

# OPERA HELPS.

## PRESS





**T**he soprano reaches a dramatic climax, demonstrating impressive lung power as she sustains the dizzying peak note, before bringing *Quando me'n' vo'* to its close. It is a powerful, emotionally draining performance, and one that seems to resonate around the room for some time after she has finished. Which is why I get up off the sofa and ask her if she would like a cup of tea.

This, as you might have guessed, is not your typical night at the opera - and not only because it's only just gone 11am. It is called Opera Helps ([opera-helps.com](http://opera-helps.com)), and is a project dreamed up by the artist Joshua Sofaer. The gist is this: contact the Opera Helps phone-line with a personal problem, and they will endeavour to send a singer to your house. Said singer will briefly discuss the issue with you, select a suitable aria that addresses it, then perform it for you while you relax in familiar surroundings: on a comfortable chair, for instance, or even in bed.

It's not therapy as such - in fact, they are very keen to stress that their singers are not trained therapists - but the project does aim to help you look at your problem from a new perspective and, hopefully, experience the healing power of music.

"It's about giving someone the space for reflection, the same way having a chat with a friend might give you fortitude to carry on," says Sofaer, who found success running the project in Sweden before bringing it to the UK. "I remember one woman contacted us because her husband had a terminal illness and she wanted a shared experience that might help her cope with his passing. That was pretty intense, but the feedback she gave us was really moving - it gave her a strength and a space to focus and cope with bereavement."

Sofaer's own opera journey also came about in an unusual way: he was working as a barman at the London Coliseum, and would sometimes catch the English National Opera performing during his shift. He found

Anxious? Stressed? Maybe you need a home visit from a soprano. A new art project sends opera singers to people's homes to perform arias to ease their worries. Would an intimate performance help **Tim Jonze** deal with his fears about impending fatherhood?

**There is something primeval about the way an opera singer's voice connects with the human soul**



Last night a diva saved my life ...  
Tim submits to the healing power of opera



PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID BEBBER FOR THE GUARDIAN

himself "bitten" by the opera bug, but also aware that this music was not accessible to a lot of people.

"Opera Helps is offering people a way in," he says. "In my experience, you either respond to the music or you don't - I don't think it is based on your musical education or what class you're from or how much money you've got, which is the common perception. The idea that opera needs an expert audience is a complete misnomer."

This comes as a relief to me, given that my knowledge of opera is roughly equivalent to my knowledge of the economic forecast for Liechtenstein. It is not supposed to be an exam, so I focus on finding a suitable problem for Caroline, my assigned singer, to deal with.

Aware that I can't have a trained opera professional travel all the way to my house just to reassure me about my car boot's lock mechanism (unable to open on a cold day - genuinely quite annoying), I opt for one of life's big themes instead: impending fatherhood. It's not a *problem* as such - I definitely want to be a dad, honest! - but anything that plunges you so deeply into the unknown is likely to provide various nagging anxieties ranging from "what happens to all my freedom?" to "how many times am I allowed to drop it before social services arrive?"

**O**ur session begins with a few minutes of chat about the issue, in which I waffle semi-coherently about various baby-related fears.

Then it's over to Caroline to try to offer musical balm. I have no idea what to expect: is there an aria about a man who immediately drops his firstborn on the hospital floor? Did Verdi ever score a stirring ode to reassure someone that they will still be able to watch five back-to-back episodes of *Don't Tell the Bride* in their jogging pants? Turns out, probably not. Instead, Caroