.<sup>31</sup>

In one sense, Reardon was just another artisan invited on the show to demonstrate his craft: numerous experts appeared as guests on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* to introduce their work to Rogers and his television neighbors. Each one was introduced as “my friend,” but in Reardon’s case, the friendship was a long-standing one. He was also a repeat guest star, and over the years his name came to be synonymous with opera in the *Neighborhood*.

In response to Mr. Crutchfield’s characterization of Reardon’s appearance on the *Neighborhood* as “proselytizing,” I would assert that he was not truly familiar with the productions. However, his description of Reardon’s diction and affect as particularly suited to American opera and television is remarkably apt, especially in light of the specific requirements for singers of Television Operas, outlined above. He also holds notable Television Opera credits not mentioned in the obituaries above. He worked with Igor Stravinsky not only on the recording of *Rake’s Progress*, but was also one of the two voices of God in Stravinsky’s

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<sup>31</sup> Nancy Ross, “Make-Believe Opera,” *Opera News* 37 (January 13, 1973): 8. Though Reardon was three years Rogers’ junior, Rogers attended Dartmouth and majored in Romance Languages for two years before transferring to Rollins College and changing his major to Music Composition. When he arrived, he was only one year ahead of Reardon in school.

oratorio<sup>32</sup> *The Flood*, commissioned by CBS and broadcast in 1962. His work on the various world premieres listed by the two obituaries above placed him on stage with such operatic heavyweights of the time as Sherrill Milnes, Evelyn Lear, Frederica von Stade, Richard Stilwell, Patricia Wells, Marie Collier, and John Macurdy, just to name a few.

As Rogers mentioned, Reardon did often arrive in the *Neighborhood* a few days before any opera was actually aired: he appeared, interacting deftly with the puppets in *Make-Believe*, early in the week. During these few episodes, Reardon sang and introduced the audience to opera, with an emphasis on the process required to create one.

#### PRODUCTION WEEK

Of course, no opera springs forth from a vacuum, and the *Babysitter Opera* is no exception. While the opera would be performed on Friday, the days leading up to the big events depict the preparations, which are fun, but also hard work, that are required in order for the opera to be a success. During the first season, the idea of theme weeks had not quite coalesced into the form it would take later. There are still examples of consistent discussions and recurring content throughout this entire week, and ahead of Friday's opera performance we hear about comforting someone who is afraid, and the fact that children grow constantly while adults were once small. This fact is usually tied to the idea of helping someone else: when you grow up you will help your children or other

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<sup>32</sup> A Television Oratorio, if we can apply Barnes' terminology to opera's more sacred sibling.

children to grow up too, or you can learn from adults and then teach someone else once you have grown. Finally, Rogers, along with the puppets and guest performers, emphasized the importance of rehearsal before performances, even for successful professional musicians. Musical guests perform both instrumental and vocal music of the standard repertoire, including Bach and Mozart. Rogers' own first opera for preschoolers is preceded by a brief introduction to *Die Zauberflöte*, an opera often considered a good choice for an audience of children.

On Monday's episode,<sup>33</sup> no mention is yet made of the opera, but we see hints of ideas that will find their way into the plot: Mister Rogers enters with a quilt, and he pretends to add additional squares to it. He talks about imagination, creativity, and channeling angry feelings through being productive with one's hands. In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, Henrietta hides under a quilt because she is afraid of thunder.

Tuesday's show<sup>34</sup> opens with Rogers discussing and demonstrating paper airplanes, especially the fact that they are hard to make at first, and that you have to keep practicing in order to be successful. During this first season of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, the trolley was present, but was not the only transitional device. In addition, Rogers used a telescope to peer into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. When he held the telescope up to his eye, the picture onscreen waned to a small circle, as if the audience was also experiencing Make-Believe through a small lens. He always looked in on Daniel Tiger's clock first, then

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<sup>33</sup> *Misterogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 0041, PBS, April 15, 1968, written by Fred Rogers.

<sup>34</sup> *Misterogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 0042, PBS, April 16, 1968, written by Fred Rogers.

swept past all the familiar landmarks in Make-Believe, naming them as they went by. Sometimes, two separate visits to Make-Believe occurred in one episode, which did not tend to happen in later years. Often, Rogers remarked that he would use the telescope to “see if it’s time for the trolley.”

During this episode, the telescope eventually deposits us inside the castle, where Bernard Goldberg, principal flautist for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, is deep in conversation with King Friday. Goldberg wears a tuxedo for this command performance. After some discussion of how the instrument works (why it’s held sideways instead of up and down, how the keys change the notes, etc.), the two engage in the following exchange:

KF: The flute is such a gorgeous instrument. I suppose it takes a while to learn to play it, does it?

BG: Oh yes, it takes many years, your majesty.

KF: When did you start?

BG: I began playing the flute when I was ten years old.

KF: And did you practice each day?

BG: I practiced each day then, and I practice each day now.

KF: Even now? A great symphony performer like you?

BG: Yes, your majesty, we must practice every day. Of course, I spend part of my time teaching other young people to play the flute.

KF: First you were little and you learned, and then you grew up and little by little you were teaching other people.

BG: Yes, your majesty.

KF: Oh, that’s excellent.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, King Friday asks Goldberg if he has “something a little longer you might be able to play for me, and my little symphonette here could accompany you?” Goldberg says that he will play “The Badinerie from the Suite in B-Minor by Johann Sebastian Bach,” and we see Rogers’ own musical taste reflected in King Friday when he responds, “Oh, Bach. I like the way he writes music.”

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<sup>35</sup> *MRN*, 0042, 9:25.

On Wednesday,<sup>36</sup> Mister Rogers introduces the idea of expressing oneself through music, and demonstrates some “happy” and “sad” sounds on the harmonica he has brought with him. When he gets inside, he draws attention to his piano and mentions that he can also play his feelings on the piano—and it has many more notes than the mouth-organ! He plays a short example emoting about missing his friends who just moved away, then a happier ditty about when they will come back to visit. Finally, he says you do not really need a harmonica or a piano—you can sing your feelings any time. When the can phone rings, he is excited to learn that “John Reardon of the Metropolitan Opera Company is with King Friday right now!”<sup>37</sup>

By counting to thirteen as the camera zooms in on the traffic light beside the couch where Rogers sits, we are able to see that inside the castle, John Reardon is performing scalar warm-up exercises for King Friday. When asked what composition it was, Reardon says that it was not really a composition, but what he calls a “Getting-ready-to-sing song.”<sup>38</sup> King Friday says he likes that very much, but he would really like to hear one that is already ready. “A ready-to-sing song?,” Reardon responds, “I’d be very happy to ... May I sing you a song from an opera?” King Friday would be delighted, so Reardon says he will perform a selection from *The Magic Flute* by Mozart, at which point King Friday wants to know what a Vogelfänger is. Reardon briefly explains Papageno’s role, tells

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<sup>36</sup> *Misterogers’ Neighborhood*, “Episode 0043,” PBS, April 17, 1968, written by Fred Rogers.

<sup>37</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 7:25.

<sup>38</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 7:40.

Friday that he is a König, and offers to let the king try on the feathered headdress he is holding. “I’m a Vogelfänger!” King Friday declares while sporting the headpiece that covers most of his puppet body. After Reardon retrieves the hat and places it on his own head, he produces a pan-pipe, hanging from a string around his neck under his coat, and demonstrates its sound. Finally, he explains the dramatic context for the song he is about to sing:

So he sings a song about the fact that he’s a bird-catcher, and that he’s a happy man living in the forest, but he’s a little lonely, and he’d like to find a little wife, too, along with some of those birds. And if he can find that little wife, he said he’d be so nice to her, and he’d feed her sugar drops and he’d rock her to sleep, and they’d live happily ever after.<sup>39</sup>

When the aria is over, concluding with Reardon making a rocking motion with his arms, King Friday asks if he is rocking a baby. When Reardon reminds him, “No, he’s rocking his little wife to sleep,” Friday asks for confirmation that he did find one, and Reardon responds, “Oh, yes, he finds a little wife that looks just like him. She wears feathers, too.”<sup>40</sup> After declaring that he is very pleased with the performance, King Friday issues the first of many royal commissions: “As a matter of fact, I’d like to commission you to make me an opera ... an opera about someone missing someone.” Reardon asks when he would like it to be completed, and is told, “Friday. Everything of importance happens on Friday.” Reardon is taken aback to learn that he means “this Friday,” and hesitantly agrees, “Oh, well, yes, of course, your majesty, if you command it. But Friday is

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<sup>39</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 9:30.

<sup>40</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 11:40.

very soon, you know, and it takes quite awhile to make an opera.” “For Friday...” he repeats to the camera after the king disappears, “well, I’ll try.”<sup>41</sup>

After the re-transition to Mister Rogers, accomplished by counting to thirteen accompanied by a zoom back out of the stop light, he says,

Well, if anybody could make an opera by Friday, certainly Reardon could. Boy, wasn’t that special to hear that? Did you like the little pipe? [he sings the five-note run motive while imitating playing the pan pipe with his can phone.] Gee, an opera about someone missing someone... that’s sort of what we were talking about, isn’t it? I wonder if Reardon will ask some of the other people in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe to help him...<sup>42</sup>

He uses the telescope to check in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe and find out if it is time for the trolley to come (it is), then has a short conversation with the trolley about the fact that there will be an opera, but no one knows yet who will be part of it. We are promised that when we get to Make-Believe we will see who Reardon asks to participate.

This trip to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe opens on Reardon speaking with Mrs. Frogg about costumes (she has “every kind of costume” in the Museum-Go-Round,<sup>43</sup> and is happy to help). He then asks where he might be able to find “some music-writing paper,” and learns that there is probably some available at Grandpère’s trading tower (established during Monday’s episode). He asks at the Tour d’Change, and while Grandpère goes in search of the item, he addresses the camera, “It’s difficult to write an opera without music-writing

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<sup>41</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 12:50.

<sup>42</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 12:57.

<sup>43</sup> Lady Elaine Fairchilde moved in later, but the Frogg family were the Museum-Go-Round’s initial inhabitants and proprietors.

paper.” Given the option between two varieties of staff paper, he reasons that the opera will probably be short, and chooses the smaller option.

The Trading Tower operates on a barter system, but since Reardon does not have anything available to trade, he offers a song, which Grandpère gladly accepts. He performs “Frere Jacques” with impeccable diction, then the two sing it a second time as a canon.<sup>44</sup> As Reardon departs with his staff paper, we understand that music and performance have real value in this neighborhood, as his singing was compensated with goods. This also establishes Reardon as a professional singer, even without using the term, since singing is the work he performs to gain items he needs.

As the trolley rolls past again, Reardon breaks into spontaneous recitative: “Oh, Trolley, Trolley, how can we ever write an opera in such a little while?”<sup>45</sup> then, speaking, concedes, “Well, I hope I can do it!” Next, he visits Henrietta Pussycat and X the Owl, who are next-door neighbors in the giant tree. Henrietta seems to be in the know: she recognizes him, associates him with the Metropolitan Opera, and is also surprised at the timeline he is working with. “Meow Friday! Meow meow meow meow meow opera meow meow hard to do meow!” she exclaims, and Reardon agrees: “Yes, very, very hard!”<sup>46</sup> X, on the other hand, is the first character to ask, on behalf of the entire preschool audience, “You sing opera? What’s opera?” Reardon explains: “Opera... well, what is opera? ... Opera is just like a play, except that everybody sings all the time,

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<sup>44</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 18:10.

<sup>45</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 18:25.

<sup>46</sup> *MRN*, 0043, 19:20.

instead of talking.” X associates this description with the palace chef, saying, “Oh, just like Edgar Cooke.”<sup>47</sup> Reardon agrees, “Yes, Edgar Cooke is an opera.”

We then learn that Reardon does not usually make up operas himself, but he is today, and King Friday has provided him a room in the castle where he can stay, which also includes everything he needs to write an opera: a piano and a writing desk. X the Owl mentions a time when he missed someone, reprising the idea from earlier about missing friends when they move away. Henrietta suddenly realizes that, since Sara Saturday is away, it is very likely that King Friday wants an opera about missing someone because he is missing someone himself. X and Henrietta quickly hatch a plan to invite Sara Saturday back for the opera, then request that Reardon sing a song about “X and Henrietta going on a trip” before they leave to find her. He sings an apparently spontaneous song about their current situation, employing full operatic diction, vibrato, and bravado, and punctuating phrases with the pan-pipe he is still carrying.

Upon our return to Mister Rogers’ living room, we find him putting chalk into a chalk holder useful for creating staves on a chalkboard, which he subsequently also does. Two staves go on the board; to the first he adds a treble clef, then outlines the melody of Reardon’s last song while singing the syllable associated with each pitch: “X and Hen-ri-et-ta go-ing on a trip.” He includes bar lines, then says, “And there needs to be a sharp there” while inserting a G-Major key signature, quickly followed by a time signature: “See? And I think that should have a four and a four—oh, I studied a long time to know how to do that.”

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<sup>47</sup> Edgar Cooke, another puppet resident of Make-Believe, sings all his dialogue.

Noting that “down here it looks something like it again,” he adds the consequent phrase, “X and Hen-ri-et-ta have a lot of zip.” This moment is rather remarkable, in that Mister Rogers establishes himself as a musical expert. Though he sings to his audience multiple times in every episode, he does not claim authorship to any of the songs, and we would not otherwise even know that he could read music, let alone write it. In this closing segment, by drawing briefly on the chalkboard, he introduces the audience to the visual aspects of music notation, and establishes that scoring, like performance, requires practice, commitment, and “a long time.” Even so, he stops far short of naming himself as the opera’s composer, reinforcing the Make-Believe narrative that it is Reardon who is responsible for “making” the opera.

On Thursday<sup>48</sup> Mister Rogers arrives with a baby bottle, which he will use to feed a chimpanzee named Honey, who is coming to visit. John Rucci arrives from the zoo, with Honey (wearing a striped t-shirt and overalls) in tow, and she quickly takes to Mister Rogers and the bottle of milk he offers. Rucci mentions that he needs to leave, and asks if Rogers would like to babysit. He quickly agrees to “chimpanzee-sit,” but confirms, “You’ll come back for her? In about 20 minutes?,” which receives an affirmative response. Honey shows no interest in the toy he offers, preferring to continue chewing on the bottle, although her attention is finally diverted to chewing on the telescope instead. Mister Rogers offers the reminder that “They are working on an opera in Make-Believe,” and the Trolley takes us there.

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<sup>48</sup> *Misterogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 0044, PBS, April 16, 1968, written by Fred Rogers.

John Reardon sings “Today Is New,” then visits Donkey Hodie, who lives in a windmill in Someplace Else. Reardon conducts an audition without calling it that, and asks Donkey Hodie to sing for him. At first, he sings several repetitions of “Hee-haw,” then, asked to sing something other than hee-haw, offers several repetitions of “Haw-hee.” Finally, Reardon introduces the song “I Am Missing Somebody Badly” that he has written for the opera, and asks to hear that instead. Reardon sings one repetition alone first, then the two sing it together, and finally Donkey Hodie takes a turn by himself. Reardon says he is pleased with what he hears, that Donkey Hodie will make a fine prince—he has been cast in the opera, and should come to the castle “when the moon is bright” for rehearsal and costume fittings. As Reardon departs, he reinforces the purported liveness of the operatic performance when he remarks, “Yes, I think he’ll make a fine prince... I wonder if he’s going to put ‘hee-haw’ in the middle of his song... well, that’s the thing about opera: you never know what’s going to happen!”<sup>49</sup>

Reardon returns to the museum-go-round and asks Mrs. Frogg on the same melody as “I am missing somebody badly,” if she has “a prince’s costume for a donkey,” and she returns with a ruffled shirt and straw hat with attached curls. X and Henrietta are back from issuing an invitation to the opera to Sara Saturday, and share the sad news that she cannot attend because she promised to watch a baby while its mother went out shopping, and she will not break her promise, even to come to a royal opera. This news sparks an idea for Reardon, and he suddenly knows exactly what the opera should be about: the someone who

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<sup>49</sup> *MRN*, 0044, 17:20.

is missing someone is “a baby prince whose mother is going out for the evening, and he has a babysitter.”<sup>50</sup>

X suggests that Henrietta play the babysitter, so Reardon sings “I’m Taking Care of You,” which she repeats, characteristically replacing many words with “meow.” It is Henrietta’s idea for Lady Aberlin to play the mother, and X insists that Reardon also play a role. He has not written a role for himself, but Henrietta wants him to play a grandfather. When he explains there is not a grandfather in this story, her response is “Meow put him in,” and so he does. X then expresses a desire to help, and Reardon assures him,

You really are a help. My goodness, you’ve already expanded this opera thirty percent. And you know how else you can help? If you’ll come to the castle tonight when the moon is bright, I want you to help with the scenery and the lighting. You’ll be the stage manager. ... We’ll decorate everything tonight for tomorrow’s opera.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, back in the house, Mister Rogers offers Honey a second bottle, and sings “I’m Taking Care of You” once again. He also emphasizes that, though it is hard to believe, he started out as a baby, but learned and grew little by little, and we will do the same. “You know what’s going to happen tomorrow? An opera! And we’re going to be able to be together to see it,” he concludes before launching into the “Tomorrow” song.

Through the course of these few days, we have learned a few things about Opera, and about this opera, which give a basis of expectation for what is to come on Friday. First, opera is like a play but people sing everything instead of talking.

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<sup>50</sup> *MRN*, 0044, 19:50.

<sup>51</sup> *MRN*, 0044, 23:00.

Also, the singers play characters, and it is helpful to have costumes to show who they are. We also know that opera requires a lot of work, and time, and it is unusual to be able to put one together in three days, though it has happened in *Make-Believe*. There will be special sets and lighting, and a rehearsal “when the moon is bright.” We have even seen an (extraordinarily kind) audition and casting process, so we know who will play each role. Finally, we know that the opera is about missing someone, and we have heard both Henrietta’s and Donkey Hodie’s arias during their auditions. Any child who tuned in for Wednesday and Thursday’s episodes would be well prepared indeed to view King Friday’s opera, which, as a matter of some importance, will take place on his namesake day.

#### TELEVISION OPERA: EMPHASIS ON OPERA

The script for the Friday opera performance episode calls for Picture-Picture to show both interior and exterior views of the “New Metropolitan Opera House.”<sup>52</sup> Rogers seemed especially fascinated with the chandeliers that could be raised and lowered electrically, and wanted footage of the lights in action to show to his audience. Though it is difficult to know for sure, lack of availability of this footage is the most likely reason the idea was subsequently cut from the episode. King Friday also mentions the Metropolitan Opera at the end of the episode, reinforcing their guest star’s association with the Met when he offered to allow Reardon to mount repeat performances there.

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<sup>52</sup> Picture Picture is essentially the television in Mister Rogers’ house, but it doesn’t look like one. When not in use, the double frame hanging on the wall displays various things: a canvas that says “Hi” or any number of famous paintings, etc., but this is the portal through which we view the documentary segments that explain how things work.

In addition to the specific discussion of operatic experiences, Reardon acts as a sort of personified program note when he appears before King Friday just ahead of the actual performance. Though Rogers made a point to prepare his viewers for the narratives they witnessed in *Make-Believe*, it is extreme even for the *Neighborhood* for one character to explain the entire plot before the opera even began.

JR: Now the opera, your highness, has the theme of a mother who goes out, and a grandfather and a babysitter who take care of the baby while she's gone.

KF: Well, who is the someone missing somebody?

JR: Well, the baby starts out by missing his mother.

KF: Oh, I see, yes. Well, you may proceed, then, with the opera.

With this short exchange on-screen, the audience was prepared to take in the opera, just as a live opera audience would have been with access to a plot synopsis or libretto.

### COSTUMES / CLOTHES

The set and costume budget was likely no higher for this episode than any other in the first season, so the operatic roles were quite similar to the characters/cast members playing them. The fact that each opera is performed by the regular *Neighborhood* cast creates an interesting situation of nested fantasy narratives, since familiar characters were playing other characters. Still, in the preparation time for the *Babysitter Opera*, quite an emphasis is placed on the idea of costumes and special clothes, both for performers and audiences of opera.

Rogers demonstrates from his first entrance on Friday that this day will be different, and indeed much fancier than normal: he arrives with a box under his

arm, and while singing “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” takes out and puts on a collapsible top hat and opera cape on top of the suit he is already wearing. Thus, in contrast to all other episodes, he actually dresses *up* rather than dressing down when arriving in the living room set. Likewise, in contrast to Graf’s construction, which frames the actions as mutually exclusive, in this moment Rogers puts on a top hat *and* brings opera into American homes.

Rogers’ dressing-up routine also reflects Gian Carlo Menotti’s convictions on the importance of clothing as a marker to set apart the time an audience member spends having an operatic experience. While Graf believed that opera should take off the top hat and enter the homes, Menotti apparently thought that the effort and even “costumes” required on the part of the audience were a necessary part of the theater-going experience. Despite being the most successful composer of Television Operas in history, Menotti had the following to say about the medium:<sup>53</sup>

Cinema, television, and radio seem rather pale substitutes for the magic of the stage. This is the reason why, in writing *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, I intentionally disregarded the mobility of the screen and limited myself to the symbolic simplicity of the stage. The spectator who takes no journey and has no appointed time or seat but, carelessly clad, sits casually on the first available chair in his living room, and who, knitting or perhaps playing with the kitten, turns on what he takes to be a theatrical performance, will never know the emotion of a real theatrical experience. The theater must be a choice—a carefully made appointment. Machiavelli, even after he retired to the country, used to don his most elaborate and richest clothes before setting to work on his books. Symbolically, at least, every artist does the same. He addresses you with utter dignity, whether his message be comic or tragic—and to partake in

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<sup>53</sup> The medium of television. Not to be confused with *The Medium*, which was composed for the stage.

his experience you must share this seriousness and receive his message wearing your 'Sunday clothes.'<sup>54</sup>

Ironically, it is the otherwise alarmist literature on the state of children's investment in and addiction to television<sup>55</sup> that can best allay Menotti's fears of having only half of the audience's attention during a televised operatic performance. We have been told for decades that knitting and kittens can hardly hope to sway the fixation of a child intent on his television programming. After all, as George Gerbner reminded us earlier, "The first and most important characteristic is that television is a ritual. Most people watch television by the clock and not by the program."<sup>56</sup> Whether by the time or by the program (they were the same, after all), Mister Rogers' audience was a loyal bunch; it is not at all unusual for his fan mail to indicate "I watch you every day." Thus, we might well contend that Rogers' audience did in fact have an appointed time, and likely even a preferred seat.

Whether he was familiar with Menotti's specific feelings on the subject or not, Rogers was acutely aware of the importance of specifically setting the time apart during his daily television visits with his audience, and had a history of working against the fears Menotti expressed on each episode, not just the operas. Even so, though each day holds its own promise, the first episode with an opera

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<sup>54</sup> Gian Carlo Menotti, quoted by Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 242.

<sup>55</sup> Summarized by Cecelia Tichi in "The Child—A Television Allegory," in *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 191-207, for example.

<sup>56</sup> George Gerbner, "The Significance of Story," *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 8.

was particularly special, and Rogers indicates this not only through the week's broadcasts, but through his choice of clothing. He appears in his "Sunday best," though the opera is a weekday matinee. He provides the on-screen transitions which take the place of Menotti's "journey" to the opera house. Also, by discussing his costume and including the audience in his experience, the children were able to join him and, through their own imagination and emotional connections to him, not remain "carelessly clad," regardless of what they themselves may have been wearing.

Advertisements touting televisions' benefits often placed their viewers in a similar state of dress.

Numerous advertisements ... showed couples in evening attire gathered in their living rooms as if in a private box at the theatre, and gazing in rapt attention at on-screen ballet, opera, or drama from the legitimate stage. Television in the living room was thus offered to the housewife as an excursion out of the household and into an expensive private box for an experience of high culture. With television, the housewife was not an isolated suburban drudge but a theatre-goer, participant in urban social forms of high-culture night life.<sup>57</sup>

Since children were home during the day with their mothers, the *Neighborhood* operas—and Rogers' dress-up routine—were their very own opportunity to visit the opera in the afternoon, in an analogous experience to their parents' evening viewing of "high-class" entertainment.

Rogers demonstrates and discusses the top hat and cape, mentioning that "I don't think too many people wear these any more ... they're pretty much like costumes now." "Do you like getting dressed up in things? Do you? So do I."

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<sup>57</sup> Cecelia Tichi, "Leisure, Labor, and the La-Z-Boy," *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 94.

Next, he brings out his opera glasses (“They’re sort of like two telescopes together”), which is followed by a knock at the door. The fanciness of the opera is reinforced when Lady Aberlin enters in her own “Sunday clothes”: a long velvet dress, with her head and shoulders wrapped in an enormous feather boa. She explains that X the Owl gave her the boa (“It’s for being the mother in the opera”) and that she was her own costumer otherwise (“They said to wear the fanciest dress I have.”)

Aberlin is clearly presented as the diva in this episode, both aurally and visually: she is the one who sings the most, and her costume is both the most extravagant and the most discussed. The opera’s remaining three cast members add costume items in order to symbolize their transformation into their characters. John Reardon begins the episode in a dark three-piece suit, but changes into an old-fashioned shirt with rounded collar and patterned vest for the performance. He also adds wire-rim glasses in order to appear more grandfatherly, despite being only 38 years old at the time. When he appears on set, ready to begin the opera, X comments, “Boy, do you look different!” and Reardon agrees, “Yes, it’s the costume.” Donkey Hodie, as the Son, dons the old-fashioned child’s straw hat with long curls and ribbons attached, courtesy of Mrs. Frogg and the Museum-Go-Round. Henrietta Pussycat, in the title role of the Babysitter, also wears a straw hat with flowers. The hats, especially, do not seem to serve a particular purpose in terms of adding information about the characters wearing them; rather, they serve the purpose of simply being costumes, and relating the idea that singers in operas wear costumes while they perform.

## REHEARSAL

Despite the references to time and readiness, this episode provides not so much a behind-the-scenes (a la *Noises Off*) look at opera as a before-the-scenes look at the rehearsal and preparation time.<sup>58</sup> Rogers is always careful to structure repetition into his program, which allows the audience ample time to grow accustomed to new ideas, and the introduction of the mother's primary melodic theme is no exception. Betty Aberlin sings her song no fewer than four times during the course of this episode, which serves to simultaneously reinforce that rehearsal is an integral part of any operatic production and ensure that the audience is familiar with the tune. The fact that the melody is introduced first in the presence of (and with accompaniment by) Mister Rogers implies his approval.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike the premise presented in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*,<sup>60</sup> that the ability and propensity to love or appreciate opera is both inherent and immediate, lifelong opera fans know that the real pleasure comes from repeat

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<sup>58</sup> *Noises Off* is a 1982 play written by Michael Frayne, which features a play-within-a-play but doesn't actually show the internal play. It focuses instead on the inevitable drama backstage while a play is being produced, including everything from interpersonal conflict to trouble with props.

<sup>59</sup> In *Spoon Mountain*, a melody introduced by Mister Rogers functions as a transitional device. For further discussion of this idea, see Chapter 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Pretty Woman* is a 1990 romantic comedy film written by J. F. Lawton and directed by Garry Marshall. Edward Lewis, a rich businessman who hires a prostitute to accompany him for a week in Los Angeles, takes her to see her first opera, *La Traviata*. Edward, played by Richard Gere, tells Vivian Ward, played by Julia Roberts, "People's reactions to opera the first time they see it is very dramatic; they either love it or they hate it. If they love it, they will always love it. If they don't, they may learn to appreciate it, but it will never become part of their soul." It's a romantic notion, but I disagree.

performances: the anticipation of a favorite aria renders subsequent experiences even more enjoyable than hearing even the most moving composition for the first time. Thus, familiarity with the music is a necessary component of true opera appreciation. By building in four repetitions of the main aria through the course of the episode, Rogers ensures that, even when watching the opera itself for the first time, his audience will have the advantage of already ‘knowing’ the music.

Lady Aberlin shows a great deal of improvement in confidence through the rehearsal process. She mentions several times that rehearsals, both individually and as a group, have already occurred, but asks for Mister Rogers’ help running her “mother song” again before she is due in Make-Believe. “I’m on my way to the castle, but John Reardon sent this to me, and-and I rehearsed it,” she says, presenting a single folded sheet, “but I was wondering if you would just play it for me, since you know how to read notes and play the piano.” Her score may reasonably be assumed to be written on a piece of the manuscript paper that Reardon acquired at the trading tower a few days earlier. As they move to the piano usually outside the camera’s perspective, she continues, “Oh, we had a good rehearsal—really wonderful, when the moon was bright.” This repeated reference by multiple characters to rehearsal that took place at a specific time of day (“when the moon is/was bright”) reminds us that the group rehearsal did in fact occur, though we do not see it on camera. The lateness of the gathering time also implies real commitment on the part of the participants: not only are they burning the midnight oil, as it were, they are also working hard at their craft well beyond the time that the preschool audience would have been in bed.

The sight of Rogers at the piano does invite an observation in spite of Barnes having eschewed “diegetic” as a useful term—this scene is not occurring inside the opera, after all. Though the sound of a piano is the most frequently heard part of the *Neighborhood*’s very present musical accompaniment, we do not often see the actual piano from which the sound emanates. Thus, this example of diegetic music-making does stand out.

The first time we hear “It’s Hard to Say Goodbye”<sup>61</sup> (figure 4), Aberlin is apparently nervous about singing in the opera, and still a bit unsure of her song. Her singing is halting here, and her eyes are fixed on the score on the piano’s music stand, except when she watches Rogers as if to gain from him either approval to continue or assistance finding her off-beat entrances. She also fidgets behind the humorously large boa, which now hangs around her neck and obscures her entire body. Rogers compliments her on her singing, and she departs for the castle. After she leaves, Rogers continues to sing/hum the theme until he receives a call on the can phone.



Figure 4. *Misterogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 0045, 5:25.

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<sup>61</sup> *MRN*, “0045,” 4:53.

Aberlin immediately performs the same eight measures again just as she arrives in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.<sup>62</sup> John Reardon also comments on the loveliness of her costume and presents her with a crown that reads “MOTHER” – “just to finish things off.” He then asks, “Do you know your song, by the way?” – a remarkable question for an opera director who has already announced the five-minute call to the other cast members. She indicates that she does, and he asks her to sing it for him. This time through, she is off-book, but Reardon follows along in what is presumably a full score, conducting her using a pen as she sings with Johnny Costa accompanying from off-screen, as always (figure 5). The invisible accompanist renders her second rendition immediately different from the first, as the piano is now non-diegetic despite her singing taking place within the frame. As Aberlin sings from memory, her confidence is aurally improved from the previous rehearsal, but still her eyes remain fixed on Reardon for the majority of the time, as she is still receiving rhythmic information and encouragement from another figure more musically knowledgeable than herself.



Figure 5. *MRN* 0045, 9:08.

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<sup>62</sup> *MRN*, 0045, 8:43.

By the time her big moment arrives in the actual performance<sup>63</sup> Aberlin is relaxed and confident, far more demonstrative and expressive than ever before, smiling widely into the camera and addressing Reardon and the puppets with her voice full and head held high (figure 6). At the reprise upon her return, the showmanship has grown even larger, and her strutting, use of the boa, and liberties with the melodic line cement her as the diva of the show (figure 7). In fact, the feather boa itself seems to have completely transformed in her hands: when she first appeared her face was entirely obscured—literally hidden behind the comically oversized accessory. During her first rehearsal, Aberlin takes some control of the boa, but continues to hide behind it intentionally. By the end of the opera, she is thoroughly in command of the space, which she encompasses with wide arms, and as she swishes the boa about there can be no doubt that it is no longer a screen to hide a reluctant performer: it is now a prop fit for a star.



Figure 6. *MRN* 0045, 14:37.



Figure 7. *MRN* 0045, 21:11.

Though it is never explicitly stated as a moral, this progression of four repetitions clearly acts as a live example of the rehearsal discussion that occurred throughout the week, as it demonstrates that practice makes improvement.

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<sup>63</sup> *MRN*, 0045, 14:30.

Though these examples of “rehearsal” are just as scripted and pre-rehearsed as the “performance,” it is presented as an integral component of opera production. I believe that this rehearsal sequence should be considered the equal-and-opposite example to the 1985 episode wherein Rogers chose to air his unpolished attempt at participating in a clapping game with Ella Jenkins.<sup>64</sup>

The other benefit of having Aberlin’s voice “improve”/ “mature” with each repetition of the song is that it introduces the preschool audience to a trained voice through a slow, careful process. Rogers’ commitment to intentional introduction appears to be at play here, since Aberlin begins singing in a childlike manner, which is more likely to be familiar to the viewers. Each time she sings through her aria again, the melody itself becomes increasingly familiar, but her singing style is simultaneously moving gradually toward what one would hear in a professionally staged canon opera. She still has more of a musical theater voice than an operatic one, but in the *Babysitter Opera*, Aberlin appears to be intentionally giving an over-the-top impression of an opera diva, which sets her performance here apart from the later operas, when she sings much more simply, in her own normal singing voice. This fact also reinforces the idea that this first opera was more concerned with the usual trappings of a full operatic experience, which included opera glasses, a top hat and cape, and a full-voiced diva.

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<sup>64</sup> *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*, Episode 1548, “Mister Rogers Talks About Music,” PBS, May 15, 1985, written by Fred Rogers. This episode discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

## VOCALITY / EMBODIMENT

Aberlin's first run-through with Rogers is "small" in nearly all possible ways: she stands still, hiding and fidgeting; her head appears to float, surrounded by the scarf, and her voice is likewise disembodied. Its sound is soft, small, hesitant, girlish and childlike, lacking in any rough edges, and completely devoid of vibrato. Though Rogers is seated at the piano and she stands at his side to sing, she seems to peer up at him through her eyelashes.

When singing for Reardon, her volume and confidence have both come up, and vibrato is introduced, though still tentatively, and still only at the ends of phrases. Her relationship to the boa is less cowering, but she is still physically overwhelmed by it. Her voice seems to have reached adolescence with the inclusion of light vibrato, but her face and body still indicate hesitance and the desire for approval. She displays a classic symptom of novice performers still uncomfortable with either the music they were to have learned or the idea of being watched on stage as she bobs her head and body in time with the music, particularly on the downbeat rests.

Her growth as a performer is again paralleled by the growth of volume she produces and space she commands during the actual performance. She controls her costume as if it were a prop, swinging the boa and dabbing at her eyes with her skirt hem. She sings with head held high and direct eye contact with the camera, even using a large gesture to herself indicating that she is the "someone special" to whom the song refers. It is during this performance that Aberlin also begins to demonstrate a greater control of her own voice, with a healthy, confident vibrato, and inflections imitative of Julie Andrews. This is especially

true in her use of toss-off sounds instead of fully sung notes, which mostly occurs at the beginning of phrases. In addition to being in control of her voice, she also seems to be in control of the music itself, and takes liberties in changing it for dramatic effect. The finale version of “It’s Hard to Say Goodbye” is grandest of all, and Aberlin is nearly comical in her attempt to embody the opera diva. She struts about, waving her boa, and takes the greatest liberties with the melodic line of the entire episode.

John Reardon also alters his voice to suit the character: he uses a thin sound, shaky-at-times vibrato, and spread vowels in his attempt to sound older than he is (he was 38, playing a grandfather), but he does not use the affectation consistently; it does not last throughout. Rogers is also an interesting example of vocal alteration: he does not sing as himself during the opera portion, but does voice the two puppets, which involves both speaking and singing, in familiar character voices.

## PUPPET OPERA

According to John Mohr Minniear, author of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*’ “Puppet Opera, Puppet Theatre” article, cultures around the world have repertoire for puppet opera productions, often composed as an alternative to live (human) opera productions in times of political or religious restriction.<sup>65</sup> Most puppet opera productions featured marionettes, performing in sync with live singing. Recent journal articles addressing puppet opera mostly

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<sup>65</sup> John Mohr Minniear, “Puppet Opera, Puppet Theatre,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by Stanley Sadie, 29 vols. (London: Macmillan, 2001), 20:602.

focus on specific productions, which include everything from far-Eastern religious practices to adaptations of Western canon works. *The Magic Flute* is quite a popular option for puppet adaptation, but fairly recent productions of *Hansel and Gretel* and *Don Giovanni* as well as, perhaps somewhat predictably, *Il Pagliacci* are also in evidence. All such productions are performed exclusively by puppets—operated and voiced by humans, of course, but interacting only with equally inanimate characters.

In 1929, Basil Maine lamented in *The Musical Times* “the kind of acting which we gladly suffer during an operatic production.”<sup>66</sup> His proposed solution to the “extraneous irrelevant activity” rampant in opera performances he had experienced was simple and clear: a “conviction” that “puppets are the only perfect actors.”<sup>67</sup> He explains, “One advantage is that his facial expression is fixed.”<sup>68</sup> If Maine is correct that fixed expressions are ideal for the perfect relation of opera to the audience, free from distracting gesticulation or facial exaggeration, then Rogers’ puppets ought to prove the perfect tool for the task.

Susan Linn, psychologist and puppeteer, provides a description of Rogers’ puppets which does seem to line up with Maine’s ideal:

The puppets themselves are simple, primitive creatures by the Muppet-centric standards of today’s television puppetry. Their mouths do not move. Their eyes do not track. They have no feet. To the annoyance of my puppeteer friends, we do not watch the

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<sup>66</sup> Basil Maine, “Puppets in Opera,” *Musical Times* 70, no. 1036 (June 1929): 508.

<sup>67</sup> Maine, 508.

<sup>68</sup> Maine, 509. Maine is not the first individual drawn to a fixed expression for theatrical portrayal: still-faced puppets call to mind the extensive tradition of Commedia dell’Arte masks.

Neighborhood of Make-Believe to marvel at flawless manipulation. Nor do we sit in awe of the puppets' design. We watch because we have come to care about the essence of these characters. We, and our children, watch because we know them. We recognize ourselves in their complexity.<sup>69</sup>

Roderick Townley provides a strikingly similar description:

The first-time viewer may be disappointed to find that all the inhabitants of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe have immobile, impassive faces. Lady Elaine's face seems actually crude. There's not a soft, expressive, high-tech, Muppetlike creature in the lot. They are, in a sense, projective devices onto which the child casts his own meanings.<sup>70</sup>

Both Linn and Townley's final statements—about recognizing ourselves in the puppets, projecting ourselves upon them, and re-creating them in our own image—resonates strongly with all literature on the history of puppets, operatic and otherwise, which agrees that puppets are a useful site of empowerment and negotiation for individuals unable to claim and utilize their own voices. Everyone from abused children undergoing play therapy, who are able to give voice to their feelings, to marginalized political or religious groups, playing out socially unacceptable critiques or entertainment, has been able to transfer emotion and meaning onto a puppet, and to be empowered through the process.

Rogers did not set out to be a professional puppeteer; in fact, his first appearance on television as the man behind a puppet happened rather by accident. Daniel Striped Tiger's origin story is as fortuitous as they come.

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Linn, "With an Open Hand: Puppetry on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 90.

<sup>70</sup> Townley, "Fred's Shoes," 73.

[WQED General Manager] Dorothy Daniel held a party the night before the new program went on the air for the first time and gave everyone favors. Mister Rogers' favor was a tiger puppet. He thought, 'Why don't we cut a hole in the set and I'll put him through? We'll call him Daniel, for Mrs. Daniel.' Josie Carey liked the idea and Dorothy Daniel was pleased to have a puppet named for her. Mister Rogers was good with puppets, since he used to play with them when he was little. So he became Daniel's voice. And the buckaroos watching *The Children's Corner* liked Daniel Striped Tiger so much that Mister Rogers used him the second day, and the third day. Mister Rogers decided, if he could do Daniel's voice so well, maybe he could do other puppet characters. That's when King Friday XIII and X the Owl came along. They joined Daniel Striped Tiger, and all of a sudden Mister Rogers was in charge of more puppets than he had hands.<sup>71</sup>

Daniel Striped Tiger, King Friday XIII, X the Owl, and Henrietta Pussycat were the original puppets first developed on *The Children's Corner*, the daily, hour-long, live program that Rogers produced with Josie Carey in the early 1960s. She explained their characters:

Mister Rogers was an actual character on *Children's Corner* although he was never seen, but Henrietta Pussycat belonged to him and she talked about him all the time. ... He had different personalities for each character. Daniel was sweet and gentle and compassionate. X was his flaky side, and not quite all that smart, always needing to learn.<sup>72</sup> King Friday was pompous, and needed power, and wanted control. So each of the characters had little parts of Fred in them.<sup>73</sup>

In 1987, he shared a story that emphasized his invisibility on *The Children's Corner*, a circumstance that was later echoed in the Neighborhood of Make-

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<sup>71</sup> Wendy Murray Zoba, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?: At the Center of Mister Rogers' Cheery Songs and Smiles Lies a God-Ordained Mission to Children," *Christianity Today* 44, no. 3 (March 6, 2000): 42.

<sup>72</sup> Rogers characterized X the Owl elsewhere as "adolescent."

<sup>73</sup> Josie Carey, interview, included in the documentary *Lessons from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* by Judy Rubin (Pittsburgh: Expressive Media 2014), 6:30.

Believe. He had an encounter at the WQED station just ahead of the *Children's Corner's* 5:00pm air time:

Sister Rosemary was head of radio and television for the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, and one day, it was very close to five o'clock and Sister Rosemary was coming down the stairs, and she said, 'What in the world are you in such a hurry about?' and I said, 'I've forgotten the puppets!' and she said, 'Well, you're nothing without them.'<sup>74</sup>

He laughed heartily, then repeated, "I remember that so often: 'You're nothing without them, Fred.'"

He may have been nothing without his puppets, but in an even truer sense they were nothing without him. It is here, in our consideration of the puppets as characters, that we also must consider Mister Rogers himself, not just as composer, but as performer. Since all the operas take place inside the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, Rogers does not appear in any of them—sort of. He does not sing or act, either as himself, as a character, or a character playing another character, as the other [adult, human] cast members do. Despite being its ostensible owner and sovereign (King Friday XIII would object), Rogers never travels to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

He plays the role of Virgil to the viewer's Dante, Heurtebise to Orpheus, Moses to the Israelites. Like Moses, he does not enter the Promised Land of the child's imagination ... but his presence is everywhere. Rogers provides the voices for King Friday XIII, Queen Sara, "X" the Owl, Daniel Striped Tiger, and most of the other puppets ... He is the Prospero in his own television *Tempest*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Fred Rogers, interview included on the documentary *Lessons from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, 20:25.

<sup>75</sup> Townley, 76.

It is only when the puppets are cast as opera characters, then, that Rogers is afforded the opportunity to sing in his own operas. The *Babysitter Opera* has only four singing characters, which is not at all unusual for a small-scale opera. Instead of the expected Soprano / Alto / Tenor / Bass scoring, however, we find Soprano / Cat / Donkey / Baritone, with the inner two voices sung (/meowed/brayed) by Rogers himself. In the updated epilogue to *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion speaks of the intentionally and organically (not technologically) altered voice:

In one sense the voice is the first of special effects—the one requiring the fewest accessories, the least technology and money. A good actor or impressionist, in fact anyone with enough practice, can become capable of changing his voice and giving it all kinds of inflections and dimensions merely with the means nature has given him.<sup>76</sup>

He goes on to discuss the implications of these vocal alterations for young children, in the context of adults they interact with personally.

We might imagine that for the infant, it must be frightening when there is a change in the voice of a familiar adult. Such changes or deformations might conjure up caricatural, monstrous, exaggerated faces in his imagination... For the very small human, parents and adults have an odor that remains constant, and a face that doesn't change shape much, but an unpredictable voice. Adult voices whisper, shout, laugh, cry, speak very close by or from afar, rise an octave, and in each case it's as if the adult becomes someone else.<sup>77</sup>

Chion's purpose with this speculation is to draw attention to the fact that altered or grotesque bodies have a greater effect on adults than altered voices do, but I wish to take his description at face value. Based on my own experience and

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<sup>76</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 169.

<sup>77</sup> Chion, 170.

those I have asked, my sense is that overwhelmingly viewers in the intended age range did not realize Fred Rogers was responsible for the voices of the puppets. According to Chion, the voice is such a strong sign of identity that, especially for very young children, alteration of the voice is inextricably bound to an alteration of identity. Thus, his conclusion is particularly apt here: that with intentional vocal alteration such as Rogers achieved to perform each character, it was indeed as if he became someone else. Thus, while he certainly played a role as facilitator and perhaps supervisor of Make-Believe—especially in terms of introducing the transitional objects (discussed in Chapter 2 and *Spoon Mountain*)—we can safely say that for the purposes of the intended audience’s reception and reaction, Rogers did indeed, upon each Trolley trip to Make-Believe, “become someone else.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> I posed a question in a facebook status on May 10, 2016 [making no assumptions or claims about having a representative sample of respondents] asking a group of individuals with whom I already have a “friends” connection to share whether/when they knew that Rogers provided many of the puppet voices. Only a few individuals claimed to have realized this was the case while they were within the target age range of the show, and most of those indicated it was because they saw him specifically ‘pull back the curtain’ and demonstrate the voices on an episode. Many said it occurred to them when they continued to watch the *Neighborhood* into their teens or twenties, whether with younger siblings, while babysitting, or for their own edification. An equally significant number responded that they were shocked to realize this was the case at the moment that they read my question. Based on this non-scientific poll, combined with other casual conversations on the subject, as well as my own experience, I feel it is safe to surmise that those precocious preschoolers who recognized their hero’s voice behind the puppet faces were a small minority of the viewing audience.

## [LITERAL] FRAMING + STAGING

In addition to all the ways in which the *Babysitter Opera* is, of all the *Neighborhood* operas, most closely related to *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, there is one way in which it is the least similar. Since the opera forms such a relatively small portion of the episode, Rogers' usual transitional devices from the living room to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe do not send the audience directly into the operatic performance. Lady Aberlin's rehearsal begins with Rogers at the piano, and the rehearsal and preparation process continue once she arrives in Make-Believe. Thus, the fantasy is nested for an additional layer, requiring yet more transitional markers to indicate that the opera has begun. The entire opera takes place with a rather elaborate proscenium framing the entire shot, complete with patterned reliefs and heavy curtains. In truth, it is a puppet show stage, from which Henrietta Pussycat and Donkey Hodie sing. The Mother and Grandfather stand in front of the stage, the bottom of which is at approximately waist height to them, and interact with both the puppets and the camera.<sup>79</sup>

Of course, no such puppet stage is necessary for each visit to Make-Believe; the puppet characters all appear in their "natural" habitats: the castle, the clock, the tree, the Museum-Go-Round. The Neighborhood of Make-Believe is not, then, a "puppet show" in the sense that one might expect, so the sudden appearance of proscenium and draperies reads very much as an opera stage. When experiencing *Amahl* and subsequent *Neighborhood* operas, the viewer, by

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<sup>79</sup> This is apparent in figure 4, taken from the opera performance portion of the episode.

way of the camera, is immersed into the world of the opera. By contrast, *Babysitter* takes place in front of a stationary camera, which relays a single shot that recreates not so much an opera performed as film or television but rather the experience of watching an opera on stage, from the point of view of a seat in the house.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF GRANDFATHERS

This is the first time that Reardon sings the role of a grandfather, but it won't be the last: he is the long-lost family member and title character who returns in *A Granddad for Daniel* (1986). Fred Rogers' grandfather, Fred Brooks McFeely, was extremely influential in his life. They were very close; Rogers was named for him (Fred McFeely Rogers) and named the *Neighborhood* deliveryman character, Mister McFeely, after him as well. Rogers was always excited to talk about his grandfather:

He was a character. Oh, a lot of me came from him. I think so. Oh, he was a real pioneer ... The fascinating thing about him was that he loved to do things so much that every time he would get something started, a company started, he'd sell his entire interest in it to be able to start something else. ... But the thing that impressed me was that he was not interested in amassing stuff; that wasn't any fun. What he wanted to do was work.<sup>80</sup>

Rogers loved to visit his grandfather on his farm for a week each summer.

He taught me all kinds of really neat stuff. And I think maybe that's who I am to the kids on the *Neighborhood*. I don't know. I'm always bringing stuff to show them. I'm always welcoming neighbors. I always think of myself as a neighbor or an uncle or

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<sup>80</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Jeanne Marie Laskas, "What Is Essential is Invisible to the Eye," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Mary Margaret Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 22.

somebody who has time to spend with them. I think that was who my grandfather was to me.<sup>81</sup>

McFeely was also a musician, and had an impact on Rogers' life in that way: My grandfather played the violin, and I remember he would play this song: [turns to the piano, plays and sings] 'Play, gypsy, dance, gypsy, play while you may. Play, gypsy, 'tis a lovely day.' I remember learning that to please him.<sup>82</sup>

Rogers' millions of viewers also have his Grandfather McFeely to thank for his trademark affirmation and benediction, as they received his message daily for decades.

I think it was when I was leaving one day to go home after our time together that my grandfather said to me, 'You know you made this day a really special day. Just by being yourself. There's only one person in the world like you. And I happen to like you just the way you are.' Well, talk about good stuff. That just went right into my heart. And it never budged. And I've been able to pass that on. And that's a wonderful legacy. And I trust that he's proud of that.<sup>83</sup>

Rogers' affection for his own grandfather explains the important role that John Reardon plays both here and in the *Grandparents' Opera*. Grandfathers, in his experience, were excellent caregivers, trustworthy, and kind (even if they do fall asleep easily). In addition, it would be sad for a child—like Daniel—not to have a grandfather, and well worth the search to find a grandfather, even if he has been missing for many years.

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<sup>81</sup> Rogers, in Laskas, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Fred Rogers, interview included on the documentary *Fred Rogers: America's Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2012), 14:45.

<sup>83</sup> Rogers, in Laskas, 33.

## FOLLOW-UP / SINGING YOUR FEELINGS

Just as we are privy to rehearsal at the beginning of the *Babysitter Opera* episode, we are also afforded the opportunity to see, at the end, a form of immediate reception history. After the opera is complete, we see Aberlin and Reardon conversing with King Friday XIII, and are introduced to the trappings of showing one's appreciation for opera. The curtains open and close, and the singers bow to uproarious canned applause and whistles, while being showered with flowers as if tossed from the audience. King Friday XIII immediately relates his approval of the opera he commissioned directly to the cast following the performance. "A most successful opera, Reardon. Congratulations. You have my permission to use it at the Metropolitan Opera House whenever you wish." Reardon responds graciously, "Oh, you're very kind, but of course I couldn't consider it without the original cast." King Friday then foreshadows the performances to come: "I trust you will come again and make me another opera."<sup>84</sup>

King Friday's reaction to the opera is not particularly characteristic of King Friday, but it does bear a striking resemblance to Rogers himself. To hear him tell it, Fred Rogers' childhood was spent surrounded by instruments and characterized by music. He tells numerous fans, reporters, and interviewers about his experience "playing [his] feelings at the piano" and how he was able to process and express his feelings musically when he could not do it verbally. In response to the opera performance, King Friday XIII, not usually the sentimental type, accepts bows along with the stars, and says, "I was very touched by the

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<sup>84</sup> *MRN*, 0045, 23:30.

opera about someone missing someone.” He then asks Aberlin and Reardon whether they enjoyed putting on the opera. Of course they enthusiastically indicate that they did, and he continues, “Yes, it does something to someone, doesn’t it, to be able to sing about your feelings.”<sup>85</sup>

King Friday concludes the proceedings with, “We shall all retire to the Compliments Room, where I will give you all my royal compliments,” and finally, “End of opera for this Friday, and now on to other endeavors.”<sup>86</sup> The end of this episode represents Rogers’ first successful attempt at the complete miniaturization of opera. He had produced a work that included arias, duets, recitative, repeated musical themes, and an emotionally compelling narrative, all in only ten minutes.

Elise Kirk says in her 2001 volume *American Opera*, “It is impossible to pinpoint an American ‘school’ of opera composition. If there were one, it would no doubt be that of Menotti and his followers.”<sup>87</sup> She goes on to name Lukas Foss (b. 1922), Lee Hoiby (b. 1926), and Stanley Hollingsworth (b. 1924) as examples of Menotti’s “followers.” Though Fred Rogers (b. 1928) did not study composition with Menotti as Hoiby and Hollingsworth did, I would suggest that he should be considered as at least a transient student of this American opera ‘school.’ As a precocious young composer on set at the *NBC Opera Theatre*, Fred Rogers paid close attention to Menotti in his simultaneous roles as librettist,

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<sup>85</sup> *MRN*, 0045, 23:50.

<sup>86</sup> *MRN*, 0045, 25:00.

<sup>87</sup> Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 240.

composer, and director during *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, and seventeen years later performed a similar feat of creativity himself. The two clearly also had similar taste in singers: by the time John Reardon sang Dr. Stone in the American premiere of Menotti's *Help, Help, the Globolinks!* in Santa Fe in 1969, he had already created the role of Grandfather in Rogers' *Babysitter Opera*.

Fred Rogers worked for Kirk Browning, Director of NBC Musical Programs, during his first professional experience. Browning recalled their time together in 2006:

I do remember that he was a much better pianist at this point than I was, and I was always asking him to play some of the music he had studied. ... I remember there was one Rachmaninoff Prelude that I particularly enjoyed. The way he plays it is still in my ear, I can still remember. ... At NBC, we had pianos in every single studio. ... Now, interestingly enough, I think one of the first operas ... was *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. That was December of '51. But as you know [grinning widely and nodding knowingly], the *Amahl* was a rather important moment in television history. And it's interesting to me that that was the first opera that Fred was on, because here we have this crippled boy who is visited by the Magi on their way to the birth of Jesus. There's something that resonates in Fred's later work. I mean, it's just coincidental, that *Amahl*, with its religious overtones, and its emphasis on the plight of a young child—and the fact that it's a musical! I think it's fascinating that that was really Fred's first television experience.<sup>88</sup>

Jennifer Barnes asserts—beginning in the subtitle of her book *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television*—that Television Opera quickly declined after a very brief period of success, but in drawing that conclusion she only considered operas that were intended for adults. Despite the fact that WQED lacked the broadcasting firepower of the *NBC Opera Theatre*,

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<sup>88</sup> Kirk Browning, interview by Jessica Wiederhorn, *Fred Rogers Oral History Interviews*, New York: April 10, 2006, 00:26.

Rogers proved with the *Babysitter Opera* that opera for broadcast was far from dead—and that opera for preschoolers was only getting started.

## CHAPTER 4

### “A WONDER THAT IS EXTRA-ORDINARY”: *SPOON MOUNTAIN*

After the 1968 premiere of the *Babysitter Opera*, Rogers found a pattern for his operas, and most of the examples from the 1970s and 1980s function in very similar ways, including many of the nine operas that separate *Babysitter Opera* and *Spoon Mountain*. The week-long narrative arc sets up an operatic performance on Friday, with discussion of a royal commission and Reardon returning to oversee the proceedings and sing a role. During this time, the operas themselves consisted of the entire Friday episode, aside from an abbreviated rendition of the theme song and sweater-and-shoes routine.<sup>1</sup> A brief concluding discussion following the performance would wrap up the week.

In these episodes, Make-Believe expands far beyond its usual bounds in the middle of the episode, and dominates both the space and, more importantly, the time of the show. Thus, everything that has already been said about *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’s* contributions to viewers’ attention spans—usually

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<sup>1</sup> For the *Windstorm in Bubbleland* opening (1980), Rogers only makes it to the front porch, already in his cardigan and sneakers, and introduces the opera by changing the words to the theme song. The opening segment was shortened significantly because the opera itself took so much of the show’s running time. For *Windstorm in Bubbleland* (Episode 1475, originally aired May 23, 1980) Rogers also modifies the words of the opening song, in addition to shortening it, singing “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for an opera. Could we make one? Yes, we’ll make one!” To open *A Granddad for Daniel* (Episode 1535, originally aired May 11, 1984), he sings, “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for an opera. Would you like one? I know I’d like one...”

expressed in contrast to the quick-cut chaos typical of *Sesame Street*—is even more applicable to an opera performance episode than to any other given broadcast. Devoting approximately 25 minutes to relating a single sung narrative might prove taxing to a four-year-old viewer's interest, but many pieces of fan mail provide evidence to the contrary.

Unlike the *Babysitter Opera*, which lasts only ten minutes, and *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*, which stretches over three episodes, *Spoon Mountain* follows the outline described above, and thus is typical of the majority of Rogers' *Neighborhood* operas. The operas that appeared between *Babysitter* and *Spoon Mountain* included the *Campsite Opera* (1968), the *Teddy Bear/Whaling Ship Opera* (1969), *Pineapples and Tomatoes* (1970), *Monkey's Uncle* (1971), *Snow People and Warm Pussycat* (1972), *Potato Bugs and Cows* (1973), *All in the Laundry* (1974), *Key to Otherland* (1975), and *Windstorm in Bubbleland* (1980).

Episode 1505, dedicated to the performance of *Spoon Mountain*, was broadcast in 1982, and opens with the title screen "Mister Rogers Talks About Make-Believe."<sup>2</sup> Originally airing on Friday, July 2, it was the culmination of an entire week's worth of episodes dedicated to preparing for the opera's production and to the topic of make-believe. Along the way, other important lessons, including seatbelt safety and dealing kindly with lost kittens, were thrown in. As a self-contained entity, this production is an opera as promised, complete with aria, recitative, dance, lament, a quest, a villain, *deus ex machina*, and a love story. Keeping in mind that Rogers was a trained composer and performing musician—

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<sup>2</sup> *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 1505, "Mister Rogers Talks About Make-Believe," PBS, July 2, 1982, written by Fred Rogers.

not to mention a very well-read individual—we can be confident that he was aware of all these traditions as he composed. Despite its fanciful subject matter and compact performance time, *Spoon Mountain* is rife with references to operatic traditions of the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, short musical quotations, recurrence of recognizable newly-composed musical themes, and harmonization clearly intended to communicate emotion. In *Spoon Mountain* we also see how Rogers clearly demonstrates some of his own deeply held beliefs: namely, pacifism, nonviolence, and forgiveness rather than retribution.

While demonstrating a wide variety of musical styles, as Rogers said he strove to do, *Spoon Mountain* also reflects the accompaniment that had by this point become standard on the *Neighborhood*: a jazz trio of piano, upright bass, and percussion. These musicians were given a great deal of latitude to improvise, both in terms of accompaniment and ornamentation for the songs, and interjections during dialogue or quiet on-screen action. In this way, *Spoon Mountain* sounds more like other episodes of the early 1980s than the *Babysitter Opera* sounds like episodes of the late 1960s. The arpeggiated accompaniment that betrayed an intentionally tame Johnny Costa during *Babysitter* is now replaced with the full force of virtuosic improvisation by some of Pittsburgh's most accomplished jazzers.

#### JOHNNY COSTA: *NEIGHBORHOOD* PIANIST

Johnny Costa's contribution to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in his role as musical director (which also included responsibilities as accompanist and improviser of the program's live soundtrack) was tremendous. Costa became

musical director when Rogers began broadcasting on WQED in Pittsburgh in 1968. According to Michael Keaton's narration in the documentary *Fred Rogers: America's Favorite Neighbor*, "It was an interesting choice because Costa had an unusually sophisticated musical style, especially for a children's program. His trio performed the music live, in-studio, as each program was videotaped."<sup>3</sup> Speaking to ASCAP about his music in 1985, Rogers explained the choice of predominant musical style on the *Neighborhood*, and highlighted "the music we always have":

The songs I have written and the jazz arrangements by our music director, John Costa. We chose jazz because it allows for improvisation, and it can be so playful, lively, and spontaneous. The music that John and his trio provide underscores the action in 'Make-Believe.' John also accompanies me as I sing the songs I have written for children.<sup>4</sup>

Costa was filmed for an interview, like Rogers, seated at a grand piano. He shared his recollections about starting out on the show:

You know, when I sat down to do the very first program, Fred wrote the song, you know [plays "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood"] and I had to have an intro you know, and I had remembered that somehow, I don't know, somehow being in Oakland, right near where I went to college at Carnegie, and I had worked on a Beethoven sonata<sup>5</sup> ... [plays ascending scalar pattern of first-inversion triads] and I thought, 'Hey, that might make a nice intro for the program. So instead of three-part harmony, I did it in

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<sup>3</sup> *Fred Rogers: America's Favorite Neighbor*, documentary, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 34:50.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Rogers, "Educating Children Through Music: Mister Rogers Talks with ASCAP," *ASCAP in Action* (Fall 1985): 30.

<sup>5</sup> The moment Costa cites as the inspiration for this introduction is the first two measures of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2, no. 3, 4<sup>th</sup> movement: Allegro Assai.

fours [plays the intro to “It’s a Beautiful Day”], and I thought that’d be a nice intro for the song, so that stayed.<sup>6</sup>

Hugh W. Glenn describes Costa’s style, which incorporates jazz with elements inspired by various giants of art music, as seen in the example of the theme song above.

An important component of Costa’s style has always been classical music. In his rendition of “My Funny Valentine” (the most beautiful rendition I have ever heard), listeners hear Ravel, Debussy, and Rachmaninov. The sounds of Beethoven are unmistakable in Costa’s arrangement of “Just One of Those Things.” To classical themes, Costa adds key and chord changes, breakneck tempos, and lines that sometimes seem to include too many notes—all applied to grand melodies.<sup>7</sup>

While taking inspiration from the greats and incorporating elements of his own classical piano training, Costa was most concerned that he would be able to maintain his own musical style—and personal standards—while working on a children’s television program.

When I first started to work with Fred, I was real, I mean, we were real jazzers, and I thought, ‘Well, I don’t know ... a children’s program,’ well, I just wondered, can I play the things that I’ve been playing, that I want to play, you know? And Fred didn’t care. And so when I play ‘Good Feeling,’ I didn’t do it for the ears of a child, I didn’t play it this way [plays ‘It’s Such a Good Feeling’ melody with straight rhythm and Alberti bass], I wouldn’t do that! So, [plays accompaniment as we are accustomed to hearing it, with jazz inflection, syncopation, and virtuosic ornamentation, while grinning impishly at the camera] and Fred loved it, and I kept doing it, and the people loved it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Johnny Costa, interview included on the documentary *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 35:15.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh W. Glenn, “The Amazing Johnny Costa,” *Jazz News* 11, no. 80 (March/April 1995), n.p. <http://www.johnnycosta.com/biography/jazz-news.html>.

When asked about playing for children when he did not have a piano present, he said, “Children understand good music. I would never play piddling nursery rhymes,”<sup>9</sup> and “I think kids have wonderful ears and an uncanny way of knowing if it’s rhythmically right. Why not play for the kids as I would for any adult?”<sup>10</sup>

We both agree that music has to be high quality. What we do isn’t simple. Fred doesn’t write simple tunes, and the jazz arrangements I do are very sophisticated, too. Fred always says if it’s for the children, it has to be the best we can give.<sup>11</sup>

Hugh W. Glenn’s profile of Johnny Costa appeared in the March/April 1995 issue of *Jazz News*, and opened with the following anecdote:

Andre Previn, famed pianist, composer, and ... then conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony, was introduced to the pianist performing in the lobby of the William Penn Hotel in downtown Pittsburgh. During their conversation, Previn said, ‘I heard an incredible pianist on a children’s television program this week. Do you know him?’ Johnny Costa smiled. Previn didn’t realize he was talking to that incredible pianist nor that he was watching the ending of an episode of ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,’ which according to Branford Marsalis, is the best jazz show on the air anywhere.’ ... Opening and closing the program, Costa also arranges all the program’s music, accompanies guest performers, and contributes original (and unrehearsed) background themes in almost every segment.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Johnny Costa, interview included on the documentary *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 36:25.

<sup>9</sup> Johnny Costa, quoted by Hugh W. Glenn, “Johnny Costa,” *Jazz Journal International* 48 (February 1995): 10.

<sup>10</sup> Johnny Costa, quoted by Rebcca Ascher-Walsh, “Can You Say Maestro?,” *Entertainment Weekly* 147 (December 4, 1992): 76.

<sup>11</sup> Johnny Costa, Music Director and Pianist, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, quote featured at the Fred Rogers Center Museum, Latrobe, PA.

<sup>12</sup> Glenn, “The Amazing Johnny Costa.”

Glenn quotes Mel Powell as saying, “As with Art Tatum there are at least 20 iron fingers involved at top speed; or possibly it’s all being done with mirrors. If Costa had been known in the 1940s, many of us would have wanted him placed under house arrest.” Powell’s association of the two pianists was not unique: Art Tatum’s own response to Costa’s playing was to call him “The White Tatum.”<sup>13</sup> While maintaining a robust local performance schedule, Costa also garnered compliments from other notable jazz personalities: Dizzy Gillespie apparently came up to hug him after another performance at Pittsburgh’s William Penn Hotel, and Teddy Wilson told a friend traveling to Pittsburgh: “Go hear Johnny Costa. He’s a monster.”<sup>14</sup> David Newell recalled,

When Johnny began noodling during a rehearsal for a Johnny Carson *Tonight Show* ... Costa’s playing shocked Doc Severinsen’s musicians, who didn’t expect to hear such an exceptional pianist. One by one, each player stopped warming up, turned his head, and listened quietly.<sup>15</sup>

Costa was also inherently musical, and traced his musical memories to age five, just like Rogers:

I’ve always had a fascination about music I couldn’t resist. I remember as a five-year-old and the wonderful feelings I had listening to songs like ‘Ramona’ and ‘Walkin’ My Baby Back Home’

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<sup>13</sup> Aaron Manela’s forthcoming dissertation (Case Western Reserve University), analyzes the racial implications of musical choices on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, *Sesame Street*, and *The Electric Company*.

<sup>14</sup> Glenn, “The Amazing Johnny Costa.”

<sup>15</sup> David Newell, quoted by Hugh Glenn, “Johnny Costa,” *Jazz Journal International* 48 (February 1995): 8.

played on a neighbour's Victrola. I also heard a lot of music when visiting relatives. I remember how much music touched me.<sup>16</sup>

After landing at Normandy on D-Day and spending a year in various hospitals suffering from rheumatic fever, Costa attended Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie–Mellon University), and earned degrees in both music composition and music education. His formal performance training was always a part of his practice routine:

I practised the major scales and exercises I invented. I still try to practise the scales daily, but I don't practise enough. But even today, when my fingers feel weak, I force myself to do the scales. Afterwards, I usually feel wonderful. Any great pianist has some classical training and practises scales and exercises. All the accomplished pianists. Even Tatum was familiar with classical music and incorporated it when he could. When I'm practising seriously, I'll play a few Chopin etudes, a polonaise, and often parts of *Rhapsody in Blue* to maintain my fingerwork and dexterity.<sup>17</sup>

Costa studied composition with Nicolai Lopatnicoff, and said of him, "Lopatnicoff was a kind, caring man. He taught me so much. But my compositions sounded like his." Glenn identifies Costa's early style as combining the "rhythms of Waller and Tatum with the sounds of Hindemith and Stravinsky, the latter two influences the result of prompting from Lopatnicoff." Costa also recognized his teachers' influence on his style, as well as the repertoire he had encountered and performed over the years.

I still use some of that training ... but not too much. I've gotten away from using polytone harmonies; I don't like distortions or changes used for effects or to modernise beautiful melodies. I want to honour the composer. When I play "Embraceable You," I don't

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<sup>16</sup> Johnny Costa, quoted by Hugh Glenn, "Johnny Costa," *Jazz Journal International* 48 (February 1995): 9. Spelling reflects the British origin of the publication.

<sup>17</sup> Costa, quoted by Glenn, "Johnny Costa," 9.

want it to sound like Shostakovich. I'm a product of everything I've learned. Now I integrate more of the sounds of Bach, Beethoven and Chopin. Bach really drives me crazy: His music is so metrical, rhythmical, mathematical and fun to play.<sup>18</sup>

"I love everybody who ever wrote good music... I love everything. Well... I'm not into rock. All that jumping around—I guess it's fun, but it scares me."<sup>19</sup>

*Neighborhood* engineer and cameraman Art Vogel recalled that both Rogers and Costa were excellent pianists, and both willing to teach him when he asked for help with his own playing or arrangements. When he was struggling to play the bridge in "Misty," Rogers kicked Costa off the piano bench, saying "John, let me show him how you taught me." – "Now this was almost jazz!" Vogel marveled.

I mean, the sound, the chords... I love chords, and Fred and John ... those ten fingers made chords. Not three notes, not four notes, ten fingers, and I marvel at the harmony and the sounds that come from the chord structure, and Fred loved that.<sup>20</sup>

Costa's trio members joined him on set : Carl McVicker, Jr., on bass, and Bob Rawsthorne on percussion, both drum set and vibes. McVicker is the son of legendary Pittsburgh music educator Carl McVicker, Sr., who offered high school jazz ensembles alongside the band and orchestral programs. Together, the three made music for decades behind the scenes. On one occasion, the three appeared on camera, when Rogers conducted a behind-the-scenes segment and introduced them individually. Each played his own part for "It's a Beautiful Day in the

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<sup>18</sup> Costa, quoted by Glenn, "Johnny Costa," 10.

<sup>19</sup> Costa, quoted by Ascher-Walsh, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Art Vogel, interview by Jessica Wiederhorn, *Fred Rogers History Interviews*, Pittsburgh: June 13, 2007, 1:27.  
<http://exhibit.fredrogerscenter.org/early-life-education/videos/view/947/>.

Neighborhood” before putting it all back together again. “I think that really helps in listening to music,”<sup>21</sup> Rogers says in thanks to them.

“I’m glad I stayed with Fred. He’s so brilliant, and he really knows music. What he has done for children has been wonderful. We’ve had a good time making shows together,” Costa told Glenn in 1995. The feeling was mutual: Fred Rogers obviously had great respect for Johnny Costa’s musical ability, and was grateful to have his collaboration for many years. “He is one of the most gifted musicians that I have ever met. He is probably one of the finest jazz pianists in the world,”<sup>22</sup> Rogers said of Costa.

Rege Cordic, a Pittsburgh radio personality, touchingly described Costa during the May 1993 tribute at City Theater: ‘I have always envied the talents of Johnny Costa—to be able to play like him, to allow those wonderful feelings to flow through that extraordinary instrument. Not the one with the 88 keys, but the one with the graceful fingers, heart, mind and soul.’<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, “Episode 1546: Mister Rogers Talks About Music,” PBS, May 13, 1985, written by Fred Rogers, 3:57. This “Music” week also features as guests Yo-Yo Ma and the Empire Brass Quintet, plus field trips to see how string instruments are made and to view a collection of unusual instruments from around the world. Ella Jenkins’ visit with clapping songs that caused Rogers so much difficulty also took place the same week.

<sup>22</sup> Fred Rogers, interview included in the documentary *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 36:12.

<sup>23</sup> Glenn, “The Amazing Johnny Costa.”

Fred Rogers later added, “Well, with that kind of music, you couldn’t help but find inside there an exceedingly sensitive man, which he is. A gifted, sensitive man.”<sup>24</sup>

## PRODUCTION WEEK

As with other opera weeks, there is extensive preliminary discussion of the impending opera during the narrative segments of the Monday-Thursday episodes, and the Make-Believe narrative presents an interesting take on opera production. Rogers wrote the score and libretto himself,<sup>25</sup> but for the full instrumental realization he relied—as in most episodes—on collaboration, primarily with Johnny Costa on piano. Inside the fantasy world, however, the creative process is presented as an interesting mix of royal patronage and egalitarian collaboration. During a visit to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe in episode 1503, King Friday commands that an opera be produced. Earlier in the week, he demanded that a mountain be built next to his castle, and just as that project is completed, he has another idea. The other human and puppet characters are visibly chagrined as they await his next demand, but upon hearing the pronouncement everyone relaxes and agrees that an opera is an excellent idea. King Friday also declares the first plot requirement: in honor of his own newly constructed peak, it should be “a mountain opera, of course.”

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<sup>24</sup> Fred Rogers, interview included on the documentary *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: Fred Rogers Company, 2004), 37:15.

<sup>25</sup> All score examples included in this chapter are reproduced from the *Spoon Mountain* manuscript, courtesy of the Fred Rogers Center.

Nancy Ross explains the week's process from John Reardon's perspective:

The music and story line always come from Rogers, while the voice of the hero is always Reardon's. Before his annual trip to Pittsburgh, a script is sent to Reardon in New York. ... He tries to arrive the weekend before taping, in time to rehearse with the rest of the cast at Rogers' home. Rehearsing helps, because though the opera scripts are sung, only the melodies are written out—which allows for considerable creativity on the part of the singers as they go along. Producing each opera takes a week—that is, five shows. The opera itself is performed on Friday, leaving the four earlier programs that week to demonstrate precisely how the miracle occurs. On Monday, typically, the puppet King Friday commands visitor Reardon to write an opera. On the following days the story line is developed, the cast is chosen, the music is rehearsed, and all kinds of crises arise and are overcome before the performance is brought off.<sup>26</sup>

King Friday then requests that Officer Clemmons, played by Francois Clemmons, “sing something operatic” on the spot. Clemmons agrees, and presents an abbreviated performance of “La donna e mobile” from Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851) to piano accompaniment. Neighbor Aber (Chuck Aber) arrives, responds well to the king's announcement (“Oh, a royal form of entertainment!”), confirms that he sings operas, and agrees to help. King Friday promotes Officer Clemmons to Commodore, another idea that will find its way into the opera. As various characters agree to perform, they also recommend plot ideas. As always, some elements of the discussion connect inside Make-Believe to the learning that has taken place in the reality Neighborhood, such as the importance of seatbelts for safety both when riding in a car and when climbing a mountain.

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<sup>26</sup> Nancy Ross, “Make-Believe Opera,” *Opera News* 37 (January 13, 1973): 9.

As Rogers closes Episode 1503 in the living room set, he remarks to the camera, “I always like it when they make up operas in Make-Believe, don’t you?” Then, by way of reminder, selections of four previous MRN operas are shown. We see once again through this montage that opera on the *Neighborhood* resides squarely in the realm of Make-Believe, reinforcing its nature as a transmitter of fantasy.

### THE PLOT

In a 2009 interview with William V. Madison, actress Betty Aberlin offered the following thoughts about her time on the *Neighborhood*: “... we [did] the operas, which considering that I starred in all of them, I liked the very best. And also because they were whimsical, they were not straitjacketed by child-development concerns.”<sup>27</sup> Whimsical is certainly an apt adjective for an opera whose characters include King Kittypuss, Queen Mumsiebelle, Prince Extraordinary, Betty Green the park ranger, a Commodore who lives on a mountain, a Purple Twirling Kitty,<sup>28</sup> and Wicked Knife and Fork.<sup>29</sup>

The royal family begins the morning with a birthday party, an activity they enjoy—alternating amongst themselves who will have a birthday that day—on a daily basis. Their post-gift-giving dancing is interrupted by park ranger Betty

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<sup>27</sup> Betty Aberlin, interview by William V. Madison (March 22, 2009). <http://billmadison.blogspot.com/2009/03/interview-betty-aberlin.html>.

<sup>28</sup> This character, played by another Pittsburgh native, Jeff Shade, is so named due to his ability with twirling a baton, not because of a propensity toward spinning around.

<sup>29</sup> A singular villain with a plural-sounding name

Green, who bursts in with distressing news that Wicked Knife and Fork is holding Purple Twirling Kitty hostage on top of Spoon Mountain. Despite the king and queen's lack of enthusiasm, the prince decides to join Betty in a quest up the mountain to save the innocent victim. Along the way, they meet the Commodore; stop for a brief rest at Balindore; see a news broadcast on Purple Twirling Kitty's dire situation that redoubles their resolve; fall in love; and finally rescue the Kitty. As an added bonus, they also rescue Wicked Knife and Fork from his wickedness, then return to the castle with new friends in tow and important news for Extraordinary's parents: tomorrow's birthday celebration will be superseded by a wedding!

Speaking of his experiences with the operas during an interview in 2007, Chuck Aber mentioned *Spoon Mountain* specifically, recalling its plot, melodies, and fanciful nature.

*Spoon Mountain* was early on [in Aber's tenure] and in writing, I guess Fred just, in writing, had this character [Prince Extraordinary], and thought, 'Chuck would be right for that' ... The music is really nice in *Spoon Mountain*, and in essence, the story of it is that there was a character Bob Trow played called Wicked Knife and Fork ... and at the end we find out that he's not wicked, but all he ever wanted was a spoon. [Singing] 'All I ever wanted was a spoon, a spoon! A spoon was all I ever wanted. But all they ever gave me was knife and fork. They always called me Wicked Knife and Fork,' but he's not you know, so we find that out, and take him back to the king, Don Brockett, and the queen, Audrey Roth, and they give him a spoon. And Spoon Mountain, of course, is in the shape of a spoon—again, I don't know where any of that came from. It's Fred's whimsy and creativity ... and of course Lady Aberlin and I kind of fall in love on our trek up the mountain to find who has captured Purple Twirling Kitty, who was Jeff Shade ... he was the baton twirling champion, and he was from Pittsburgh, and Fred met him along the way and incorporated him. As I said, you had to

be careful what you said to Fred, or whom he saw along the way,  
because the next thing you know you're involved!<sup>30</sup>

## COMPOSITION AND PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS

The first thing we see and hear in the fantasy world following a fade from Mister Rogers (more on that transition later) is Joe Negri. “Handyman Negri” in any other episode and guitar professor and performer in real life, he plays and sings here illuminated only by a spotlight. The use of a balladeer character, as he is identified in the manuscript score, recalls a variety of older musical performance conventions including both troubadours and prologues such as the one in Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci*. The presence of a single singer in the dark with a spotlight makes this brief moment appear as if Negri is performing on stage, further tying the presentation to a staged operatic tradition. The entire opera is, of course, filmed on sound stages, but the sets are built to approximate familiar indoor and outdoor spaces, not to replicate the sets one might encounter in a live opera performance.

When Rogers composed the operas, he did not provide complete orchestrations, preferring to allow Johnny Costa, accomplished pianist that he was, the freedom to improvise. The manuscript score only consistently contains two elements throughout: libretto and melody. At times, chords are spelled out; other times, there are chord names or a bass line. This approach to scoring and performance, which emphasizes collaboration and improvisation, is of course

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<sup>30</sup> Chuck Aber, interview by Jessica Wiederhorn, *Fred Rogers Oral History Interviews* (Pittsburgh: February 27, 2007), 1:27.  
<http://exhibit.fredrogerscenter.org/early-life-education/videos/view/950/>.

quite common in jazz, and indeed jazz harmonies and instrumentation are predominant musical features in *Spoon Mountain*, just as they are on each *Neighborhood* episode. Figured-bass scoring and collaborative improvisation also call to mind baroque performance traditions, which also tie into the idea of royal patronage and the decree from the puppet-king that there should be a king in the opera as well.

In terms of his available performance forces, Rogers' task as a composer had more in common with an opera composer of the eighteenth century than with the composition-before-casting convention that had become standard practice during the nineteenth and twentieth. This cast only includes two guests: John Reardon, the professional singer who always appeared in the *Neighborhood* whenever there was an opera in the works, and Jeff Shade, who guest-starred as the Purple Twirling Kitty. The rest of the cast of *Spoon Mountain*, as well as the other opera episodes, were regular citizens of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Rather than write a work in a vacuum and search for singers capable of performing the roles after the fact, Rogers, like Mozart and his contemporaries, began with the singers available to him and created both characters and arias to fit each performer. It becomes very quickly apparent to the trained observer—though, granted, not necessarily to the average American four-year-old—that there is a tremendous range of both inherent musical ability and vocal training represented by the nine singers in this production.

Of the regular neighbors, tenor Francois Clemmons boasts the most musical training and the greatest stylistic variety of performances. After earning a Bachelor of Music degree from Oberlin College and an MFA from Carnegie-

Mellon, he won the regional Metropolitan Opera Audition in Pittsburgh and subsequently sang a variety of roles throughout the country. In addition to his operatic experience, Clemmons founded and directed the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble. In his regular role in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, he plays a friendly policeman, Officer Clemmons.

Since John Reardon sings far less in this opera than in many others, Clemmons stands out as the most impressive singer in this production. He plays the role of the Commodore who inexplicably lives halfway up a mountain and nowhere near any boats.<sup>31</sup> He introduces the Prince and Betty to Balindore, and later exhorts them not to discount the magic of the mountain (which is love, of course.) He also sings one of the best lines of the opera early in his appearance, which includes in a short space the presentation of a moral (“The outside is never as much as the in”), a soaring leap, a meter change, and as many as two puns (“as much as the in[n]” and “come in and partake of the rest,” meaning both ‘everything you can’t see from here’ and ‘the respite we offer.’)<sup>32</sup>

Betty Aberlin and Chuck Aber represent the next category of vocal training. Both are reliably consistent with pitch, and sing in a musical theater (rather than an operatic) style, which is characterized by a lack of vibrato and a belt-style production, especially from Aberlin as she approaches the top of the staff. “We did rehearse the music for the operas more than we would rehearse... for the program,” Chuck Aber shared in 2007.

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<sup>31</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 10:35.

<sup>32</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 10:55.

For the program, we could come in, and if Mayor Maggie or I had a song to do, you would rehearse it with Johnny Costa. He would make sure the key was right and everything was good, and then you would do it. You get one or two run-throughs with him, and that was it. For the operas ... we would usually rehearse two or three days.<sup>33</sup>

The remaining cast members do not sing with the same level of natural ability and training as the four singers already named. Fortunately, Rogers seems to be well aware of each actor's singing ability, and writes for each in a way that is appropriate and achievable.

While giving full credit to the singers and instrumentalists who brought the work to life, we must also keep in mind that Fred Rogers wrote the entire libretto and score, save some orchestration, singlehandedly. It is worth noting that his temperament, by all accounts, was the antithesis of either a tortured Romantic or an egocentric artist. However, while his mindset may have been far from the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal for its own sake, he did have final creative control over the production from beginning to end. As writer, composer, executive producer, title character, and star of the show, Rogers set the agenda, beginning with the decision to make an opera in the first place. In this context, it is easy to think of Make-Believe as a kind of cheerful, miniaturized Bayreuth.

Aberlin explains:

The operas were Fred at his whimsical best. The operas still focused on the beautiful themes that were pertinent to children, but Fred was allowed to be more expressive. For some reason or another, he said that PBS was not so fond of them, but I thought they were it. I loved them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Chuck Aber, interview by Jessica Wiederhorn, *Fred Rogers Oral History Interviews* (Pittsburgh: February 27, 2007), 0:01. <http://exhibit.fredrogerscenter.org/early-life-education/videos/view/950/>.

Her framing of the operas as opportunities for Rogers to express his individual creativity, perhaps even against a backdrop of mild institutional disapproval, clearly places him within the tradition of nineteenth-century artists writing from an overflow of passion for their art.

Another tradition at the opposite end of the operatic aesthetic spectrum from Richard Wagner but nevertheless contemporaneously present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the use of patter, most closely associated with the British operatta duo Gilbert and Sullivan. While on the mountain, Betty Green and Prince Extraordinary are nearing their goal of saving the Purple Twirling Kitty, but Wicked Knife and Fork says they will have to find him themselves. To aid in the final step of the quest, they sing a tongue-twisting searching song. Darting amongst the rocks on the set's landscape, they rapidly repeat, "Kitty, kitty, kitty, Here, kitty, kitty, kitty, won't you tell us where? Won't you tell us where you may be? Kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty..."<sup>35</sup> This number, obviously inspired by the seemingly inevitable call ("here, kitty, kitty, kitty!") employed when searching for a (usually non-anthropomorphic, non-purple) cat, is also directly reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan's patter choruses.

Even while this production is undeniably operatic due to its use of opera traditions spanning from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is undeniably a product of its own time, written as it was in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and encouraging creativity and participation from a variety of performers, and also its audience. William Guy observes that much of Rogers' mission is to demystify the process of

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<sup>34</sup> Betty Aberlin, interview by William V. Madison.

<sup>35</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 17:25.

creation, using examples of both automated manufacturing and handmade artisan items.

Mister Rogers.... focus[es] on process, the way things work in the world. At the end of a sequence about a factory or about a farm, Mister Rogers points out that there is nothing magical about what it produces. The product, he notes, resulted from an idea that arose in a human mind, an idea that human beings then carried out—something his *viewers* might do in the future, something of the kind *they* might want to imagine and implement. ... He progresses from showing how a *human being* has designed something (made candles, for instance, or knitted sweaters) to suggesting that since his viewers are human beings, they might accomplish similar things.<sup>36</sup>

We can see the same attitude, and indeed the same explicit message, applied here to opera: now that you have seen it done, you can make this yourself! “See? You can make up all kinds of things and sing them, and you can call that opera,” concludes Rogers as the *Spoon Mountain* episode ends. Besides espousing a can-do spirit and encouraging creativity, this also calls to mind artists from the early twentieth century. In many ways, *Spoon Mountain* resonates with Hindemith’s and Weill’s ideals of *Gebrauchsmusik*. It was composed to be broadcast once at a particular time, embraced a cast of amateur as well as professional singers, and was designed to appeal to children of all classes as an engaging form of musical entertainment. Rather than presenting opera, as some have done, as a symbol of class division, something to be either aspired to or rejected for its association with the well-to-do, Rogers simply presents opera as something that is. Like a factory, farm, candle, or sweater,

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<sup>36</sup> William Guy, “The Theology of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*,” in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 103.

opera is something that creative people have been known to make, and Mister Rogers would like for you, the audience, to know about it. He also takes some time to explain how it is done, and hopes that you will choose to make an opera with your friends.

The fact that anyone and everyone in the viewing audience, regardless of musical ability, has the ability to “make up” an opera—and that they should do it with their friends—is reinforced by the collaboration presented on-screen. The performances by singers with a wide range of ability and the fact that everyone in the cast was able to contribute a suggestion to the plot are perhaps not a realistic representation of “real” opera, but it does reflect *Gebrauchsmusik* ideals. The *Neighborhood* was a collaborative work off-screen as well, as Warburton explains,

Rogers’ ability to work effectively with children is not something he takes for granted. Neither is it something he assumes credit for accomplishing on his own. He recognized that his skill is the product of working under the guidance and with the assistance of others; without their commitment to children and their support of his efforts, he would not be nearly as effective: ‘It’s from working a long, long time with children and with those who know children well, and I have had such wonderful instruction. You know, where I did my graduate work in child development is a family and a children’s center that was started by Dr. Benjamin Spock and Erik Erikson and Margaret McFarland.’ ... The notion of collaboration and sharing with people is very important to Rogers, and it pervades not only the planning and creation of the scripts and materials for the show but also the actual production of it.<sup>37</sup>

Rogers’ own preference for music-making also veered toward collaborative over solo performance. “Chamber music is much more fun than solo. To be able to

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<sup>37</sup> T. L. Warburton, “A Visit with Fred Rogers: A Guided Tour Through a Special Neighborhood,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 36.

make music with somebody else... I can see why people would love being a part of an orchestra—mmm!”<sup>38</sup>

#### REAL WORLD TO FANTASY WORLD: MORE ON TRANSITIONS

As the Friday episode opens, Rogers performs the usual opening ritual with sweater and shoes, then reminds us, using collaborative language, that it is opera day.<sup>39</sup>

You know what an opera is: it's people acting and singing a story. So let's make up an opera about things we've been thinking about together these past times. An opera about spoons, and a mountain... Why don't we call the mountain Spoon Mountain? And a kitty, and a king and queen, and Commodore, and popcorn, and seatbelts, and even Reardon, busy making the news. The kitty could be the baton-twirler, dressed in a purple kitty costume. But let's begin with a storyteller singing, 'Once upon a time, not so very long ago...' <sup>40</sup>

Roderick Townley writes about the importance of transitions in the *Neighborhood*, and already in these moments we can see two examples. First, the use of transitional objects: physical objects which appear and belong in two worlds are helpful for children in making a change from one environment to another, whether between home and school, or from Mister Rogers' living room to the Land of Make-Believe. "Things don't just appear on the set of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*:" Townley observes, "They are brought by a trusted

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<sup>38</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 7 of 9, 17:10.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

<sup>40</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 1:35.

person.”<sup>41</sup> In this case, the object that will play an important role later is the purple cat headpiece, which Rogers places on his own head when mentioning the twirler in purple kitty costume. Second, time and space are always allotted to allow the audience time to adjust to a new idea or location before it is thrust upon them. The trolley that appears each episode to transport the narrative from reality to the realm of imagination is the most frequent example of this approach to transitional time, but other cases, especially musical interludes, are also common.

What makes this particular transition from reality world to fantasy world unique is that the usual device of the trolley ride—and accompanying “trolley” music—is foregone completely in favor of musical repetition and a two-fold transition, the first of which is a fade from Rogers to Negri. Rogers, still sitting on the bench where he changed his shoes, says, “Let’s begin with a storyteller singing, [sings] ‘Once upon a time, not so very long ago....’”<sup>42</sup> Following the fade, we see Negri “onstage” (figure 8) and immediately hear him repeat the same “Once upon a time, not so very long ago” in the same key, quickly moving on to more scene-setting information about the royal family we are about to meet. This choice functions as if to make the music itself the transitional object: its introduction by Rogers himself implies his endorsement, and the reassuring

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<sup>41</sup> Roderick. Townley, “Fred’s Shoes: The Meaning of Transitions in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*,” in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 70.

<sup>42</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 2:11.

value of familiarity through repetition is already being exploited by the time we see the first character on stage.



Figure 8. “Once upon a time,” *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* 1505, 2:25.

#### USE OF HARMONY

One scene in particular clearly demonstrates harmonic choices communicating emotional information. While we are often correctly reticent to rely on a simple “major = happy / minor = sad” interpretation of music, in this case it seems like that is exactly what Rogers chose to do. Furthermore, such a straightforward dichotomy would have been easily understood by the target audience of preschool children in the early 1980s. When the opera opens, the royal trio naively celebrates another birthday, ignorant of the tragedy unfolding in the very location they are discussing. Betty Green’s arrival simultaneously introduces the first hint of conflict, the first example of recitative, and the first use of a minor key. She steadfastly addresses them in C minor, while they continually interrupt her, reverting each time to the C Major that was the instrumental background upon her entrance. Thus, each time she speaks, it is

disruptive, and demands that they shake their happy-go-lucky attitude in favor of the more pressing issues at hand.

Betty [Cm]: Forgive me, King; forgive me Queen, forgive me,  
Prince. I've come to tell you the news from our Park Service--  
Prince [CM]: Aren't you Betty Green from the Park Service?  
Betty [Cm]: I am. And I'm sorry to barge in like this--  
King [E-flat M]: It's the Queen's birthday. Here, have a milkshake.  
Betty [Cm]: Thank you. [CM]: Happy birthday, Queen  
Mumsiebelle! [chromatic, rising/climbing]: I just had a call  
from my office that a purple twirling kitty was climbing to  
the top of Spoon Mountain--  
Prince [CM]: It's the very best mountain to climb!<sup>43</sup>

This exchange, which continues beyond what I have quoted, is both comical and effective in communicating the attitudes of the various characters toward the news of Wicked Knife and Fork's dastardly deeds: the combination of minor tonality and accelerated tempo with which Betty Green impresses upon the other three the importance of the situation reflects the urgency that she feels is warranted in addressing it. There is also a bit of text painting in her climbing melodic line about the Purple Twirling Kitty climbing to the top of Spoon Mountain. The only time she sways from her message is when propriety demands it: she expresses gratitude for the milkshake she does not wish to consume, and wishes the queen a happy birthday in appropriately cheerful fashion, which only serves to heighten the impact of her swift return to the message she is intent on delivering.

However, the royal family refuses to be swayed both from their carnival spirit and their self-important approach to declarative statements: each time one displays willful ignorance and interrupts the bad news, it is not only in a

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<sup>43</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 4:54.

belligerently major key, but is delivered in a relatively grandiose and therefore time-consuming phrase, a fact with which Betty becomes justifiably impatient. When Prince Extraordinary initially decides to join her cause, it is apparently not because he feels the same urgency she does, but simply because he wishes to do something heroic. Betty finally joins in his heroic approach, and they depart (figure 9).



Figure 9. “Farewell,” *MRN* 1505, 6:55.

### RECURRING MUSICAL THEMES

The first melodic theme we hear is the Balladeer’s “Once upon a time...,” which returns throughout at pivotal moments, and functions as a transitional device both within the framework of expectations in the *Neighborhood* and within dramatic conventions associated with operas of the more established repertoire. We hear it first, as discussed above, from the lips of Mister Rogers himself, which serves to establish his endorsement of the opera, though he does not appear on stage or sing a role. (The original audience, of course, could not be expected to acknowledge him as composer, with all the agency that title carries.) When Handyman Negri takes up the tune and sets the scene, we are fully

transported into the world of King Kittypuss, Queen Mumsiebelle, and Prince Extraordinary. Both Rogers and Negri initially sing in F Major (figure 10). All descriptive titles assigned to themes are my own.



Figure 10. Fred Rogers, “Balladeer theme,” *Spoon Mountain*, p. 1.

The next time we hear the melody, it begins in G Major, once again presented by Negri singing from a spotlight. This time, the lyrics of explanation and transitional time account for the change from daytime to nighttime in the fictional world, a parallel to the transition from reality to fantasy. During this short interlude, however, a modulation occurs, and we are delivered back into the action in the key of A Major.<sup>44</sup>

After the initial transition to the castle set at the opening of the opera, we find the royal family in the midst of their daily ritual of “celebrat[ing] their birthdays in manners arbitrary.” As it turns out, it is the Queen’s turn to have a birthday, and her husband gives her Spoon Mountain, indicating a model of the mountain on a table in the room. In celebration of the birthday and the gift, the trio sings the wonders of this particular mountain in a lilting 6/8, which, taking into account the subsequent recurrences, I find to always refer to spoons (figure 11). This is the only theme that is specifically indicated for dancing, which the royal family also does in their celebratory spirit of spoon-themed gift-giving.

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<sup>44</sup> The score contains a note at this point that “J.C. [Johnny Costa] continues in A for a while,” p. 31.



Figure 11. Fred Rogers, “Spoon theme,” *Spoon Mountain* p. 6.

We hear the Spoon theme again about halfway through the opera—and halfway up Spoon Mountain. When Betty and the prince have convinced the Commodore that they must depart to continue their mission, he also bids them farewell with the same melody, singing, “Farewell, great pair, be brave out there; beware up there on Spoon Mountain.”

The Spoon theme re-emerges again much later in the opera: after rescuing the Purple Twirling Kitty from Wicked Knife and Fork, the other characters notice that the villain is crying. He explains in a lament, so labeled in the manuscript, p. 44, that “all I ever wanted was a spoon, a spoon” but “all they ever gave me was a knife and fork.”<sup>45</sup> Prince Extraordinary, true to his name, responds with compassion, and offers, “Let’s take your knives to the castle, where there’s a spoon-making machine. We’ll melt your forks at the castle; we’ll make you twelve or eighteen,”<sup>46</sup> using the spoon melody in C Major.

Perhaps the most melodically memorable example, and the only one that reappears with text and melody together, is introduced by Betty Green as her statement of purpose and determination. The king, though not quite so self-important as King Friday, clearly displays his royal privilege when he questions

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<sup>45</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 19:46.

<sup>46</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 20:25.

the value of putting time and effort into saving “just a little kitty,” asking “why would you bother for that?” Betty looks straight into the camera and delivers her credo in a bold G-Major, espousing *noblesse oblige* in response:

It doesn't matter who's in trouble, all that matters is that we, strong of heart and strong of body, can be helpful and can see that the weak and heavy-laden will be given comfort here, in this land of milk and seatbelts where no person need have fear.<sup>47</sup>

Prince Extraordinary quickly joins her, and as they sing in unison their resolve strengthens: save the kitty, and save the mountain. With melodic sequences and careful chromaticism, this moment conveys determination and courage. Thoughtfully heroic, it makes us believe that the quest is necessary, and that it will be successful. “All that matters is that we,” the park ranger and prince conclude, “strong of heart and strong of body can be helpful and be free!”<sup>48</sup> Classic values, helpfulness and freedom, are the driving force behind the forthcoming trek up the mountain (figure 12).



Figure 12. Fred Rogers, “Determination theme,” *Spoon Mountain* pp. 10-11.

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<sup>47</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 5:47.

<sup>48</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 5:50.

This moment also represents the first time that a named character—not Rogers or Negri—has delivered music directly into the camera from within a tightly framed shot, and that choice calls to mind at least two layers of television convention: one dealing with Television Opera, and the other with *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Unlike the *Babysitter Opera*, which used a single camera shot to recreate the experience of viewing an opera from the audience, *Spoon Mountain* is conceived more as a film, using various shots to focus on specific moments of action. Jennifer Barnes asserts that the use of close-up shots was one key factor in the success of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*—but a volatile liability when applied to some of the other televised operatic works of the time.

Menotti established... an affinity for very tight camera shots, that is, close-ups. ... In the same year as *Amahl*, an ...*Opera* (UK) correspondent point[ed] out: '... the facial expressions of love, torment, despair, etc., are frighteningly close, piped into one's parlour.'<sup>49</sup>

A decade and a half prior to *Amahl*, Kurt London was already skeptical of the reality of watching a filmed opera:

The camera brings the singer's pathos much too close to the spectator; a close-up of a photographed high C, on which the distorted face of the tenor, with wide-open mouth, is to be seen, at once destroys the effect of even the most beautiful melody and resolves it into laughter or even disgust.<sup>50</sup>

Mary Holtby's "The Pearl-flashers or *Simonna Boccanegra*" puts the entire problem of viewing singers on television even more succinctly:

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<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>50</sup> Kurt London, 1936, quoted in Mervyn Cooke, "Opera and Film," *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, edited by Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 272.

Fair face, in distant drama seen,  
The source of sumptuous trillings,  
Avoid, I pray, the mini-screen,  
Where I can count your fillings.<sup>51</sup>

The “frightening” or “disgusting” closeness of the singers’ faces that gave this reviewer such concern would have been experienced through screens sized an average of 12 to 17 inches. Since televisions grew steadily, Rogers’ preschool-aged television neighbors would experience the physical reality of the singers on an even larger scale than the *Amahl* audience.

However, Rogers’ regular viewers were also quite accustomed to this approach, as they encountered Rogers’ break-the-fourth-wall, sustained-eye-contact, undivided attention from the television set on a regular basis. Therefore, this moment would not probably read as socially awkward for children in the same way that it might come across to adults. It also makes sense that this declaration, which is in essence an early presentation of one possible moral for the story —“be helpful and be free”—should be delivered directly to the audience rather than to the short-sighted king to whom it purportedly responds.

When the theme is repeated, it is once again in response to another character questioning the veracity of the main characters’ mission. Halfway up Spoon Mountain, they are welcomed into Balindore by the Commodore (figure 13). Extraordinary initially protests, “But it’s only a door, just a door on a

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Holtby, “The Pearl-flashers, or *Simmona Boccanegra*,” *How To Be Tremendously Tuned In to Opera*, compiled and edited by E. O. Parrott (London: Viking, 1989), 176.

mountain” to which the Commodore responds, “This may look like only a door to you, but inside you’ll see the best...”<sup>52</sup>

While he is not quite a Calypso figure determined to thwart the mission, and the Commodore does prove encouraging and helpful during the inevitable rescue, at this point he provides warmth, safety, milkshakes, and popcorn. He encourages them in bold, major-key proclamations reminiscent of the king’s initial protests to rest in Balindore for awhile, and not to rush off too quickly. His hesitation in supporting their plan is based on a confidence that Wicked Knife and Fork could never take Spoon Mountain, and when informed that such a scenario is already ongoing, as is the rescue operation, he echoes the king’s question: “For just a little kitty?” (figure 14). This time, the determination theme appears in truncated form, begun by Prince Extraordinary and joined by Betty Green.<sup>53</sup> They also sing in harmony, the most extensive phrase of non-unison singing that has appeared thus far. When they see an Alpine News broadcast presented by John Reardon,<sup>54</sup> they quickly depart to continue up the mountain.

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<sup>52</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 10:57.

<sup>53</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 12:20.

<sup>54</sup> Reardon also played a news anchor, a role much more extensively sung than this one, in *Windstorm in Bubbleland* (1980).



Figure 13. “Welcome to Balindore,”  
*MRN* 1505, 10:47.



Figure 14. Balindore interior,  
*MRN* 1505, 11:27.

In its third and most distantly related iteration, the determination theme even makes an appearance during the only love duet. Betty and Prince Extraordinary take advantage of the moonlight during their night on the mountain to express how their time together has made them both feel quite different than they have ever felt before, and the original music from Betty’s declaration of purpose is now transformed to serve as a declaration of love.<sup>55</sup>

The final example of this theme appears at the end of the opera, when all the problems have been resolved. We learn that our villain’s plan to steal Spoon Mountain has been motivated by unresolved issues with childhood trauma and stereotyping (“All I ever wanted was a spoon, a spoon.... All they ever gave me was a knife and fork”) and that he wishes not to be wicked after all. The other characters agree to forgive his hostage-taking and to support a change of his name, which of course also implies a transformation of his character. Once again, Betty Green interjects with her melody of determination, which this time communicates acceptance of a new friend and declares the next mission they will

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<sup>55</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 15:17.

undertake together. The theme is taken over first by Prince Extraordinary and finally joined by all the characters present:

Betty: We'll help you find out what your name is  
Prince: In the meantime, let's celebrate, and communicate the wonder that's beside, below, above.  
Together: It's the wonder that is extra-ordinary  
Betty, Prince, King, Queen, Kitty, Knife and Fork: It is extra-ordinary love!<sup>56</sup>

### MUSICAL QUOTATIONS

The first example of pre-existing musical themes Rogers works into the opera is not a direct quotation, but is close enough to call the original to mind, despite not being identical. The Purple Twirling Kitty only sings alone for eight measures in the whole opera, during which time he remains bound by Wicked Knife and Fork. He offers first an assurance that he and the mountain will be saved, then issues a plea for someone to indeed do so. The melody is remarkably reminiscent of a Stephen Foster tune most assuredly familiar to the composer, and perhaps even familiar to the original audience (figures 15 & 16).



Figure 15. Stephen Foster, "Beautiful Dreamer," published 1864.

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<sup>56</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 24:01.



Figure 16. Fred Rogers, “Someone please save us,” *Spoon Mountain*, p. 20.

The two examples of direct quotations are certainly intentional, and would have likely been recognized in context by a preschool audience. The first references one of the most recognizable melodies in an American preschooler’s vocabulary. As part of the early-morning birthday party, the king and prince sing, “Happy birthday, dear Mumsiebelle! Happy birthday to you”<sup>57</sup> with only a slight melodic alteration to the expected contour. Betty Green, when informed that she is interrupting a celebration, breaks her narrative to offer the same phrase.<sup>58</sup>

All birthday discussion and accompanying “happy birthday” singing is confined to the castle, and reappears when the king and queen learn that the rescue mission has been successful from the Alpine News broadcast.<sup>59</sup> The news report continues, but fades in volume as the couple begins to converse over it. Whereas all previous “Happy Birthday” quotations have consisted of only the penultimate and final phrases, in this case the king anticipates the fact that his birthday is due again tomorrow by singing from the beginning, “And tomorrow

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<sup>57</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 3:30.

<sup>58</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 5:10.

<sup>59</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 22:03.

will be mine again.” The piano underscores the second phrase as Reardon continues speaking, then joins into the existing melody by singing “And rumor has it that the prince and Betty are serious about... something or other.”

Finally, a briefer quotation is introduced by King Kittypuss following Extraordinary and Betty’s announcement that they are in love. He decides that tomorrow will not be a birthday, after all, and in the declaration he switches from “Happy Birthday” to sing “Tomorrow will be a wedding—instead of a birthday” to Wagner’s “Bridal March” melody. While this melody does represent another operatic connection, composed as it was for *Lohengrin*, I would argue that it does not reference the original context so much as its common usage in wedding ceremonies.

#### FRED ROGERS’ VALUES: PACIFISM AND NON-VIOLENCE

*Spoon Mountain* offers an interesting opportunity to observe one way that Rogers included his moral ideals in his operatic works. There are precious few villains in Rogers’ world. The battles children face are recognized, but often the struggles are internal. The driving dramatic forces for the other two examples in this study are far more abstract: namely, fear of abandonment and pervasive feelings of insufficiency. Though adults carry these same struggles through their lives just as children do, most operas written for adults are expected to demonstrate some external conflict. Wicked Knife and Fork is, however, one of the only truly (so he appears) villainous characters that Rogers creates for dramatic purposes in his operatic writing.

In his 2015 book *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers*, Michael G. Long addresses the pacifism and inclusiveness that Rogers demonstrated throughout the run of the *Neighborhood*, especially pointing out how the messages commented directly on the events of the day. Rogers' complete commitment to non-violence was introduced in the very first week of broadcast, with "Conflict Week" in 1968, in the midst of the Vietnam War. King Friday XIII declares war inside Make-Believe, and the other characters, led by Lady Aberlin, Lady Elaine Fairchilde, and Daniel Striped Tiger, must employ determination and creativity in their quest to use diplomacy over violence.

Long enumerates three reasons that war, as Rogers puts it, "isn't nice":

First, it leads winners to steal from losers.... Second... it fails to recognize the essential truth that all people, including our enemies, are just like us: inherently good and deserving of care and concern. ... Third, war is not nice because it's such a waste.<sup>60</sup>

The last reason is especially striking as a very early introduction to Rogers' values: in the case of "Conflict Week," the resources diverted to King Friday's war efforts were originally earmarked to purchase record players for the schools. Thus, Rogers presents music as a direct alternative to conflict and war.

The second reason also reappears throughout the decades of television visits: that everyone deserves care and concern. This message is most often perceived as directed at the individual viewer for the benefit of their own self-esteem ["I like you just the way you are"], but as important as that result is, it must also be recognized that the same message was going out to every other

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<sup>60</sup> Michael G. Long, *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Counterculture Mister Rogers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 15.

viewer. Therefore, Mister Rogers also liked everyone else just the way they were – even the bullies and aggressors, whether a mean kid on the bus, a world leader on the opposite side of a protracted conflict, or an opera villain like Wicked Knife and Fork.

‘You are special, and so is your neighbor’—that part is essential: that you’re not the only special person in the world. The person you happen to be with at the moment is loved, too.<sup>61</sup>

Despite his role as kidnapper, Wicked Knife and Fork does not receive swift justice at the hands of the heroes: he is not killed, harmed, jailed, nor banished—any of which could have been a reasonable fate for a character in his position. Instead of quickly tying up the narrative loose ends by punishing the evil character, Rogers as composer works in much the same way as Mister Rogers, child-psychologist-in-training: “... we don’t have to put people in concentration camps and annihilate people just because we’re angry with them,” he once said.<sup>62</sup>

Even the villain is given the time and space necessary to express who he is and how he feels, and he uses the opportunity to be honest with those who hold his fate. In 2000, Rogers wrote about an experience he had that parallels this moment with Wicked Knife and Fork, but with the opposite outcome:

I stopped to see my grandsons... [they were] watching a superhero cartoon on television. The first thing I saw on the program when I

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<sup>61</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Wendy Murray Zoba, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?: At the Center of Mister Rogers’ Cheery Songs and Smile Lies a God-Ordained Mission to Children,” *Christianity Today* 44, no. 3 (March 6, 2000): 46.

<sup>62</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World’s Most Beloved Neighbor* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2005), 65.

walked into the room was a group of people with machine guns seemingly shooting everyone and everything in sight—a cartoon to be sure—but nonetheless these human characters were solving something with deadly violence. I sat beside the 5-year-old and said how scary that all looked to me. Keeping his eyes fixed on the television mayhem, he nodded his head, and after awhile of more shooting and hitting and screaming on the screen, I said, ‘You know people shouldn’t do that to other people.’ He said, ‘But they’re the bad people,’ to which I passionately replied, ‘There are better ways of treating bad people than killing them and hitting them and screaming at them.’ Then he looked right at me in the strangest way, as if, in the superhero environment that he had just been visiting, nobody ever thought of what I just said. That’s the kind of adult presence children need. To let them know there are other ways to be.<sup>63</sup>

Just as Betty and Extraordinary find the Purple Twirling Kitty, Wicked Knife and Fork begins viciously declaring that they are “Too late, too late, too late, too late...” Extraordinary bids him, “Now simply wait, Wicked Knife and Fork ... Let’s communicate ... What is it that you want?” He initially responds that all he wants to do is tie them all up, but Betty Green calls for the Commodore, and he appears, as promised. He does not arrive full of heroic vengeance, however. He might have proclaimed himself arrived to save the day, declaring victory and vengeance for the scourge on his mountain, but instead he brings the struggle to a standstill in order to sing—how very operatic! With all eyes on him, he sings another lovely little aria about perseverance, and the wonder in the mountain:

Even when the way seems rugged, even when your hearts are cold,  
There’s a wonder in this mountain, you will find that it is so,  
You will know when you have found it, it will come as no surprise  
There’s a wonder in this mountain that is hidden from our eyes.

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<sup>63</sup> Fred Rogers, “A Point of View: Family Communication, Television, and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*,” *Journal of Family Communication* 1, no. 1 (2000): 73.

Never doubt the wonder's being, never doubt, below, above  
There's a wonder in this mountain and the wonder's name is love!<sup>64</sup>

When the Commodore's song is finished, Extraordinary notices that Wicked Knife and Fork is crying, and Betty Green asks him what makes him cry. Rather than a rousing chorus declaring defiance, celebrating anti-social behavior, or enticing others to join his kidnapping plots, Wicked Knife and Fork is quite pitiful in his confession that "All I ever wanted was a spoon, a spoon... all they ever gave me was a knife and fork" (figure 17). This moment is the first time Wicked Knife and Fork has been emotionally vulnerable and at all honest about his feelings, goals, and experiences. Notably, this same moment also presents the first truly melodic expression that Wicked Knife and Fork has offered, which contrasts with his previous growling-infused recitative.



Figure 17. "All I Ever Wanted Was a Spoon," *MRN* 1505, 20:33.

Having reversed the previous power dynamic, even Purple Twirling Kitty does not wish to see his kidnapper punished. All the assembled characters listen respectfully to the villain's true desires, then offer to come alongside him to help

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<sup>64</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 19:00

change his situation—and his name. Though it does not become an explicitly stated moral of this story, the treatment of Wicked Knife and Fork clearly reflects Rogers' view that even bullies deserve opportunities to express themselves—and someone to sincerely listen.

Once everyone is back at the castle, King Kittypuss asks, “But what about you, Wicked Knife and Fork?” and receives the same response in song: “All I ever wanted was a spoon, a spoon....” with the final phrase changed to an announcement that he is going to change his name. All the characters then ask in turn what his new name will be, and the former villain's change of heart is demonstrated not only in his desire for a new name, but also in the fact that he adopts his former captive's lyrical melody for his own self-expression. The “Someone will save us” theme returns, broken into dialogue phrases:

All: What will your names be?

WKAF: Not Wicked, I'm sure. You all have helped me know that.

Purple Twirling Kitty: But what will your name be?

WKAF: I'll never hurt you. My name will be just what I am.<sup>65</sup>

Rogers held his seminary professor, Dr. William S. Orr, in high regard, and often recalled conversations they had about the power of forgiveness, and how everyone is given the opportunity to choose to be either an accuser or an advocate.

[Orr] said, ‘Evil simply disintegrates in the presence of forgiveness. When you look with accusing eyes at your neighbor, that is what evil would want, because the more the accuser’ – which, of course, is the word *Satan* in Hebrew— ‘can spread the accusing spirit, the greater evil spreads.’<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 25:42.

<sup>66</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Zoba, 41.

Evil would like nothing better than to have us feel awful about who we are. And that would be back in here [in our minds], and we'd look through those eyes at our neighbor, and see only what's awful—in fact, *look* for what's awful in our neighbor.<sup>67</sup>

When the assembled cast on top of Spoon Mountain offers the possibility of forgiveness to Wicked Knife and Fork, the villain's resolve and obstinacy crumble—just as Dr. Orr had said.

Wicked Knife and Fork is the tough guy, the self-reliant “meanie,” the nonsentimentalist who in the end breaks down when he sees how much his supposed enemies love one another. In other words, the theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* includes a depiction of the reasons for the rejection and the reviling of it by some people; it evinces compassion for the rejecters and the revilers and entertains the perpetual possibility of welcoming them into the fellowship. All they would have to do to be welcomed is to admit that they “feel want, taste grief, / Need friends,” as Shakespeare's Richard II does when his self-sufficient kingly persona and all his royal defenses start to break down.<sup>68</sup>

The opportunity for self-expression was not without parameters of propriety, however. “What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel?” was a question commonly posed, in song and otherwise, by Rogers, and he offered numerous suggestions for creative, productive ways to channel the energy produced by anger. During the five episodes collectively entitled “What Do You Do with the Mad That You Feel?” but often abbreviated “Mad Feelings Week” (October 16-20, 1995), King Friday XIII gets angry and threatens to muster an army. Quoting a Rogers speech from 1997, Long observes:

As a writer for children, Fred Rogers normally steered far away from such explosive actions and violent reactions. He detested violence on television, not only on the programs offering up the usual fare—‘murders and bombings and gross physical harm’—but

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<sup>67</sup> Fred Rogers, paraphrasing William Orr, quoted by Hollingsworth, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Guy, 112.

also those that employed ‘subtle violence’: ‘the so-called ‘insult humor’ of situation comedies where even the parts acted by children are filled with wisecracks and insults.’<sup>69</sup>

Thus, lashing out at a friend or family member and doing them physical or emotional harm was not tolerated as a reasonable reaction to anger, nor were there portrayals in the *Neighborhood* operas of temper tantrums. “Fred didn’t advocate a freewheeling acceptance of any emotional outburst but believed that feelings should be expressed, and at the same time, controlled.”<sup>70</sup> The same energy that might be diffused through shouting or flailing or stomping is put to much better use in creativity: “pound some clay or some dough” is always a good option, as is, of course, music-making.

While King Friday was busy getting himself worked into a frenzy in Make-Believe, Mister Rogers was discussing productive and creative alternatives. On Monday, the first day of Mad Feelings Week,<sup>71</sup> he introduces artist Red Grooms, and explains to the audience how he used a piano for self-expression in his youth:

I’m not very good at drawing, I guess because I haven’t practiced very much. I remember when I was a boy if I couldn’t do something very well and I’d get frustrated about it, I’d go to the piano and tell it with my fingers on the piano keys. I’ll just show you.<sup>72</sup>

After playing a few dark, loud chords at the piano, he remains at the bench to ask, “Do you have ways of showing you’re angry? Ways that don’t hurt you or

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<sup>69</sup> Long, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Hollingsworth, 64.

<sup>71</sup> *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 1691, “What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel?” PBS, October 1, 1995.

<sup>72</sup> *MRN*, 1691, 2:25.

anybody else?”<sup>73</sup> He then begins to play and sing “What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel?,” continuing to sing after the first line as Costa and company take over the accompaniment.

When young brothers Adrian and Anthony Montgomery visited the *Neighborhood* in the final segment of the same episode, they had their violins in tow to play some Bach. Rogers asked them specifically about playing when they are angry and received an affirmative response. “Sometimes, like when I’m mad or something, and I go in my room and close the door and play the violin by myself it calms me down a little bit,” says Adrian. “What about you, Anthony?” Rogers inquires, and the younger brother responds, “Yes.”<sup>74</sup>

*Spoon Mountain* offers insight into Rogers’ convictions on war and violence, healthy expressions of anger, and the universal value of mankind. When asked by Amy Hollingsworth what he would say if given the opportunity to air “one final broadcast,” he responded:

Well, I would want those who were listening somehow to know that they had unique value, that there isn’t anybody in the whole world exactly like them and that there never has been and there never will be. And that they are loved by the Person who created them, in a unique way. If they could know that and really know it and have that behind their eyes, they could look with those eyes on their neighbor and realize, ‘My neighbor has unique value too; there’s never been anybody in the whole world like my neighbor, and there never will be.’ If they could value that person—if they could love that person—in ways that we know that the Eternal loves us, then I would be very grateful.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *MRN*, 1691, 2:58.

<sup>74</sup> *MRN*, 1691, 24:28.

<sup>75</sup> Fred Rogers, quoted by Hollingsworth, 161.

The characters of *Spoon Mountain* certainly seem to have learned these lessons, as they take personal risks to care for “the least of these,” noting “it doesn’t matter who’s in trouble...” They ultimately find that allowing Wicked Knife and Fork healthy space to express himself is more important than exacting swift justice, and he responds with musical honesty rather than a temper tantrum.

While the other operas of the 1970s and 1980s follow a similar format, they do all address different issues, from silly to serious. In various others, we also see premises, plot points, and props that only make sense in light of the framing episodes; quests undertaken to find something or someone that is lost; and affirmations of value for those struggling to love others—or themselves. Among this group of operas, *Spoon Mountain* demonstrates the most musicological interest due to its overt inclusion of and participation in composition and performance conventions from all eras of opera history. In addition, the carefully handled ending and humanizing treatment of the character formerly known as Wicked Knife and Fork clearly demonstrate Fred Rogers’ communication of his deeply-held convictions on pacifism and non-violence through the medium of opera.

Joe Negri has the final word as balladeer narrator of this opera, and he packs in quite a bit of information, stating a(nother) moral, reminding the audience of the opera’s conclusion and unseen epilogue, and inviting a creative response, as well as repeating several of the main musical themes, in the final 55 seconds.

[Determination]: What do you think Wicked’s new name will be?  
You could make it a game as you think of a name for him  
tomorrow

[Spoon (variant, evaded cadence)]: And tomorrow will be the  
wedding of the Prince and Miss Betty Green. With popcorn,  
spoons, and confetti, and seatbelts and milkshakes and  
weddings cakes and keepsakes and no one mistakes  
[New material] the outsides of people with what's in their hearts,  
for people did change as they played out their parts  
[Spoon, original] Once upon a time!  
[Balladeer] Once upon a time, not so very long, not so very long  
ago.<sup>76</sup>

Preschoolers likely did not realize at the end of *Spoon Mountain* that they had taken a journey through opera history, and in keeping with his commitment to education by exposure rather than explanation, Rogers did not point out all the elements that had gone into this particular composition. Rather, he chose to use a variety of styles in his own works, as he explained to *ASCAP in Action* in 1985, and to trust that children would come to love what they had been exposed to.

Quite often children will grow up appreciating the music their parents liked. A man I know of who runs an 'Oldies' record store says his daughter really likes best the songs of the '50s that he now collects and that were his favorites when he was her age. I remember walking down a neighborhood street in Rome and it seemed to me that every window had a radio near it, and that every radio was playing an opera. Won't the children growing up around there just naturally flock to the opera when they are old enough to go?<sup>77</sup>

By continuing to produce operas on a nearly-annual basis through the 1970s and 1980s, and by including numerous examples of operatic traditions in his own whimsical composition, Rogers ensured that his American preschool audience, like their counterparts in Rome, was exposed to opera.

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<sup>76</sup> *MRN*, 1505, 24:40.

<sup>77</sup> Fred Rogers, "Educating Children Through Music: Mister Rogers Talks with ASCAP," *ASCAP in Action* (Fall 1985): 31.

## CHAPTER 5

### YOU'RE MUCH MORE THAN A NECK: *JOSEPHINE THE SHORT-NECK GIRAFFE*

Fred Rogers' favorite quotation was a line from Antoine St. Exupery's *The Little Prince*: "What is essential is invisible to the eye." He had the line displayed on the wall in his office, and it informed everything he did. He was constantly reminding his audience that the most important parts of themselves were not their physical attributes, especially when their uncontrollable features might be a source of physical or emotional pain, discomfort, shame, teasing, or varying levels of ability. In 1989, he attempted to make this essential message visible with his final narrative musical production, *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*. *Josephine* was a three-episode, 90-minute mini-series, the only one ever produced on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Rogers wrote the story for a class in college, then composed music to go with it for a commercially released LP. A picture book version was released in 1985, and the staged version represents the fourth iteration. This unique performance broadcast is quite different from other episodes, and raises a number of questions including genre, adaptation, its dedication, and a variety of contexts within which we can understand its plot content.

During the 1980s, Rogers' operatic output slowed considerably from the pace he maintained in the late 1960s and early 1970s. After *Spoon Mountain* aired in 1982, he wrote *A Granddad for Daniel* (*The Grandparents Opera*)

(1984) and *A Star for Kitty* (1986). These were to be the last ‘real’ operas heard in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Daniel Striped Tiger features prominently in *A Granddad for Daniel*, where he wishes for his long-lost grandfather, played by John Reardon. Betty Aberlin and Chuck Aber play Daniel’s parents, and Francois Clemmons is again a helpful policeman. Like *Spoon Mountain*, the set of this opera appears to be a life-size version of set pieces familiar in Make-Believe, as the cast rides a full-size trolley through a jungle setting. Daniel is also a “star” in *A Star for Kitty*, where the lesson learned is that no one can own a star (or another person), even if it is to fulfill a birthday wish.

*Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* once again forces us to confront the question of genre. The idea that all of Rogers’ compositions might not quite count as “real opera” has certainly informed this project (as it does all discussions of children’s opera) from the beginning. All of the markers previously addressed (recitative / sung nearly throughout / the composer called it such) appear to be missing from this work. Only once in all the publicity materials is *Josephine* referred to as an opera: most of the information concentrated on the fact that it was a mini-series due to air on Wednesday through Friday, May 3-5, 1989. Though it is called a “musical story” most often but also just a “musical” at times, I propose that *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* be given an honorary position as the fourteenth entry in the list of *Neighborhood* operas.

Fred Rogers might well be placed in the company of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American composers such Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin, and even, once again, Gian Carlo Menotti, who wrote “crossover” compositions: operatic musicals, light or theatrical operas, or works that can be

equally at home in an opera house, on Broadway—or on television. Genre classifications in modern America were a funny business, often reflecting the politics of a composer’s milieu as much as they accurately described the musical style he had produced.

Alessandra Campana tackles the problem head-on in “Genre and Poetics,” her contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*.

This chapter adopts the following broad definition: opera as a genre is the staging of an encounter between music and theatre, an encounter that demands that the borders between the two arts are continually redefined. In the course of opera’s history these borders, norms and limits have taken the shape of clusters of conventions. Conventions can in turn be defined as the connection between the artefact of opera and the practical, specific conditions of its production and reception. ... Going back to the initial question – what kind of artefact is opera? – the answer is ultimately an ever-changing solution to the perceived necessity for opera to maintain its own identity, to preserve its status as a recognizable, autonomous specimen.<sup>1</sup>

As James Ryan O’Leary lays out in his dissertation “Broadway Highbrow: Discourse and Politics of the American Musical, 1943-1946” (Harvard, 2012), musical theater composers sometimes claimed highbrow components of their work in order to capitalize on the implication that they were writing in a “higher” idiom. He gives the example of *Oklahoma!*, which Oscar Hammerstein claimed to strategic effect was the first “integrated musical,” despite the fact that others had been produced years earlier.

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandra Campana, “Genre and Poetics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 203.

While Broadway composers might have benefitted from the association of their work with a more highbrow audience, labels that moved operas in the opposite direction were also employed around the same time.

*The Medium* was so successful on Broadway and on film that publicists hesitated to actually call it “opera”. Instead, references to it as a play or music theatre abound. To describe the composer of *The Medium* (in Menotti’s words ‘An Opera in Two Acts’) as a playwright may strike one as intentionally obtuse, but actually it signaled a back-handed compliment: *The Medium* was simply too riveting to encircle within the rusty chains of the word ‘opera.’<sup>2</sup>

Elise Kirk takes *Sweeney Todd* as an example of a genre-bending work, and presents two opposing definitions for how one might decide to categorize it:

Is *Sweeney Todd* an opera, musical theater, or Broadway show? Are we merely caught up in a play of terms? Martin Gottfried has one answer: “There is an operatic kind of music, of singing, of staging. There are opera audiences, and there is an opera sensibility. There are opera houses. *Sweeney Todd* has its occasional operatic moments, but its music overall has the chest tones, the harmonic language, the muscularity, and the edge of Broadway theater.” But, Howard Kissel argues, if “operatic” means “the highest form of theater, a way of capturing all the energy, all the emotional rhythms of the drama in music, then *Sweeney Todd* is indeed operatic. If popular American theater cannot absorb such serious, provocative musical theater, then the development and evolution of the form are in jeopardy.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, *Sweeney Todd* has been produced by opera companies as well as on Broadway stages, which further complicates the question and adds to a sense that it may be considered either, depending on the purposes of each particular performance.

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Barnes, “Television Opera: A Non-History,” in *A Night In at the Opera*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (London: Libbey, 1994), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 321.

Kissel's emphasis on the capturing of energy and emotions in music is similar to what Scott Pratt describes in "Opera as Experience." Presenting an opposing view to Joseph Kerman's call for opera as drama, Peter Kivy's preference for opera as music, and Carolyn Abbate's understanding of opera as a revelation of something outside itself, Pratt borrows from John Dewey's definition of art to understand opera. "Instead of supposing that art objects—musical works, paintings, or whatever—simply are art, Dewey argues that they are art because they are part of an aesthetic experience."<sup>4</sup> He also reminds us of Benjamin Britten's assertion that "Music does not exist in a vacuum, it does not exist until it is performed,"<sup>5</sup> and the performance requires a "holy trinity of composer, performer, and listener." Roger Sessions agrees with this assessment, positing that "music is an activity: it is something done, an experience lived through, with varying intensity, by composer, performer, and listener alike."<sup>6</sup> A complete musical or operatic experience requires the participation of all three categories of individuals:

Composers ... have the role of producing a set of complex musical instructions to be used as a starting point for performers. In so-called classical music the performers, already familiar with the performance practices of their art form, use those practices and their own imaginations to create the sonic experience shared with the audience. The audience, carrying their own musical knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Pratt, "Opera as Experience," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 77.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Britten, *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 257.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Sessions, *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 8.

and experience into the hall, interacts with the performers and the sounds and becomes part of the experience.<sup>7</sup>

According to this understanding of opera as a musical, dramatic, emotional, aesthetic experience realized through the combined efforts of the composer, performers, and audience, *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* must certainly qualify as an opera. In addition, it would appear that the cast members thought of it as such: Chuck Aber said in 2007 that “*Josephine*, which was the last opera we did, was the longest opera.”<sup>8</sup> The composer was writing with the needs of both the performers and audience in mind, the performers were offered—and took—creative license in creating the characters and singing the melodies created for them. The audience, for their part, was also asked to contribute to the aesthetic experience by bringing their own education and preparation (also provided on the program in previous episodes), as well as their interest and attention.

The preschool attention span is an important component when considering *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, and never is it more an issue than in this particular broadcast. While *Sesame Street*, as discussed earlier, was constructed to cater to a 90-second attention span, in the process it also contributed to a shortened attention span and restlessness in its audience, as accounted in both studies and anecdotal evidence. *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, on the other hand, asked its audience to sit quietly and think

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<sup>7</sup> Pratt, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Chuck Aber, interview by Jessica Wiederhorn, *Fred Rogers Oral History Interviews* (Pittsburgh: February 27, 2007), 0:57.  
<http://exhibit.fredrogerscenter.org/early-life-education/videos/view/950/>.

deeply for thirty minutes each day. This expectation of attentiveness was compounded on opera performance days: while most episodes featured small-scale narratives, visitors, and activities in the A-B-A-C-A structure, most of the operas presented a single narrative that spanned nearly 28 minutes. For *Josephine*, the expectation grew further: viewers were asked to follow a story line that took place, with cliffhangers and summaries included, over the course of three days. Thus, the listeners truly did invest in their own experience, contributing to the total aesthetic experience.

Pratt continues:

The idea of opera as experience reasserts the potential of opera as an art form with wide appeal. By releasing those who would perform opera and those who would listen from the impossible expectations of ideal performances and a narrow range of canonical texts, opera has the potential to become more a part of everyday life.<sup>9</sup>

Rogers' operas appeal to all the characteristics outlined above: they had wide appeal (and nationwide broadcast coverage), featured collaborative and inclusive performances, and embraced new and even silly works that nevertheless carried the potential for both inciting and explaining extreme emotions. John Reardon, who knew opera well as a successful performer, took a similar approach to defining the genre in response to Nancy Ross in 1973.

Asked his professional opinion of Rogers' operas, Reardon replied, 'Opera's value is in its communicativeness, and as such Fred's operas are highly successful. They're written in a language children can understand. Who knows what seeds are planted in children's

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<sup>9</sup> Pratt, 85.

minds if they have the experience while they're young of seeing people act and sing?'<sup>10</sup>

Pratt concludes,

In the end, one may object that the effort is large but the payoff is small. Opera is a diminished art form that can offer little to an American audience in the twenty-first century. In fact, if opera is understood as a mode of experience, it may not offer something better than any other form, but its complexity, its necessary call on a broad range of arts, and the challenge of its making recommend it as exactly the kind of art that ought to be an important part of a community that seeks to make a difference in people's lives.<sup>11</sup>

He was speaking originally to the Department of Music at the University of Notre Dame, and certainly universities are institutions of the sort he describes.

However, I can hardly think of a better description for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* than "a community that seeks to make a difference in people's lives." The members of that *Neighborhood* believed in providing their audience with the full operatic experience, and, despite *Josephine's* lack of recitatives, they provided that experience again, for the fourteenth time, in 1989.

Finally, we must consider *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* and its lack of recitative in light of Herbert Graf's experience from a few decades earlier. When staging a 13-minute scene from *La Boheme* for television in 1944, his first change was to ask the singers to perform in English after the crew around them appeared bored with the Italian.

This dialogue, sung in the style of the Italian recitative, went on for some time. Before too long I saw the faces of the camera men again assuming that uninterested look which is a better gauge than the director's self-deception of the true communicativeness of his

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<sup>10</sup> Nancy Ross, "Make-Believe Opera," *Opera News* 37 (January 13, 1973): 9.

<sup>11</sup> Pratt, 86.

production. ... The next day we repeated the scene. I had been thinking about the opening recitative and had decided to try an experiment. I asked the singers to speak their lines, leaving out the music entirely until they came to the aria. To my surprise, this was not effective either. The mood simply was not there. We now had too little emotional impact where before we had had too much. ... At this point the conductor suggested, 'Let them speak their lines and I'll play the music underneath the words.' We tried it this way and it felt 'right.' There was just enough emotion vibrating behind the words to carry the tension between the two young people who are feeling the destiny of their first meeting. This was the effect of the 'background music' used as it is in the movies.<sup>12</sup>

The approach Graf eventually used also most accurately describes *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*'s scoring. The songs are sung with live accompaniment, and the dialogue is spoken, but with nearly constant scoring underneath. In this sense, without even taking into account Josephine's own rather over-the-top mourning over her physical features, *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* is a classic melodrama.

*Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*'s final musical production, is the most extravagant of them all. One possible reason why Rogers stopped writing operas after completing *Josephine* is that, having produced his magnum opus—finally staging the story he had carried with him since college—he simply never again had the inspiration to write another opera. After all, there was no requirement that he write operas at all. PBS executives did not really “get” them, but given Rogers' immense popularity and success, they chose to leave him to his own devices. Rogers himself also never created a specific timeline, goal, or necessity to compose dramatic works in addition to the songs for each episode. For awhile, the *Neighborhood* featured approximately

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<sup>12</sup> Herbert Graf, *Opera for the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951), 227.

one opera per year, but it is not as if he set out to write one opera per year; he would just write another opera whenever he wanted to. Why, then (excepting the argument I have already outlined above), would his final and culminating work of the genre not really be squarely and overtly within the genre, as all the others were?

I believe there are two reasons for the choice of musical style, particularly regarding the lack of recitative. First, the practical: the music was composed almost two decades earlier in collaboration with Josie Carey, and first recorded on an LP entitled *Misterogers Tells the Story of* “Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe.” Rather than make tremendous changes to the songs (or compose recitatives to insert two decades after the original composition was complete), Rogers used the music that he had already prepared to tell the story. And second, the personal: in 1988, *Neighborhood* opera mainstay John Reardon died of pneumonia, the result of AIDS complications, at the far-too-young age of 58. I believe that one remarkably insightful—if blunt—seven-year-old from Vermont posed a question that Mister Rogers simply did not have an answer to. After beginning the note, “I love you and your TV show,” this young fan quickly gets right to the point: “What are you going to do when you make up new opras with Reardon dead?”<sup>13</sup> It is impossible to know what explanation was offered in the response this child received, but the benefit of hindsight reveals the practical

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<sup>13</sup> Personal letter to Fred Rogers, courtesy of the Fred Rogers Center Archive. Spelling original. Reardon’s death was mentioned in numerous examples of fan mail to Fred Rogers: he received sympathy cards and letters from both parents and children who expressed how much they enjoyed seeing Reardon in the operas and that they knew Mister Rogers would be sad and missing his friend.

result of how Rogers would handle composing and producing new operas after Reardon died: he simply didn't.

The *Josephine* broadcast closed with the following dedication in white typescript on the screen:

We dedicate the production of Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe to our good friend and opera maker, John Reardon, whose excellence as a singer and as a person will continue to inspire us forever.<sup>14</sup>

Though, on the one hand, an opera would have been the most apt way to honor John Reardon's memory, I suspect that when it came down to it, Rogers and the *Neighborhood* cast found themselves emotionally unprepared to produce an opera without him.

*Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*, then, was a story whose time had (once again) come. Rogers wrote the short story for a French class in college, which places it prior to his graduation in 1951. He composed the music somewhat later, while working with Josie Carey, who wrote the lyrics for some of the songs, and released the LP recording *Misterogers Tells the Story of "Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe"* in 1968. 1968 was a banner year indeed, as it marked the advent of *Misterogers' Neighborhood* and was of course the year *Babysitter Opera* was aired as well. Thus, the music in *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* and the *Babysitter Opera* were contemporaneous, but *Josephine* did not receive the full performance treatment until over two decades later, in 1989. In the meantime, the same story was produced as a picture book, adapted by frequent Rogers co-author Barry Head, in 1985. The picture book is a completely different

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<sup>14</sup> *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 1610, "Mister Rogers Presents *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*," PBS, May 5, 1989, written by Fred Rogers.

adaptation itself, not simply a visual representation of the musical version. In fact, there is no reference in it to the songs, though the entire narrative is written in rhyme. The final difference between the book and the musical is that in the book, Josephine's friends and companions are depicted as teasing her for her physical difference, while in the musical her mother, old friends, and newly-introduced schoolmates all insist throughout that she is fine and lovable, while Josephine herself is the only one who insists she isn't.

The 1968 LP version of *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* is quite similar to the 1989 broadcast version: they share most of the same songs, and of course the same story. In several cases, the same performers even worked on both projects, but often not as the same characters: Betty Aberlin, who, as the *Neighborhood's* ingénue had earned the title role by 1989, here plays Miss Honeybear, a character cut from the later version. Fred Rogers provides the narration for the story, with dialogue between characters spoken by the various actors, and songs sung with musical accompaniment. There is also light accompaniment underscoring the spoken portions, but it is not as pervasive on the LP as the version that would air two decades later. There are also a couple of songs that are different between the two, but for the most part it is very easy to see that they are two versions of the same musical story. The *Neighborhood* broadcast is longer, of course, and the extra time is filled by the framing segments in the living room at the beginning and end of each episode, as well as some additional songs, more extensive dialogue, and time taken for such activities as traveling, with musical underscoring but without spoken dialogue.

## PUBLICITY MATERIALS AND BETTY ABERLIN

David Newell, best known for his role as Speedy Deliveryman Mister McFeely, was also responsible for the *Neighborhood's* publicity in his off-screen role of Director of Public Relations. The press releases ahead of *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* were copious, encouraging individual stations to promote the performance in the local press, and included prose descriptions of the musical, emphasis on the fact that 1989 marked the *Neighborhood's* 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary on the air,<sup>15</sup> and promotional pictures to aid in alerting potential audience members to the upcoming broadcast.<sup>16</sup>

Included among these materials was an interview with Betty Aberlin, which refers to *Josephine* as an “opera” (quotations included). She had the following to say:

I have been working with Fred in the Neighborhood for 22 years ... and I still find the work a delight and a challenge. Fred's scripts seem so simple in both plot and language, but that's because he distills complicated feelings and spiritual mysteries right down to their essence. Trying to convey the directness and honesty of Fred's work is as demanding as any acting I've done. No one spots phoniness faster than a young child.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This auspicious anniversary could be another possible reason that *Josephine* was recorded for broadcast: at the very least, it is one more beneficial coincidence.

<sup>16</sup> This press package was viewed at the University of Pittsburgh Special Collections

<sup>17</sup> Betty Aberlin, quoted by David Newell, “The Big Apple's Betty Aberlin or How the Ingénue Became a Giraffe,” included in promotional materials for *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* produced by Family Communications Inc., 1989, 1. This article is self-contained and paginated; my page numbers reflect the original.

After outlining some of her professional experience outside the *Neighborhood*, including two years of music revues at the Upstairs at the Downstairs in New York City, regular appearances on *The Smothers Brothers*, playing Meryl Streep's sister in the Public Theater production of *Alice in Concert*, and creating the role of Cheryl in *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking it on the Road*, the description then reminds the audience of her role(s) on PBS. She is Lady Aberlin in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, "the ingenuous niece of that fantasy land's autocratic puppet monarch, King Friday XIII."<sup>18</sup> She plays Betty Aberlin, theater manager, in the reality segments, and as quoted in Chapter 1, she did indeed star in all the operas, so it is no wonder she liked them best of all. Just thinking of Aberlin's roles in the operas examined here gives an idea of the various types of fantasy that take place in the narratives. In the *Babysitter Opera*, Aberlin played a mother who went out for an evening (or about seven minutes). The realism of the narrative is undeniable, but the son who protested her departure just happened to be played by a donkey hand puppet. In *Spoon Mountain*, Aberlin sang the role of Betty Green, a conscientious park ranger who was engaged to a prince she had just met by the end of her self-appointed mission. While the setting included castles and other fantastical elements, the main characters were adult humans playing adult humans. While *Josephine's* sets are a fanciful approximation of an African savanna, all the characters are anthropomorphized wild animals.

Now ... I've become a short-neck giraffe—and an unhappy one because I'm different. In the case of Josephine, my task was to use the simple declarative sentences in the script, and, without forcing,

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<sup>18</sup> Newell, 2.

suggest that this is a unique character, a giraffe with some feelings, not just a grownup dressed in a giraffe suit. ... I don't mean to sound 'lofty'—*Josephine* is a dear piece, and all of us in it—and on all the Neighborhood programs—want our work to look so comfortable that children at home will know that they too can make up and play in their own stories.<sup>19</sup>

Again we hear that the goal of the work is that children will be inspired to creativity and personal expression through dramatic, musical play.

### PRODUCTION WEEK

As with all weeks by this point, the set of five episodes all carried the same title: “Mister Rogers Presents *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*.” Discussion of the upcoming performance begins on Monday, and as usual, thematic ties run throughout the five episodes. For the week's opening episode,<sup>20</sup> Mister Rogers walks in carrying a round basket containing plastic toy animals: a giraffe, an elephant, and a tiger. He explains that he likes playing with the toy animals, but is excited about visiting a wild animal park where he will be able to see the live animals in person. He also makes a point of taking his camera with him when Mister McFeely arrives to accompany him to the park.<sup>21</sup> They leave Johnny Costa and all possibility of live scoring behind in the house; thus, their entire outdoor adventure features only the live sounds of humans, animals, and vehicles.

The pair enjoys looking at the animals, and Mister Rogers takes pictures of Mister McFeely, some birds, a group of flamingos, and a tiger. Soon, Mister

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<sup>19</sup> Aberlin, quoted by Newell, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 1606, “Mister Rogers Presents *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*,” PBS, May 1, 1989, written by Fred Rogers.

<sup>21</sup> The script makes a point of noting this is not a Polaroid camera.

McFeely announces that he has to leave, but introduces Rogers to Joan Embry, a guide in the park, and she invites Rogers to join her on a feed truck for an opportunity to see the animals up close. They visit the giraffes, and Rogers is allowed to feed them several carrots from his hand while seated in the back of the truck. He is characteristically polite, greeting one giraffe with “How do you do” and later concluding “I’m very glad to have met you.” Joan points out that “each one is different—you can identify individuals by their markings.” During this scene, the sound of the giraffes’ chewing predominates. Upon returning to the interior set, Mister Rogers points out that “you can play about what you’ve done,” then suggests, “Let’s make-believe something about animals,” as he summons the trolley.

In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, Queen Sara and Chef Brockett discuss Princess Zelda’s new play; she wants him to play a bulldog. When he accepts the role, he sings “I am a bulldog of the jungle,” and the script notes this should be done “In his best operatic voice.”<sup>22</sup> A bit later, when Lady Aberlin asks who could play the bulldog, Chef Brockett again sings the same phrase, which the script refers to parenthetically as “repeating his audition.”<sup>23</sup> Lady Aberlin is subsequently informed that Zelda also wants a short-neck giraffe to appear in the play, and she would be wonderful for the role. Wearing a dark green dress with puff sleeves and enormous red puffy heart earrings, Lady Aberlin soft-shoes through Make-Believe from the castle to the clock. Along the way, she practices

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<sup>22</sup> Script: “Monday – Josephine,” 4. The script is paginated.

<sup>23</sup> “Monday—Josephine,” 5.

having a short neck, and the scoring underneath her journey is an instrumental version of the Wishing song that will appear later.

When Lady Aberlin arrives, Daniel Striped Tiger informs her, “I’ve been reading about tigers. I don’t think I’m very much like other tigers.... It makes me feel bad sometimes.”<sup>24</sup> She reassures him that she likes Daniel the way he is—in fact, she wouldn’t come to visit him if he were ferocious and roaring, like a regular tiger. “You’re saying I don’t have to be just like the ones in the book to be all right?” Daniel asks, and she confirms, “Exactly. In fact, I’m really glad you’re just exactly the way you are.” She reinforces the sentiment by singing “I’m Glad You Are the Way You Are,” which will reappear in the musical as “I’m Glad I Am the Way I Am.” After the trolley returns to the living room, Mister Rogers then wonders at what we have just seen: “A tame tiger, and a giraffe with a short neck: anything is possible in Make-Believe.” Finally, he closes the episode by singing “I’m Glad You Are the Way You Are” directly to the audience—even pointing at the camera to emphasize “you”—before changing his coat and shoes for departure.

On Tuesday<sup>25</sup> Mister Rogers arrives holding a camera, and the basket of animals remains on the bench where he left it the day before. By way of review, he asks, “Remember last time we went to see some giraffes and elephants at the wild animal park?” He mentions having taken several pictures, and adds, “I saved the last picture on the roll for while you’re with me.” He pulls Trolley into

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<sup>24</sup> *MRN*, 1606, 23:00.

<sup>25</sup> *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 1607, “Mister Rogers Presents *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*,” PBS, May 2, 1989, written by Fred Rogers.

position and snaps the last picture, then rewinds the roll and puts it in the canister with the admonition “the only person who should ever open a camera is the person who owns it.” Once again, as he sets off on a visit to learn how film is developed, the field trip is governed by conversation and machinery, but devoid of musical accompaniment.

A fascinating bit of scoring from Costa occurs once Rogers arrives home from his trip and sits down to look through his new photographic prints. The *Neighborhood* has a small-scale system of leitmotifs, with musical accompaniment regularly paired with specific characters or objects, such as Mister McFeely or the Trolley. In quick succession in this scene, we get examples of several motives, and here they are paired not with the character, object, or animal in question, but rather with pictures of those things. The first picture on the roll was of Mister McFeely, and we hear his “Speedy Delivery!” motive in the piano when the snapshot of him is shown on screen. As Rogers moves through the stack, “We Are Elephants” plays in time with the picture of the elephants in the zoo, and the Trolley’s familiar motive also accompanies its picture from the end of the roll. The most interesting of these examples is the elephant song, since it is paired with a picture of live elephants even though the song has not yet been introduced.

Between the pictures of the trip to the zoo and Trolley’s portrait that finished the roll, we can see that Mister Rogers has taken individual smiling snapshots of several Neighbors. This serves two purposes: first, it reinforces the idea that the show takes place in real time; it is a true half-hour per day, in between which Rogers has spent time with his neighbors apart from the

audience. Additionally, Rogers thumbing through these portraits serves the same purpose as having a board of headshots available in the lobby of a live theatrical production: we are introduced to (or reminded of) the cast first as “themselves”<sup>26</sup> before seeing them in costume.

Rogers recaps the previous day’s make-believe narrative before sending the Trolley into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Princess Zelda herself is present now, and asks Neighbor Aber to try on a giraffe headpiece. He initially sings a rousing chorus about how proud he is to be a giraffe, but Zelda informs him that his character is painfully shy, and he practices that demeanor instead. She will also need “a very strong, kind, caring woman giraffe” and it is decided that Mayor Maggie will be perfect for the role. Bob Trow would like to be the bulldog, but since Chef Brockett has already taken that role, he will play a tree instead. This casting decision also results in an apparently spontaneous sung declaration: “I am a tree in the forest and I love to sing.”

Meanwhile, Harriet E. Cow is teaching Daniel Striped Tiger, Ana Platypus, and Prince Tuesday at the neighborhood school. Daniel and Anna practice being sleeping and slowly blooming flowers, like morning glories, and they all sing “Perfect Day” together as they “wake up.” The teacher and students all already know “the perfect day song,” which represents another use of “existing” music—at least it exists in the world of Make Believe—for an opera.

As Rogers closes the episode, he discusses the day’s Make-Believe goings-on, and reminds the audience, “You could make up your own play—or your own song! Just sing about whatever you’re thinking about.” He sings “Perfect Day”

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<sup>26</sup> Quotations, of course, because they are already playing characters

while changing his clothes. When he is ready to depart, Mister McFeely arrives to deliver the photographic negatives left behind at the processing plant, and stays long enough to join Rogers in singing “the good feeling song” before they both depart.

PERFORMANCE: *JOSEPHINE THE SHORT-NECK GIRAFFE*

Just as the time constraints and fanciful sets are much larger than any previous production, the instrumental ensemble also gains a member. Trombones feature prominently in this narrative: aurally, visually, and as a plot device. Hazel’s father, Ms. Mongrel the music teacher, and eventually Hazel all “play” the trombone, and they are credited with the efforts of Joe Dallas, Sr., another guest musician with an impressive list of collaborations. Dallas had previously appeared on camera in 1971, where he was repairing—and then playing—a trombone at Joe Negri’s music shop. This expanded jazz combo accompanies all the songs, in addition to playing interludes, throughout *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*.

On Wednesday, the first day of the *Josephine* performance,<sup>27</sup> Rogers arrives with an elephant head under his arm, but makes a point to feed the fish before introducing it. While watching the fish, he wonders aloud about fish, and whether they talk and sing. “Remember the song that Daniel Tiger and the others sang?” he asks, then sings “Perfect Day” once again. The accompaniment marries

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<sup>27</sup> *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 1608, “Mister Rogers Presents *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*,” PBS, May 3, 1989, written by Fred Rogers.

the “Perfect Day” scoring with the music usually associated with the fish, as they represent a dominant visual aspect of this scene.

After returning to the living room, he draws attention to the elephant headpiece and begins to put it on, saying, “This is one way to dress up like an elephant. Now remember, Mister Rogers is in here!” Just as with the Twirling Purple Kitty headpiece in *Spoon Mountain*, he uses the costume as a transitional object, introducing it in the familiar and safe confines of his home (and himself!). The admonition to remember that he was in there just makes the effort, already evident in *Spoon Mountain*, even more apparent to the young viewers. Reminding us that the elephant costume will be seen again shortly, he adds, “This is the way that Miss Paulificate and Handyman Negri and Princess Zelda are going to pretend that they are elephants in the Neighborhood of Make Believe.” Switching to the giraffe headpiece, he says, “And this is a way to dress up like a giraffe. Lady Aberlin is going to dress up like a giraffe.”

Finally, he takes delivery of a large, wordless prop book from Mister McFeely, carries it to the bench by the Trolley tracks and reinforces the idea of collaborative imagination by announcing, “I’m going to tell the story of *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*, and we’re going to pretend that the people in the Neighborhood of Make Believe are going to act it out.”<sup>28</sup> “Perfect Day” underscores the action throughout the Speedy Delivery and subsequent discussion, leading us into the first song of the musical.

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<sup>28</sup> The use of the book as source of the story serves to emphasize the idea of Book As Text. The script also ties this device with a previous opera: “Fade back to book at the end, like we did with Potato Bugs and Cows.”

*Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* opens with a sunflower (Daniel Striped Tiger), a tree (Dog Trow), and a frog (a puppet) singing “Perfect Day,” which by now is quite familiar to the audience. They are joined by Butterfly, Bird, and Bee, who always travel and speak as a group, and agree that the day is indeed perfect. When we first see Josephine, she is sitting on a rock singing “For a Year and a Day I’ve Been Wishing” and shares her grief with the group over her lack of stature: specifically, she has been wishing for over a year to have a longer neck, but nothing has changed. They all think she is fine, but she sulks away still singing her declaration that “It’s no use crying, it’s no use trying,” etc.

The sets are by far the most elaborate of any *Neighborhood* musical production: the time and expense that has gone into creating the grounds is quite evident. After the opening scene with the flora and fauna, we see an establishing shot of two huts: one round and grey, the other tall with two spires and giraffe markings, next door to one another (the huts are visible in figure 18; Josephine’s displeasure is also evident in this example). The external decorations are obvious reflections of their occupants.



Figure 18. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* 1608, 13:21.

First we visit the elephant hut, where a small family sings their introductory Family Song (figure 19), which begins, “I’m the Father of this family” / “I’m the Mother of this family” / “I’m the Hazel of this family.” “We Are Elephants” is truly evocative of both lumbering and trumpeting, two of the most recognizable pachyderm characteristics, and it’s not surprising that this song got special mention in fan mail as being particularly clever and fun. Hazel announces that she wants to learn to play trombone like her father and read like her mother, so it is decided that she will begin school the next day. She sets off to find Josephine and invite her along, but first encounters Mother Giraffe, who sings a motherly ballad about her desire to make her daughter smile. Hazel finds Josephine, who persists in singing “It’s No Use” in response to the invitation to go to school, but is told for the first of many times, “Remember, you’re more than just a neck.”



Figure 19. “We Are Elephants,” *MRN* 1608, 14:07.

This ends the first day’s installment, and back in the house Mister Rogers points out that he’s leaving the book next to the bench “so we can learn more about it the next time.” He then demonstrates that one need not have access to a

fancy elephant costume in order to pretend to be an elephant, and sings “We Are Elephants” again while swinging his arms like a trunk. Next, he takes a beige sweater from the closet and wraps it around his head as a recommendation for giraffe play. Finally, he sits on the bench in front of the door and remembers aloud, “There was a time that I wished for something. I wanted to be exactly like all my friends, and there were times when I was sad I couldn’t be just like them. I remember making up a song very much like what Josephine sang.” He sings, “Yes, I’m sad, but you see, it’s because I want to be like the others. I’m not wishing for the moon, I just hope that I’ll soon be like the others.” This interlude was included in Josephine’s initial song for the LP recording, but was removed from her performance here. It quickly returns to the same familiar melody, and he continues, “For a year and a day I’ve been wishing...” to finish the song. He concludes, “I wished and I wished, but I didn’t have to be just like the others. No, I was ok just the way I was, and what a good feeling that was, when I found that out!” “Good feeling” is the cue for the closing song, and he exits after the reminder, “You can pretend more about the story when we’re not visiting together, and then next time we’ll all think more about *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe!*”

To begin Thursday’s show,<sup>29</sup> Mister Rogers enters the house holding a trombone, and changes into the beige sweater that served as a giraffe headdress the day before. He demonstrates the mouthpiece, then blows a few notes before conceding, “I am not a trombone player, but it’s fun to try!” Next, we are

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<sup>29</sup> *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 1609, “Mister Rogers Presents *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*,” written by Fred Rogers, PBS, May 4, 1989.

reminded of the relevance of the musical instrument to the ongoing story: “Hazel Elephant wants to play the slide trombone because her father, Mister Elephant, plays one. It’s a story about animals in the forest. Let’s just continue that story now.” After a quick recap of the events already occurred, a fade delivers the viewer back to the pseudo-African countryside, where we hear “A new day is beginning, a day in which it’s time to go to school.”

Inside their hut, the elephant family sings “It’s time!” which is quickly followed by a lively reprise of “We Are Elephants.” The music fades after the first section as we travel to the giraffe house. This is the first interior shot of Josephine’s home, which contains both a piano and a portrait of a giraffe in a blue bowtie. This is the first clue, either seen or spoken, to explain the absence of Josephine’s father. He still is never discussed, but the presence of a picture implies that he is deceased.

Josephine remains hesitant to attend school on the basis that everyone there will look wonderful and she looks awful, due to her short neck. “A giraffe is much, much more than a neck, dear,” Mother Giraffe insists. Hazel bounces in to collect Josephine for school, and makes her “Promise You’ll Try,” adding, “come on, Jo, you’re much more than just a neck.” Of course, such a pivotal message was inevitably set to music, and we hear “You’re Much More Than a Neck” for the first time. Even Josephine joins in, adding to the list of animals that are much more than their single most memorable feature.<sup>30</sup> The girls set off for school,

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<sup>30</sup> You're much more than a neck, Jo  
I know you're much more than your trunk,  
A chicken's more than a peck, though,  
And there's more than a smell to a skunk

You're much more than a feather,  
A wing or a beak or a word,  
When we put you all together,  
You're a beautiful singing bird!

accompanied by Butterfly, Bird, and Bee, but make a detour to say goodbye to sunflower, frog, and tree. Tree adds, “You’re much, much more than you look” and they continue to sing “You’re Much More Than a Neck” all the way to school.

One of the best jokes likely to be missed by preschoolers occurs when Hazel and Josephine arrive at school and remember that they were admonished to “Send a note home” upon arrival. Josephine says she thinks she’ll send home a G-sharp; Hazel chooses an E; and Butterfly, Bird, and Bee add a B. They buzz away humming an E-Major triad, offering to carry the notes home for their friends.

Mister Bulldog (Chef Brockett), the headmaster, greets them at the entrance and shows Hazel to Music and Reading, then directs Josephine to the AAA (Attractive Active Animals) class outside (figure 20). There, she meets the two elephant instructors, Rosie and Posie, along with fellow students Sam S. Snake, who cannot hiss (“Your hissing is missing?” she asks), and J.R. Giraffe, who is painfully shy. After a rousing rendition of their “Attractive Active Animals” theme song, Josephine witnesses some of J.R.’s speaking exercises, which include making statements about the sky, the air, the grass, etc.

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Not just your nose or your grin or your eyes,  
Not just toes or your chin or your size,  
Not just a bit or a spot or a part,  
You're not just your outsides,  
You're also your heart

You see there's more than honking to geeses,  
And there's more to a cow than a moo,  
When you add up all the pieces,  
There is more than we see to you

You're much more than a feather  
A neck or a trunk or a mind,  
When we put you all together,  
You're a beautiful, marvelous,  
Spirited, lovely,  
Wonderful one-of-a-kind!



Figure 20. “Attractive Active Animals,” *MRN* 1609, 15:11.

Meanwhile in the music room, Hazel is coming along quickly in her quest to learn to play the trombone, and it is now time for J.R. to have a hoof-organ lesson. The hoof-organ slides out from behind a curtain: an impressively large keyboard, much like any piano or organ keyboard, except that it is doubled, with essentially two keyboards lying back-to-back, mirroring one another. It is during the hoof-organ scene that we see a use of diegetic-to-non-diegetic scoring that is actually quite common in other genres of film but not quite so much in the *Neighborhood*. J.R. begins with a simple demonstration, stepping on E for elephant (Hazel responds with a G for giraffe on her new trombone), then takes a few careful steps, and with each step the organ notes emanate from off-camera with intentional precision, as if J.R.’s actions truly were creating the sound. However, after one exposition of the “You’re Much More Than a Neck” melody, the ensemble expands prodigiously from the single organ note to the full jazz combo, including piano, bass, trombone, and drum set. J.R. dances about on the hoof-organ, and his movements no longer contain the illusion of sound creation (figure 21). After briefly exiting his shy shell while playing (he finishes the

performance with legs and arms spread in a stance of triumph), J.R. quickly returns to his former shy, collapsed demeanor.



Figure 21. “Hoof-Organ,” *MRN* 1609, 21:48.

After a brief exchange with Hazel Elephant, Miss Mongrel turns back to her other student, asking, “J.R., will you play your g-minor fugue for us?” With her encouragement, J.R. demonstrates that his hoof-organ skills are not limited to a repertoire of Fred Rogers originals, and he hops back on the keyboard, playing the fugue subject from Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Fantasia and Fugue in G-Minor,” BWV 542. Once again, his steps initially appear to match the aural accompaniment, but the camera pans up and away from his playing before the counter-subject begins, so as not to create a visual dissonance when we learn that J.R., sadly, cannot dance two contrapuntal lines simultaneously. As the picture fades from the animal school back to Mister Rogers’ living room, the fugue continues to underscore Rogers’ synopsis of the day’s narrative, and after a few moments in the living room, Costa transitions from the organ to the piano.

Our host immediately recommends additional creative outlets: “When you write a story, you can make some pictures to go with it, like the pictures in this book. There are all sorts of things you can do.” He personally sings two more of the musical’s selections before leaving: first, we hear “Attractive Active Fish” to the tune of “Attractive Active Animals,” again underscored with the regular fish motive. Finally, he addresses the humans in the audience to the tune of “You’re Much More Than a Neck: “You’re much more than your toys, and you’re much more than your noise,” then says, “You can think up all kinds of things that you’re much, much more than... Just like you’re much more than your hair, or your teeth, or your skin, or your legs ... any one part of you. Much, much more... Just like I’m much more than a slide trombone.” With this, he plays six notes on the trombone. The tone produced does not reveal him to be a trombone virtuoso, but the melody he blows is extremely similar to a phrase from Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, first heard with the words “Vita detestabilis” during “O Fortuna.”

Finally, he concludes the episode, “And the next time we’re together, we’ll think about the last part of *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*. How do you think she’ll do? Do you think she’ll grow a longer neck? Do you think she’ll grow a bigger inside? Well, you just think about it, and I’ll be back next time. Bye-bye!”

The conclusion of *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* is presented on Friday’s episode,<sup>31</sup> which Mister Rogers opens by arriving with a blue balloon. He indicates that the balloon is a clue to the end of the story: “I looked at the last

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<sup>31</sup> *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Episode 1610, “Mister Rogers Presents *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*,” PBS, May 10, 1989, written by Fred Rogers.

picture in this book, and it has some balloons, so I thought ‘somebody must be planning a party.’ But that’s for the end.”

By way of recap, we are shown both stills and video clips of the past two days’ performance. The Elephants’ theme plays over stills of them at home, then we see a short reprise of Josephine singing “It’s No Use,” followed by more still shots of the journey to school accompanied by the Butterfly, Bird, and Bee theme. We also see and hear portions of “Attractive Active Animals” and J.R.’s hoof-organ solo. At five minutes into the episode, Rogers gives the transition back to the story in progress: “Let’s think about the last part of this story now, as Josephine is talking with her teachers, Rosie and Posie.”

While talking to Josephine, Sam S. Snake learns to hiss while saying the word “hysterical” and quickly sings “My Hissing Was Missing, My Hiss Was So Remiss” in celebration. His teachers are ecstatic, and ring the good news bell, summoning Mister Bulldog to join their congratulations. Josephine thinks the celebration is overreacting, and decides to go home. She sings “It’s No Use” again, this time to Mister Bulldog, as an explanation of her impending departure.

When Hazel finds out her friend is intending to leave, she hurries outside and reprises “Will You Promise That You’ll Try,” and their two themes—one indefatigably optimistic and the other irretrievably depressed—combine into counterpoint for the first time.<sup>32</sup> Since Hazel is unable to convince Josephine to reconsider on her own, she finds J.R. practicing his speaking exercises and begs

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<sup>32</sup> This overlapping of encouragement from one character layered upon expression of negative feelings from another is reminiscent of the moment “I Am Missing Somebody Special” combined with “I’m Taking Care of You” in the *Babysitter Opera*.

him to talk to Josephine: “She’s really very nice, she just needs to know it.” He agrees to try.

He uses his practice statements, which leads Josephine to believe that he is only using her for practice, but adds “It would be a perfect scene if you were smiling, Josephine.” She insists that “staying isn’t going to make any difference. I’ll always look—” at which point he interrupts her and interjects, “Nice.” He sings to her, “I Think You’re Nice,” then begins to list alternative adjectives to describe her stature, including “petite, dainty, cute...” Suddenly he realizes: “I’m talking!” and quickly adds that she can call him Jack. Josephine smiles for the first time in the whole three days, and exclaims, “What a difference a minute can make! Sometimes it’s better than a whole year!” As the two walk back into the school, they stop abruptly several times to talk, and the scoring stops with them.

Once inside, Josephine announces to the assembled crowd, “Jack and I just had a long talk, and I’ve decided to stay at school.” Josephine, having finally changed her tune, actually changes her tune to “I’m Glad I Am the Way I Am.” Soon the girls’ parents arrive to participate, and the entire group sings “We’re Glad We Are the Way We Are” (figure 22).



Figure 22. “We’re Glad We Are the Way We Are,” *MRN* 1610, 22:22.

As the communal spirit and self-affirmations continue amid streamers and balloons, the camera zooms toward a blue balloon and transitions back to Mister Rogers, still holding the book, and he points out the first of a series of lessons to be gleaned from the story: “As J.R. helped Josephine feel better about herself, he started to feel better about himself.” The presentation of the moral continues:

There are so many ways to grow. There isn't a whole lot we can do about our outside kind of growing. Some of us grow tall and some of us grow short. Some of us have one color skin and some of us have another. That's all outside stuff. But we all have insides, too. And our insides have a different way of growing. Our thoughts and our feelings grow. And there's a lot we can do about them. We can try to understand them, and love them, and help them to grow well. And turn out to be glad we're the way we are, and glad our friends are the way they are. And we can always try to remember that we're much more than one thing. We're much more than our arms, or our legs, or our eyes, or our skin, or our hair. We're even more than our thoughts: we are! When you put us [singing] all together we're a beautiful, marvelous, spirited, lo-ve-ly, wonderful, one-of-a-kind!”<sup>33</sup>

The special week closes with Mister Rogers singing about his good feeling, concluding that next time “we'll celebrate each other!” He carries the toy basket, book, and balloon as the door closes behind him, signaling the end of the last large-scale musical production that would ever take place in his *Neighborhood*.

## CONTENT AND CONTEXTS

*Josephine The Short-Neck Giraffe* is Rogers' musical magnum opus in more ways than one. It is the longest and most elaborately staged dramatic production ever undertaken in the show's run, but perhaps even more importantly, its message encompasses the spirit of the *Neighborhood* more

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<sup>33</sup> *MRN*, 1610, 23:53.

thoroughly than any other set of episodes. The moral(s), stated early and often, both by the animal characters to one another, and by Mister Rogers to the viewer at home, deal with difference. Specifically, the messages are intent upon reassuring the listener that difference is worthy of celebration, not sadness. On the surface, “You’re special just the way you are” is nearly so familiar as to be rote to a television neighbor who regularly tuned in, and *Josephine* appears to be merely an hour-and-a-half long reiteration of one of Rogers’ favorite phrases. However, taken in light of the *Neighborhood*’s entire run, the variety of messages and applications contained within this simple narrative is enormous: it is clear that Rogers was deeply concerned with issues of race, gender, and disability, and wished to assure each viewer of his or her unique value.

Of course, the most obvious case of “being different” is the one named in the title and discussed throughout the narrative: Josephine has a short neck, and wishes this were not the case. Having already spent an entire year wishing fervently (and musically) beside the Wishing Pond, Josephine’s thoughts are completely preoccupied by her one perceived shortcoming. Everything that happens only serves to remind her of her unhappiness with her own stature: a friendly tree offers her some high leaves, which she cannot reach, and even the flora and fauna<sup>34</sup> insisting they find her beautiful does nothing to sway her mood. She sullenly insists they are wrong about her, as her height renders her less attractive and less valuable than her taller counterparts in the giraffe community.

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<sup>34</sup> The tree, sunflower, frog, bird, bee, and butterfly, in addition to her friend Hazel Elephant

Josephine truly does become like a broken record, refusing to engage in any conversational topic that would distract from her body image and self-loathing.

Careful consideration of other elements seen rather than discussed in the script will lead the viewer to understand several more instances of difference in this narrative. The difference in this production is cast in such a way that it can be understood in a variety of ways, and would invite members of the audience to see their own struggle in Josephine and the other characters. Whether struggling with physical disability, extreme shyness, fighting against gender norms, or not being accepted by others due to their race or other uncontrollable factors, children could understand the musical in light of their own experiences. Finally, it is clear that Josephine's biggest struggle is not to gain acceptance from her peers, who universally adore her, but to finally be able to accept herself.

#### RACE / COLOR-BLIND CASTING

The two main families that appear in *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe* are the giraffe family, consisting of Josephine and her mother, and the elephant family, composed of Hazel and her parents. The fact that Josephine is a child of a single parent could make her and her narrative more compelling to many children of the late 1980s, when divorce was common and households frequently headed by single women. Though a picture of a male giraffe, presumably

Josephine's father, does appear on the wall in their home, neither he nor his unexplained absence is ever mentioned.<sup>35</sup>

Even more interesting than a lack of present father figure is the fact that Josephine Giraffe is played by Betty Aberlin (usually Lady Aberlin), who is white, while her mother is portrayed by African-American actress Maggie Stewart (Mayor Maggie). Meanwhile, Zelda Pulliam as Hazel Elephant is the African-American daughter of two caucasian parents, Audrey Roth and Joe Negri (Miss Paulifcate and Handyman Negri). Thus, among the main characters there are two daughters and two mothers, but in both cases Rogers chose to create mixed-race family units rather than matching the actors by skin color. This instance of color-blind casting by a man who was truly color-blind is just another bold but subtle affirmation that all humans are inherently equal. This "bold but subtle" approach characterizes Rogers' methods for decades of strong messages of equality: he would make a choice to show something—like a mixed-race animal family in a musical production—but not call attention to it verbally. Again, we can see an example of Margaret McFarland's conviction that "attitudes are caught, not taught" and realize that the *Neighborhood's* color-blind casting is another medium which is itself the message. Even without a direct statement on inter-racial marriage (or adoption), Rogers simply presents the situations as normal—or at the very least, as normal as a trombone-playing, self-referential-song-having elephant family might ever be considered to be.

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<sup>35</sup> In the LP, Josephine's father also does not speak or sing, but he is referred to as being present. This change reflects a change in the norms of family life from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The idea of various colors of animals living harmoniously together was seeded earlier, in the Monday episode. While observing and photographing birds in the animal park's aviary, Mister McFeely and Mister Rogers do call attention to their visual differences: "They look so comfortable, all of them together," Rogers says, and Mister McFeely agrees, "all different colors, all living together."<sup>36</sup> Once again, the pedantic explanation "and people are all different colors, but enjoy living together peacefully" is not spoken, but the audience may be left to infer for themselves that, in both the cases of the birds in the animal park and the actors in *Josephine*, we are learning that color does not matter: it is not something you can control, and has no effect on your "inside growing" – or your friendships.

While skin color is never referenced within the narrative as a marker of individuality, other physical animal characteristics are: various body parts are mentioned, then put into their proper place with the repeated reassurance, "you're more than your trunk," "you're more than your neck," etc. No particular physical feature, whether a source of discomfort or pride, should be imbued with the power to determine one's entire self-worth. "You're more than any one body part" and "you're more than even the sum of your body parts—much more" Rogers concludes in the wrap-up to episode 1609.

Rogers' goal of racial equality was visible on the *Neighborhood* for its entire run. Francois Clemmons was cast during the program's inaugural season after Rogers heard him sing at church, and became the first African-American actor to hold a recurring role on a children's television show. Rogers was intent on having him play a friendly policeman in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

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<sup>36</sup> *MRN*, 1606, 11:45.

Clemmons was very reticent about taking on the role because of his experience with the police while growing up in inner-city Youngstown, Ohio. However, Rogers insisted it would be good to show a friendly African-American law enforcement officer in charge of maintaining order and safety in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.<sup>37</sup>

In May of 1969, amid tremendous controversy about segregated public swimming pools, Rogers sat down on a hot day in his Neighborhood and put his feet into a wading pool filled with cool water. When Officer Clemmons walked past, Rogers remarked upon the weather and invited him to join in, noting that even a few minutes of soaking your feet in water can be really refreshing on a hot day. Clemmons was initially hesitant because he didn't have a towel with him, but after Rogers suggested they share a towel, Clemmons accepted the invitation and removed his shoes. The two sit in quiet companionship, conversing amiably without ever audibly recognizing the atmosphere in the nation at the moment or drawing attention the tremendous significance of the visual message they were creating: two sets of feet, one white and one brown, immersed in the same pool of water.<sup>38</sup>

After Clemmons had departed the *Neighborhood* to pursue more extensive performance and touring with the Harlem Spiritual Ensemble, a group he

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<sup>37</sup> Michael G Long, *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 86.

<sup>38</sup> Long also describes this scene as an example of Rogers' stance on the racial tension of the time, page 89.

founded and directed, Rogers visited the Ensemble during a rehearsal.<sup>39</sup> In this segment, we once again see the two ideas reinforced simultaneously: the importance of rehearsal, and the similarity of all humans. Rogers enters a concert hall while the group's rehearsal is already in progress, then joins them onstage for introductions and discussion. Rogers moves around the piano as Clemmons introduces the African-American ensemble: three female singers, two male singers other than himself, the pianist, and the percussionist. Clemmons then announces that they're going to rehearse a song Rogers wrote, "When the Day Turns into Night," which pleases him very much.

In the course of three songs, we are shown works in very different stages of preparedness: when Rogers first arrived, the six singers had photocopied scores available, but lying on the piano, and rarely referenced them. When they begin to sing "When the Day Turns Into Night," they hold the scores up, and are obviously reading the song from them. At the end of the run-through, Clemmons says, "Very nice. There are some things we'll work on, but it's very nice," reinforcing the fact that this was not a polished performance, and more rehearsal will be coming. When the visit is over, Clemmons asks Rogers if he can stay and hear one song they'll be performing that night. The singers move in front of the piano, and Clemmons calls for the performance lighting. Thus, we are shown the difference between a song in rehearsal and one that is performance-ready.

Even more important than the implicit message about making music, though, is the explicit discussion of how all people around the world have the

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<sup>39</sup> *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 1635, "Mister Rogers Talks About Growing," PBS, March 1, 1991, written by Fred Rogers.

same experience of growing. After his song, Rogers asks Clemmons about some of the places that they have sung around the world, and Clemmons responds, “We’ve sung in Scandinavia ... Germany ... Korea twice, Italy...”<sup>40</sup> After some more discussion about the travel and people who attend the concerts, Rogers says, “I’m just interested in my friends knowing that in every country, babies grow up to be bigger children, and then teenagers, and then adults ... So really, all human beings grow in very much the same way, don’t they?”<sup>41</sup> The entire group nods and answers in the affirmative.

Rogers’ interest in or experience with positive race relations did not begin in 1969, however: his own childhood included a sharing his home with a teenage African-American young man, George Allen. He shared the story on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1993.

When I was three, this young man was just an early teenager, and his mother had died, and my mom and dad said “Come live with us.” And he turned out to be a real model for me. As a matter of fact, when I was in high school, he taught me how to fly, and right after that he went to teach at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and taught all of the black flyers in the country to fly in the Second World War. His name is George Allen, and he’s gonna be eighty this year, and I really admire him. So I had a black brother even then!<sup>42</sup>

This declaration was met with laughter and applause from Hall and the studio audience. His “brother” George was a positive influence in young Fred Rogers’ life, and when it came time to produce *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*, Rogers

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<sup>40</sup> MRN, 1635, 20:30.

<sup>41</sup> MRN, 1635, 21:05.

<sup>42</sup> Fred Rogers, on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, 1993, footage included in the documentary *Fred Rogers: America’s Favorite Neighbor*, hosted by Michael Keaton (Pittsburgh: The Fred Rogers Company, 2012), 12:30.

reflected his own childhood by having animals—and people—of different colors reside together, under the same roofs, as family.

## DISABILITY

Josephine's short neck is certainly a matter of personal dismay to her, and it is definitely an abnormality for a giraffe to have a short neck. Other animals in the story also have differences in their physical appearance or abilities that mark them as different from what is expected to be normal for their species.

The two elephantine teachers of the Attractive Active Animals class, Rosie and Posie, feature stripes and spots, respectively. When Josephine points out that elephants are not supposed to have stripes or spots, the elephants laugh off her comments and insist they are proud of the way they look. "My spots are like freckles," says Posie. "And we've always had stripes in our family," adds Rosie. "And besides, an elephant is more than just a skin."

Another member of the Attractive Active Animals class is Sam the Snake, who cannot hiss. He is saddened by this fact, but continues to practice, and is eventually successful after Josephine motivates him to scold her over her dejected response to her own situation. The physical abnormalities such as short neck, spots, stripes, and speech impediment represented as the inability to hiss discussed in this musical can all be considered physical disabilities, and could easily be understood as such by viewers struggling with their own unique physical challenges.

The *Neighborhood* had a number of visitors over the years who were experiencing a variety of challenges and disabilities, and Mister Rogers always

asked them about their lives and circumstances with sensitivity and kindness. A girl named Chrissy Thompson, in a recurring role as the McFeelys' granddaughter, demonstrated her crutches and leg braces, and even returned as an adult to discuss how she had been perceived. She emphasized her abilities rather than her disabilities, and related her plans to become a medical secretary.

Perhaps no exchange on disability was more memorable than when Jeff Erlanger came to visit. During a 1981 episode<sup>43</sup> discussing electric machines, including electric cars, ten-year-old quadriplegic Jeff Erlanger visited from Wisconsin to demonstrate his electric wheelchair, which he handled adeptly, manipulating a joystick with his left hand. He then spoke frankly with Rogers when asked about the reason that he needs a wheelchair: he had a spinal tumor at seven months old, which left him with nerve damage and unable to use his arms and legs. An operation to remove the tumor was unsuccessful in regaining use of his limbs, and even as recently as "earlier this summer," he had additional surgeries for ongoing stomach problems. Maintaining a positive spin on formidable circumstances, he concludes, "That just goes to show you have a lot of things happen to you when you're handicapped, most of the time—and sometimes when you're not handicapped." "Of course," Rogers agrees.

After a few minutes of unscripted conversation, Mister Rogers says that he would like to sing "It's You I Like" to and with his friend Jeff. Jeff agrees, and Rogers begins to sing, with Jeff joining him a few lines in. Rogers changes the line "It's not your toys" to "It's not your fancy chair" ("That's just beside you"),

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<sup>43</sup> *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Episode 1478, PBS, February 18, 1981, written by Fred Rogers. This episode does not have a specific title on the opening screen.

which makes Jeff break into a big smile. This scene is often noted as one of the most touching exchanges to ever take place on the *Neighborhood*. Erlanger even made a surprise visit when Rogers was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 1999. When Erlanger was announced and entered the stage, the 71-year-old Rogers leapt from his front-row seat and clambered right up onto the stage, bypassing the stairs in his haste to greet and hug his old friend.

Though Josephine's disfigurement is not a matter that affects her everyday life to the same extent that Erlanger's challenges do his (though she cannot reach the top leaves, lower leaves are still readily available), her story is an opportunity for children of all levels of ability to understand that difference is not necessarily a matter to be mourned; rather, uniqueness is to be celebrated. Rosie and Posie, despite Josephine's unkind words about their abnormalities, demonstrate pride over their identifiable features.

Josephine also learns that she is not the only one who deals with challenges, and it is all too easy to become jealous of another's situation. J.R. the Giraffe is the final participant in Attractive Active Animals class, and the final primary character facing a type of disability. He has also been struggling for some time with his own condition, which seems to be a combination of painful shyness and difficulties with speech. He is unable to speak in groups, and practices phrases assigned to him by Rosie and Posie in an effort to overcome this condition. Josephine can only see in him what she lacks and longs for: a long, beautiful neck. Thus, she is jealous of J.R. while also insensitive to his self-consciousness. Meanwhile, he cannot understand her obsession with her appearance when she finds self-expression so easy. J.R.'s narrative is a

combination of two important *Neighborhood* messages: the inherent value of each person, regardless of individual difficulties, and the power of music.

### THE POWER OF MUSIC

In a plot point not unheard of in real life, J.R.'s only consistent and effective means of self-expression is in music—specifically, in making instrumental music. We see reflections of Rogers' childhood in this character who lacks both close friends and the ability to easily process and express his emotions, but proves to be a virtuoso on a keyboard instrument. In J.R.'s case, the instrument is a hoof-organ, the several-foot-long molded keyboard described earlier. When J.R. "plays" the hoof-organ, he grows visibly more comfortable, coming alive as the song continues, and eventually embodying real showmanship, dancing on and around the hoof-organ in his performance. His musical transformation is accompanied on trombone by the music teacher Miss Mongrel and witnessed by Hazel the Elephant.

A non-expert might be tempted, without being intentionally flippant, to label J.R. as an example of an autistic-savant. The apparent change in personality is remarkable between his attempts at conversation and his unselfconscious abandon when finally allowed to engage in his favorite activity, making music. However, he does show some real progress in his non-musical life through the process of music-making. For this reason I would say that a stronger interpretation of the hoof-organ scene and J.R.'s overall narrative is that he was engaging in a kind of music therapy, which used music to solve a non-musical problem.

The change in J.R.'s demeanor during this scene really is remarkable, and indeed the other characters remark upon it. Hazel, not exactly the paragon of tact, speaks to Miss Mongrel about J.R. while he is standing beside her: "J.R. is very good on the hoof-organ, but he doesn't talk much, does he?" Miss Mongrel explains in response that this behavior is not exactly unique for him: "J.R. has always been shy, except when he plays his music."

Since *Josephien* is a musical production, all the main characters sing. Josephine's recurring song is not therapeutic for her; in fact, it appears to be quite the opposite, merely reinforcing her existing negative self-image. The song she eventually joins Hazel in singing is much more helpful: "You're much more than a neck," etc. However, while this song appears in the musical and in Roger's living room, and is useful for affirmation, it still functions as a plot device within the narrative arc. "Attractive Active Animals" and "We Are Elephants," on the other hand, are both examples of musical declarations of self for their title characters.

What sets J.R.'s big scene apart—and so closely allies him with Rogers' own childhood—is the fact that he does not sing. His positive change does not come from repeating a self-affirming mantra, whether set to music or not, but in actually making instrumental music. In addition, he undertakes this experience both as a solo, then as part of an ensemble. The individual portion was necessary for demonstrating his change from debilitating shyness to a practiced musician—again it is emphasized that he has practiced before he performs!—confident enough to play for an audience. When he is joined by the music teacher, we can see that he is living in community, with a support system of individuals that know

him well enough to create music together. The unseen jazz ensemble then enters, and we are given to understand that his available network is larger even than the characters encouraging him on screen.

At the end of the hoof-organ episode, after feeding the fish, and by way of conclusion, Rogers calls our attention back to this scene. He reminds his viewers that we can pretend anything, then says, “It’s fun for me to think about J.R. Giraffe... that shy giraffe playing that hoof-organ so well.” Taking the giraffe toy from the basket on the bench, he makes the toy animals bounce in his hand and up his arm, then continues, “Remember when he was jumping around, and it was like, “You’re much more than a neck, and you’re much more than a trunk....”

Daniel Striped Tiger is often said to be one of Rogers’ most autobiographical characters, and J.R. Giraffe certainly fills the same role in the story of *Josephine*. Rogers so often described himself as a shy young man who could only find solace and self-expression at the keyboard, and we see here that J.R. share those characteristics. The idea that J.R. is modeled after Rogers himself is further confirmed when we hear J.R.’s second piece, written by Rogers’ favorite composer, Bach.

## CHANGES AND NAME CHANGES

J.R. the Giraffe and Wicked Knife and Fork may appear on the surface to have very few things in common, but both of their operas end with tremendous changes: both characters experience major personal growth, and commemorate/cement that internal change by changing their own names. Wicked Knife and Fork, we will recall, has been called Wicked, but did not really

wish to be wicked—at least, once he has been shown kindness by his former adversaries, he does not wish to be wicked any more. *Spoon Mountain* ends before we find out what his new name will be, but the commitment by the entire cast to help him find out what his name is leaves the viewer reassured that the change will be imminent and positive.

J.R., by contrast, has been kind all along, but in the course of the seen and sung narrative has also experienced a major change of personality and personal ability. He then tells Josephine, “You can call me Jack.” No further explanation is given for this decision, but Josephine complies with his request. Presumably, Jack or John could be the name represented by the J in J.R., but why was he called J.R. all along? It could have been that his given name (or preferred name) was Jack all along, but he lacked the self-confidence to inform his teachers and peers of his preference, despite the fact that they would have undoubtedly complied. Of course, he might have had no problem with being called J.R. his entire life, but wished to mark the notable change in himself by requesting to be called Jack instead. Whether the name represents the change (he felt “like a new person” and wished to be called something different to reinforce the fact) or the change facilitates the name (he was finally able to voice his preference after all), we know that something about Jack is definitely different than before.

The power of naming is a tremendous power indeed, and to name oneself is to enact self-actualization in a very specific way. Rogers’ willingness to give his characters the power to re-name themselves is another example of the self-ownership and self-actualization he consistently championed. The fact that Wicked Knife and Fork and J.R. hold the ability to make such a fundamental

change once again reinforces the idea that no one owns their bodies or minds, and no one can control their thoughts, dreams, or identity. It is imperative in these cases that the other characters readily accept the changes, and in fact they do. These two name-changing characters are quite different from one another, and that in itself is also significant: we see that one does not have to be “wicked” to begin with in order to benefit from personal change and growth, and at the same time wickedness does not nullify one’s right to self-determination.

We can see reflections of Fred Rogers in his characters, especially the shy and sensitive male animals like Daniel and J.R. / Jack. As discussed in Chapter 2, Rogers crafted a gentle masculinity in an era when such a personality was neither the norm nor the expectation. He modeled an alternative masculinity, and also assured his audience that they were special exactly as they were. He emphasized this message consistently through pointed discussion, Make-Believe segments, and most spectacularly, in *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*.

Mister Rogers is widely considered one of the most pedantic characters ever to grace the small screen. He slowly and carefully explained away fears that most grownups did not even remember having, and therefore would not consider talking through with their children. Who but Mister Rogers would know that baths can be scary not because of the water but because of the possibility of being sucked down the drain? Hospitals are unfamiliar, scary places, and having an x-ray taken can be very hard on a child, but very few adults would realize that a child’s panic over having a picture taken of the inside of their chests or heads could be motivated by the fear of having people see their thoughts or feelings? Rogers’ viewers learned from him precisely how all manner of things work,

including mechanical processes and ideal interpersonal interactions. However, when it came to big issues such as racial equality, Rogers chose to simply model and depict healthy relationships, foregoing the pedagogical discussion—or even acknowledging the fact that inter-racial animal families, African-American policemen, or two friends sharing a wading pool on a hot day might be somehow out of the ordinary.

It is interesting that he treats music in much the same way: we do not hear from Mister Rogers information like “you need a librettist” or “to make a REAL opera you have to have recitative” or even “a quarter note gets one beat—now let’s clap this together.” He also does not say “Mister Costa is improvising all this music just for you,” or even “I wrote this opera, and I hope you enjoy it,” and he definitely never implies that “you’re a more enlightened child now that you appreciate opera.” Instead, opera as personal expression and collaborative creativity were simply modeled by him, just like his friendship with Francois Clemmons.

It is almost as if the things very most dear to his heart received the least technical explanations. I in no way intend to imply that opera is as important to Rogers or anyone else as racial equality and positive interactions amongst a variety of people. I do recognize, however, that both were very dear to Rogers’ heart, and in some ways there are parallels in the way he chose to present them: as normal, and without extensive commentary. The fact that music can be useful in the goals of communication with others—whether they are similar to us, or different—was another attitude that did not require explanation, when it could simply be caught. Making these positive attitudes—about race, disability,

increasing maturity, and self-acceptance— “catchable” was the goal and success of *Josephine the Short-Neck Giraffe*.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### “I TOTALLY TOOK YOUR ADVICE, MISTER ROGERS”: AUDIENCE REPOSE FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

Having invested a great deal of time, creative energy, perseverance through tedium, and problem-solving through various challenges, Fred Rogers was able to complete his project, and air his operas. Still, the question remains: was it successful? Was he able to communicate his message that opera is for everyone, or did his audience already “know” that opera is boring, suitable only for old rich people, before he got to them? Did the works inspire any sort of response in kind—a rash of children across America inventing sung narratives for their own entertainment, playing and singing about their feelings, as Mister Rogers recommended? The short answer, I believe, is yes: Fred Rogers was successful in incorporating his own musical education, professional experience, and love of opera into simple, whimsical, sophisticated, sincere, and downright fun operas for his audience. Insofar as the preschoolers in his nationwide neighborhood can be relied upon to self-report their reactions in fan mail to their trusted friend, we can assume that they loved it.

Since the *Neighborhood* viewers tuned in daily as a matter of habit, normal television statistics such as Nielsen ratings are not useful in determining whether the operas received greater viewership than any other given episode. Mister Rogers was not setting goals for sweeps week, or creating musical

spectaculars in order to draw a record-breaking audience. He even stated that he was not concerned about the numbers of children watching: as long as one child was helped, his work had been worthwhile. It is interesting that Nancy Ross, normally the crossword creator for the Metropolitan Opera Company's *Opera News* publication, took an interest in Rogers' operas and wrote an article about them, complete with interviews. This lone article does prove that fans of "real" opera did have the opportunity to be exposed to the daytime PBS broadcasts. It also appears that her association with the subject grew from her son's devotion to the *Neighborhood's* opera episodes. Other than this example, we know precious little about audience response from the press, and since ratings tell us nothing about the audience's interest in a given episode, we must depend on the children and their parents to make their opinions known. It takes initiative, especially on the part of a young child, to write a letter to a figure only familiar from television. Fortunately, they did so.

Fred Rogers was famously attentive to his fan mail: each child received a response, some penned by Hedda Sharapan but all edited and approved by Mister Rogers himself. Many of them begin, "How nice it is to know you from your letter!" In his Emmy TV Legends interview, Rogers addressed his mail: "It's my prime responsibility, answering mail. It's the only way people have of letting us know how they feel about what we're doing."<sup>1</sup> Indeed it was the only avenue for communication from viewer to host, and let him know they did!

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Rogers, interview by Karen Herman, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), part 9 of 9, 16:30. <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

In a box labeled “Fan Mail: Operas” at the Fred Rogers Center Archive, I found evidence of the response the mostly pre-literate audience had upon watching the operas, and it was overwhelmingly positive. Accompanied by drawings of themselves, Mister Rogers, themselves with Mister Rogers, their houses, his house, a nickel, a granola recipe, and a variety of undecipherable scribbles, these letters express delight at some opera or another that had recently aired. Parents wrote in as well: in beautiful flowing script or neatly typewritten missives, mothers also shared how much they personally enjoyed the productions. Of course, a large number claim to be a joint effort: “I’m writing this exactly as my child dictates.” The dictated examples often betray a toddler’s attention span, moving immediately from “I love the Laundromat opera” to “I have two fish,” or sharing about a new baby, a favorite color, or a recent potty-training success. Many of the correspondents proclaim their affections (“I love you!” opens and/or closes a great many letters) and issue an invitation for Mister Rogers to join them at their home, school, or church.

The parents’ notes are more specific, of course, asking when a particular opera was slated to be broadcast again (or asking that one enter the rotation soon), inquiring about purchasing audio or video recordings, and asking questions about the music, whether they purchase scores, or requesting details about the words or harmonies to a favorite song. Many refer to the fact that their children watch the operas with great interest—and repeatedly, when given the opportunity. One mother wrote,

I was terribly impressed with the Bubbleland Opera you showed this week. More importantly, my 22-month-old daughter watched it twice and was glued to the set both times. She is not a television

viewer normally—this really entertained her. She still talks about it. Also, I was amazed at how much she understood.<sup>2</sup>

Another, speaking of her 2½-year-old, included, “As for your ‘Bubbleland’ opera and your more recent ‘Josephine the Short-Necked Giraffe’ opera, she watched and hardly moved a muscle, her interest was so great.”<sup>3</sup> Still others from the 1980s and 1990s say they had managed to record operas when they aired and their children watched them over and over, to the point of memorization. “They have it memorized!” and “I can sing the songs by myself” are not uncommon claims in these letters. One child was fortunate to have received a video recording from Family Communications, and sent a note in response: “I received the tape of Bubbleland Opera today. I have already played it twice. Thank you very much. You have made me very happy. God bless you.”<sup>4</sup> Even without the benefit of recordings, some children tracked the number of times they have seen the broadcasts air. One young fan (“typed verbatim by Mommy”) ticked them off:

We have seen the Potato Bug opera about 3 times and Bubbleland about 3 times, and Wicked Knife and Fork and A Star for Kitty about twice each. We’ve seen the Laundrymat opera only once in the four years we’ve been watching Mr. Rogers. ... We’ve seen Daniel Tiger looking for his grandfather at least twice. You’ve talked about one opera where someone gets frozen into some kind of snow person, but we’ve never seen it in four years. Could you please put it on?<sup>5</sup>

Others treated the program, and its operas, as truly interactive, making specific requests or suggestions. When Rogers left *Spoon Mountain* with the

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<sup>2</sup> Personal Letter to Fred Rogers [excerpt] from L.

<sup>3</sup> Personal letter to Fred Rogers [excerpt] from N.

<sup>4</sup> Personal Letter to Hedda Sharapan [excerpt] from P.

<sup>5</sup> Personal letter to Fred Rogers [excerpt] from A.

unresolved question of what Wicked Knife and Fork's new name would be, he received many suggestions in the mail. One child enjoyed *Cows and Potato Bugs* so much that he wanted a sequel also featuring Priscilla Cow and Horatio Potato Bug. Some recommendations were purely original, such as "Could you have a mouse in your next opera. I like mice" from a 2½-year-old or "I want you to do a dinosaur opera. I have a book about dinosaurs" from a 4-year-old.

Still others commented positively on the preparation and the anticipation it built, such as one mother whose 2 and 4½-year-olds tuned in daily.

I like the way you investigate things. I especially enjoyed, along with the children, the opera and the daily preparations that led up to it. It was an outstanding introduction to a cultural type of production. You often have cultural type of programs, but this one was so outstanding that I had to take the time to write and tell you. My children were looking forward to the opera on Friday almost as much as I was. It was great!<sup>6</sup>

Nancy Ross' *Opera News* profile also mentioned the introductory material, quoting Hedda Sharapan, "By introducing the arias early in the week, we get the children in our audience so familiar with the melodies that they even sing along during the opera."

And so they do. My own four-year-old, emulating Reardon, tried to teach his stuffed tiger to sing 'Quack' on A for his role as a duck in one opera. It didn't work, because the home tiger lacked Rogers' behind-the-scenes voice, but it was fun. When asked which of Mister Rogers' operas was their favorite, my little boy and one of his playmates couldn't agree. 'My favorite,' said one child, 'is the opera about pineapples and tomatoes.' That's one in which Reardon played the part of the assistant to the president of the Pineapple Can Telephone Company. *You figure that one out. ... 'No,'* insisted the other children, 'the best opera is the one about the whaling captain, when Lady Aberlin lost her teddy bear and wailed and wailed and wailed.' Other favorites included the opera in which Reardon appeared as an unsuccessful organ grinder, and one in

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<sup>6</sup> Personal letter to Fred Rogers [excerpt] from K.

which a leading character lived in a windmill and was named Donkey Hodie.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, not all of his fan mail mentioned his operas. Sharing from the recently-released book *Dear Mister Rogers, Does it Ever Rain in Your Neighborhood?* during an interview with Charlie Rose in 1997, Rogers cited a boy who had written in for advice.

‘The baby came to live at our house. I like her sometimes. Sometimes I want to sock her.’ We talked with him—this little boy’s name was Taylor, and he was three years old at that time, and we talked to him about what it means to be able to say that you’re angry—I mean, he was able to do that. And I wrote back and told him that playing the piano loudly and swimming very fast helped me with my mad feelings. And I want you to know he is now a teenager, and he wrote to us the other day and said, ‘I totally took your advice, Mister Rogers. I swim on the swim team and play the piano.’ I was so proud of that.<sup>8</sup>

Taylor was not the only viewer to take Mister Rogers’ advice to heart, however—or to follow his example. The prospect that children were inspired by him was what made all the effort worthwhile, he said in 1999:

What if this person who is watching is somehow moved to do something of value because of what you’ve put on the air? That’s so much more important than the numbers, the millions of people who are tuned in.<sup>9</sup>

The “something of value” he spoke of surely took many forms: he was proud of any act of kindness, any improvement in patience or self-control. He was also

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Ross, “Make-Believe Opera,” *Opera News* 37 (January 13, 1973): 9.

<sup>8</sup> Fred Rogers, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, May 5, 1997, 23:10.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Rogers, “Fred Rogers,” *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), part 3 of 9, 19:30.  
<http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/fred-rogers>.

proud of creativity, whether it took the form of creative play, problem-solving, producing art ... or writing an opera.

The fan mail expressing interest and delight in Rogers' operas certainly must have been exciting for him, and it provides evidence of success for the first of his goals, to present opera as enjoyable and accessible. Still, there were other letters that told an even more fascinating story: a story of preschoolers who watched Mister Rogers, and subsequently wrote an opera themselves. One child, at 3½, saw a Rogers opera, adapted the story for his own purposes, and sent a copy to the original composer.

Last week my son [M] (age 3½ yrs) and I watched your opera 'Potato Bugs and Cows.' We loved it! When it was over, [M] wanted to make his own opera book, so he drew some pictures, then told me who they were so that I could write their names on them. He also changed the story a little to make it his own. Somehow his story included a Mommy Mouse, a mouse with curly hair and a boat with wheels! We thought you might enjoy it!<sup>10</sup>

All evidence indicates that Mister Rogers did enjoy it. He often cited letters outlining original operatic projects as his favorites, beginning as early as 1973.

Fred Rogers has his own favorite among the audience responses to his television operas: the script and melodies for yet another opera, created by a six-year-old child whose mother wrote it down, words and music, as the child dictated it to her. That boy may not be an infant Mozart, but he should at least become a member of tomorrow's opera public.<sup>11</sup>

When Rogers gave a speech "on the occasion of his receiving an Honorary Doctor of Human Letters from Thiel College, Greenville, Pennsylvania" on November 13, 1969, he chose "Encouraging Creativity" as the topic of his speech,

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<sup>10</sup> Personal letter to Fred Rogers [excerpt] from M.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, 9.

and used another such child as an example. Just as he often cited live musical productions as the height of beneficial television programming, it would appear that he found the composition of an original opera to be the height of personal creativity. He began,

Last week I received a large envelope from Dallas, Texas. It was from the manager of the television station which shows our programs in that part of the country. His letter was attached to eleven pages of music paper and started out by saying: 'Enclosed please find an opera, no less, written by a six-year-old viewer who was inspired by your programs.' And there it was: a little boy's opera about an owl and a tiger and a King and an archeologist who discover that what others thought was a monster was really just a blinking flashlight caught in a tunnel. Can you imagine how I felt when I read through those pages of simple chants and age-appropriate themes? An opera by a six year old! Of course his mother had written the words and the notes on the music paper for him and the characters are one with which he visits via our program every day—but the opera is his. He wanted to make one and someone encouraged him to try.<sup>12</sup>

Rogers is obviously deflecting praise here. Of course the child's mother was involved in the recording process; still, who but Mister Rogers encouraged the boy to write an opera in the first place?

Finally, we have the case of almost-3-year-old Joycelin, whose mother penned a letter to Mister Rogers in 1986 (and who has granted her permission for me to use her name and her story). A portion of the original letter follows:

I have enclosed a copy of an opera Joycelin wrote as a direct result of your encouragement. You once spent a week writing an opera in the neighborhood. At the end of one of your episodes you said 'Perhaps you can write an opera of your own.' Joycelin came to me with wide eyes of excitement asking to help her write an opera.

She was just 2 1/2 at the time. What is enclosed is the finished product of weeks of working together. The story is truly hers. I

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<sup>12</sup> Fred Rogers, *Encouraging Creativity*, November 13, 1969, 1.

wrote it down for her, and periodically kept her ‘on track’ and only embellished once during the king’s dialog.

After it was written, we made costumes very simply out of paper and felt (mostly just hats) and performed it for the family at Thanksgiving.

I found it interesting that after performing our opera, the other children spent the next couple of hours taking turn being the different characters and re-enacting the opera; remembering most of the dialog (with Joycelin correcting them if they were wrong).

A little background: Joycelin said nobody could be the pink monster because he was too scary. My guess is that this becomes very real to her and she didn’t want anybody she loved to become scary. Joycelin’s Memere (the princess) has a rock garden that she and Joycelin spend a lot of special time in together during the summer.

I thought you would enjoy sharing this with us. We are very proud of Joycelin and thought you would enjoy sharing the fruits of your encouragement. Keep up the GREAT work you do on Mr. Rogers Neighborhood.<sup>13</sup>

Enclosed with this letter was the outline of an opera, carefully typed, which included a pink monster, a fairy princess, and a rock garden.

As always, Rogers responded with encouragement and genuine pleasure at hearing about the creative work Joycelin had done, also acknowledging the nurturing family environment that had facilitated her imagination.

Your mother wrote and told me about your family. I was glad to know you from her letter.

It was especially exciting for me to know you made up your own opera. What good ideas you have! And how wonderful that you are growing up in a family that is proud of your ideas and that enjoys that kind of play!

It was interesting to hear about your opera now because this week we are working on our new opera. It is for our week on Celebrations. The opera will be on Friday, May 9. I wondered what kind of opera you might make up about Celebrations? There certainly are many things to celebrate – and one thing that makes

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<sup>13</sup> Personal letter to Fred Rogers [excerpt] from A.

me feel like celebrating is hearing from your family about what our program means to you all. You are special!<sup>14</sup>

Although *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* has now been off the air for fifteen years, creative productions inspired by it continue. Two very recent projects that take the *Neighborhood* as their starting point include Billy Mullaney's live theater project *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, presented August 2015 in Minneapolis, and a meeting of the 2MF collective, January 2016, in New York City. According to the follow-up podcast,

2MF is a monthly, ambivalently professionalized, pro-emotive, and ... anti-academic monthly gathering. ... It operates as a vehicle for discussion, which happens here as well as in our meetings, that circle and depart from texts and content chosen by facilitating artists. ... 2MF uses texts and readings as both a site of departure and a lens for interpreting and living through contemporary issues, particularly within the arts. We focus on content that is personally relevant to the lived experience, and encourage and approach those reflective, analytic, and vulnerable.<sup>15</sup>

Bethany Ides was the facilitating artist for 2MF's January 2016 meeting.

According to her website, Ides:

sets precarious parameters wherein roles & resources play actors & places as if everything extends itself uncertainly. In 2014, she founded DOORS UNLIMITED, a roving vessel for investigative operatics that proliferates communitarian-collaborative strategies for provisional-conditional experimenting with/in soap opera, encampment opera, opera-within-opera, telephonic inter-drama, dismantlement, dialectics, days & nights & both as neither, near-death, opera in bed, opera in spite of itself, opera in excess of itself, ante-institutional operatic allusions, elations, protrusions, performance, sticks, schools, stone squares, soggy cereal blankets, very long songs, backlog, tending tender tendencies, like water, underwater, fake hair, carpet squares, contact paper, play mats, flooded currency, fluidity, liquid plumber, uncertainty.

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<sup>14</sup> Response to Joycelin from Fred Rogers

<sup>15</sup> "2MF with Bethany Ides," *Clocktower Radio Profiles*, 1:12.  
<http://clocktower.org/drupal/play/13070/>

Her multi-phasic, month-long opera, *Transient's Theme*, premiered at the Knockdown Center in 2014, following a 2-month connective-convective convocation or composition involving 80 participants at a campground in the Catskills. Ides' performance or installation-as-proposition work has also been presented for/at Mandragoras Art Space (MAAS), Fragmental Museum, St. Marks Poetry Project, St. Francis College, Dixon Place, the Brooklyn Museum, & the Gershwin Hotel (as if there is only New York), but also lots of other places in other cities, & for BOMB Magazine's Instagram account. Additionally, she co-curates occasional festivals that often have an air of counter-purpose to them, co-writes articles on minor peculiarities related to sound or film, co-edits a series of fugitive anthologies, harmonizes readily, & partners in movement with wonderful, really wonderful people for real & wonderful occasions too starry to count out because they are lit gleaming enough, luckily, to constitute really gladness. She is perennial artist-in-residence at the Prattville Art Center & soon also at SenseLab in Montreal. Ides teaches at Pratt, Bard, SVA, & SUNY-Albany, & is being taught a lot.<sup>16</sup>

Since facilitating artists for 2MF are asked to “provide supplemental materials to provide context for the points of meaning,” Ides selected Stephen Connor's essay “Collective Emotions: Reasons to Feel Doubtful” and Fred Rogers' opera *Spoon Mountain*. She explains:

I chose *Spoon Mountain* opera from Fred Rogers because it's my favorite of the *Mister Rogers* operas. He composed something like fifteen of these operas that he also co-produced over the course of this show, forty-some years on the air. And I'm interested in ... Fred Rogers' operas because I think they provide a model for communitarian, collective composition, in terms of this opera engagement that's more of a community liminal ritual, as opposed to something that's an aesthetic product or even enterprise.<sup>17</sup>

Ides goes on to define opera as far more inclusive than any conception examined here, noting that “opera is just the plural of opus, meaning work.” However, the

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<sup>16</sup> “Who,” <http://bethanyidesprojects.blogspot.com>

<sup>17</sup> Bethany Ides, “2MF with Bethany Ides,” 3:56.

very twenty-first century concept of collective composition was indeed pioneered by Rogers as early as the 1960s.

Billy Mullaney's current work is not engaging directly with the operas, but it is an example of live theatrical performance. According to his website,

Billy Mullaney is a Minneapolis-based contemporary artist rigorously and empirically intervening in the conventions and practices of spectatorship in the fields of theater, choreography and performance art. Beginning by theorizing models of how audiences watch art based on various representational and aesthetic practices, Billy proposes changes to specific elements in these models, manifesting them in performances intended to push against assumed ontological boundaries of discipline, engagement and aesthetics.<sup>18</sup>

"Interested in the idea of staging 'found texts,' Mullaney performed *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, a verbatim staging of a full half-hour episode of the eponymous television show (#1718: 'Be Yourself, That's the Best'). The episode features Rogers' visit to a string quartet and a trip to the neighborhood of make-believe."<sup>19</sup>

While Ides was inspired by Rogers' portrayal of collaborative composition to explore the limits of original collective composition, Mullaney was inspired by Rogers' own persona on the *Neighborhood* and chose to re-create it exactly. Ed Huyck's review of the performance is entitled "Don't Expect a Ride on the Irony Trolley in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*," and begins,

Billy Mullaney wants you to know that his recreation of episode 1718 of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, 'Be Yourself, That's the Best,' is not meant as some kind of ironic, hipster ransacking of a beloved childhood show. Instead, it's a straight-on interpretation, complete with trolley, the Neighborhood of Make Believe, and a live fish onstage. 'Mr. Rogers is an anachronism. It is simultaneously very

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<sup>18</sup> Billy Mullaney, "Billy Mullaney," <http://www.billymullaney.com>.

<sup>19</sup> Billy Mullaney, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, <http://www.billymullaney.com/mr-rogers-neighborhood.html>.

conservative and also super radical in an age of irony and cynicism and the like. Whenever I have the show, the audience expects to see a punchline. When it isn't coming, that is very telling of what we expect,' Mullaney says.<sup>20</sup>

Matthew A. Everett also reviewed the performance for the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, and his observation that the show was, in a way, hard to watch is quite telling.

Mullaney makes full use of the Open Eye Figure Theater stage to give us a low-tech recreation of a full episode of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. ... Tackling this character without irony for a full half hour is more of a challenge than you might expect in our sarcastic 21st century. Mullaney describes Fred Rogers' kindness as 'anachronistic' and that is both sad, and very true. Mr. Rogers also gets a call from some musician friends – here, the Lux String Quartet of Erika Olson Bianco, Sam Rudy, Benjamin Davis, and Lars Krogstad Ortiz – and goes to visit them in their studio.

Along the way, Mullaney as Rogers questions and explains things so patiently and simply, it doesn't seem like he's exercising a great deal of patience at all. This gentleness of personality is built into the fabric of the show. Mullaney also channels Rogers' sense of wonder and appreciation of things that we quite easily take for granted. Again, judging by the laughter of the audience, some laughing with him, but others I think laughing at him, maintaining that demeanor without winking at the audience is harder than you think. And taking it in, in the spirit in which it's intended, is perhaps equally hard. We keep waiting for the punch line that never comes. Rogers is genuinely interested in the well-being and the self-esteem and growing, questioning minds of children. He engages his audience of neighbors not by talking down to them, but by giving them credit for being able to learn, and maybe even talk about things (like going to the hospital) which might scare them.

A little oasis of songs, mischief with puppets, and an adult's full undivided attention – it seems like such a simple concept, but not everyone can execute it with such care. Fred Rogers did it for over 30 years, almost until the very end of his life. Mr. Rogers and the TV show he's known for have been gone for over ten years now.

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<sup>20</sup> Ed Huyck, "Don't Expect a Ride on the Irony Trolley in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*," *citypages.com*, August 13, 2015.  
<http://www.citypages.com/arts/dont-expect-a-ride-on-the-irony-trolley-in-mr-rogers-neighborhood-7559658>

The fact that Mullaney is taking up Fred Rogers' mantle – complete with comfy red sweater and a pair of sneakers – seems both strange, and an oddly perfect fit. This word for word evocation of another brand of storytelling and performer addressing an audience is a fascinating experiment. The longer Mullaney stays in character, the more the audience has an opportunity to relax, let its guard down, and genuinely visit Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. Eric Mayson's piano playing is perfectly in the spirit of the original, and a marvel to listen to – a great supporting player following Rogers through his day. Mullaney also has able support in creating this world from Eric Larson, Rachel Petrie, and Jane Rennick.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that these two performance experiences have taken place so close to one another indicates that there is a renewed interest in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, from the perspective of creative artists as well as scholars.

Parodies also continue: though Johnny Carson and Eddie Murphy may have the most memorable parodies of Mister Rogers, even as recently as May 2016, Seth Rogen, Zac Efron, and Chloe Grace Moretz starred in a two-minute “Mister Rogen's Neighbors” production as a promotion for their new movie, *Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising*. Like the others, Rogen's version features an adult pandering to the implied child audience—and this time, he is yelling at his costars for not playing along properly.

Besides encouraging performances in recent days, whether actors produce sincere re-creations or parody of his actual work or artists are inspired by his encouragement to seek new artistic expression, Rogers has also provided encouragement for scholarly pursuits. Amy Hollingsworth shared one such story:

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew A. Everett, “Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood and That'swhatshesaid takes your brain to places you weren't expecting to go,” *Twin Cities Daily Planet* August 15, 2015. <http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/theater-review-mr-rogers-neighborhood-thatswhatshesaid-take-brain-places-werent-expecting-go/>

Cathy Larson Sky, a musicologist and musician in Chapel Hill, North Carolina ... wrote him a letter—after his death. Cathy’s story began when she was in her late forties and finding it difficult to wrap up the work for her masters’ degree. She had completed the research for her thesis, but the prospect of committing it to paper—and exposing it to the scrutiny of advisers and colleagues—proved daunting. What she perceived at first to be laziness, she says, after applying for several extensions, grew to be ‘more akin to terror.’ Attached to the completion of her degree were some childhood fears about being the ‘smart girl’ and some adult fears about the lovability of intelligent women: ‘Achieving meant being disliked and sometimes being hurt.’ ... She turned on the television looking for distractions. She found Mister Rogers. ‘He was making a greeting card out of construction paper, carefully cutting pictures out of a magazine, planning how to paste them nicely and what message he would write. Then he looked directly into the camera and said, ‘It’s fun when you have a project. You have an idea for something you want to do, and then think about how you want to do it. It takes a lot of planning. I know it’s hard work, and I’m so proud of you for trying.’ Mister Rogers’ gentle words sent a beam of light into the darkened room in my spirit when I’d been hiding in fear. I cried like a child that morning, snuggled in the La-Z-Boy by the TV, feeling old hurts melting away.’ He had said exactly what she needed to hear ... Cathy began to watch every day. ‘It was uncanny how the simple messages of acceptance and encouragement helped me to write and be productive. I would almost hold my breath while Fred sang his songs, for so often they soothed some tender place in my heart.’<sup>22</sup>

To some extent, I know how she feels. I am happy to say that, through the course of my research, though the work itself was hard and tedious as research tends to be, I never grew tired of the subject matter—or of watching Mister Rogers. In fact, I may be the only mom ever who has spent the first year of her child’s life trying desperately to get him to nap so I can watch Mister Rogers by myself. I was pleased and impressed to find that, the more I read and listened to and about Fred Rogers, the more substance I found in his message—and his music. The operas stood up to re-watching, and to scrutiny. More than standing

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<sup>22</sup> Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, 40.

up, though, I found that they revealed more depth and substance as I asked more questions of them. Each one is different; many are gently and humorously unpredictable, but they carry important messages, as well, in the way that only music can.

Everyone I had contact with who knew and worked with Fred Rogers said that his music and operas were his favorite and most meaningful parts of his work, and they were glad someone was doing research on that aspect of his creative output. I am grateful to have been able to spend this time doing that work. I hope to see additional work in this area in the future, and with the recent musicological interest in children's musical experiences, I trust this will be the case.

For the sake of limiting the scope of this particular project, I did not include any interviews or oral history components here, but I have made a few contacts in the course of my research, and I believe that for additional work in this area I would be able to speak with actors, musicians, producers, and perhaps even Mrs. Rogers about their experience producing these operas, which would bring an additional dimension to the commentary. In addition, there are several other operas that I have not yet covered in detail. Because the archival materials available are different for each opera, it could be possible to bring different treatments to some of the other middle period works, including a commentary on compositional history and revisions.

Joycelin, the 2½-year-old composer whose opera featured the unfilled role of a pink monster, is now a mother herself. When I found her and asked about

her ongoing artistic experiences, and the creative influence the *Neighborhood* had during her formative years, she had the following to say:

I absolutely LOVE Mr. Rogers and my mom and I talk about my opera to this day, haha. Without a doubt Fred Rogers laid a foundation for my creative pathways and my current work in young-adult ministry. His encouraging style and approach was formative in my young years and I am even more enthralled with his work today as an adult. I now get to watch his programs again with my own 3 ½ year old daughter, who is equally enthralled by Josephine the short-necked giraffe and the ‘we are elephants’ song 😊

While I didn’t pursue music professionally, music has always continued to be a part of my life. I played in the orchestra for 8 years in school, and then in high school and college sang in competitive acappella groups. Art was always my creative preference, and went on to pursue a BA in Art Education at Emmanuel College in Boston. During my time there, I even got to meet Fred Rogers when he accepted his WHEEL award from Wheelock College in 2002. I told him about my opera and how he laid the foundation for my desire to be an art teacher and encourage other’s creativity.

After teaching art for 3 years, I felt more drawn to work in spiritual formation with young adults and got a MA in Ministry from Boston College. No doubt Fred Rogers’ ministry style has played a continued role in my work in this field as well. Needless to say, I am still a HUGE fan...he is one of my greatest role-models to this day.<sup>23</sup>

It would be impossible to estimate, let alone prove definitively, how many lives Fred Rogers influenced during his broadcast career. As he always said, however, he didn’t even care what the number was, even if it was only one. He also said that children learn best when they see an adult simply enjoying what they do. While maintaining a non-hierarchical endorsement of all music, Rogers still found a way to enjoy what he truly loved on camera, and his enthusiasm was undeniably influential on his audience. Fred Rogers loved music, and children,

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<sup>23</sup> Joycelin Raho, email to the author, May 2, 2016.

and whimsy. He worked hard at what he did, whether it was earning a degree in music, producing opera on NBC, or creating PBS' longest-running children's series centered around a persona that everyone who knew him insisted was not an act. He taught innumerable lessons to his neighbors, but none was so important as the message that each person is unique and special. He also offered tools for self-discovery and self-expression, emphasizing healthy ways to know and share your feelings. He wanted each child to develop their own method of creative expression, and he continued to develop his own.

Fred Rogers' operas are a delight. They communicate deep truths while reflecting his own life experience and introducing children to an otherwise rather lofty genre in digestible 30-minute portions. Above all, he offered the best of his musical self to the children he chose to serve. He believed that they deserved the highest quality of programming and relationships, and his operas offered both.

While Rogers was determined to "do his best" on every episode of his *Neighborhood*, he understood through a lifetime of experience, education, and effort the unique narrative and emotional power of music. Composers reveal something of themselves in their music, and Rogers was never one to hold back from his television friends. His operas lie at the nexus of the things he cared about most: emotions, children, and music. When the three came together, he gave the best of himself, and left it all on the stage. Fortunately, we still have them all on tape.

When offered the opportunity to give his final thoughts on his time at NBC, Fred Rogers said,

It was such a great learning place for me, but some of the greatest things about it were the people that I worked with. And isn't that always the case? You can learn the mechanics anywhere, but it's the relationships that develop ... When people work very close together to create something that they feel has value, that they want to give to their audiences, they become a community, and it's a real blessing to be a part of a community of givers.<sup>24</sup>

While a young man working at NBC, Rogers was involved in bringing many musical broadcasts to the air, and in the process, he and his collaborators became a community. When he moved on from NBC and eventually became a mainstay at PBS, he carried the same goals, and many of the same experiences, forward with him. Over time, Rogers gathered in a whole new set of collaborators. They also produced operas for broadcast, and in the process, they became a neighborhood.

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<sup>24</sup> Fred Rogers, "Fred Rogers," *Archive of American Television* (Pittsburgh: July 22, 1999), Part 3 of 9, 18:20.  
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Archive of the Fred Rogers Center, St. Vincent College (Latrobe, PA)

Website holdings summary: "The Fred Rogers Archive holds a wide range of resources, including many original, handwritten texts by Fred. These items include letters to personal friends and professional colleagues; ideas and outlines from his earliest children's television program (The Children's Corner with Josie Carey); scripts and production books from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood; public service announcements for both children and adults; and speeches. The Archive also houses awards and citations, photographs, and viewer mail."

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood Archives  
Formerly Housed in the Elizabeth Nesbit Reading Room  
University of Pittsburgh Special Collections Library (Pittsburgh, PA)

Finding aid preface: "The Mister Rogers' Neighborhood Archives contains: materials produced by Fred Rogers, including correspondence and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood (MRN) programs, scripts, props, puppets and other materials used in the production and promotion of MRN, books, records and other publications for children and parents produced by Fred Rogers or his production group, Family Communications Inc. (FCI), materials that reflect audience response (primarily fan mail), and materials that show the cultural impact of Fred Rogers' work (such as scholarly articles)."

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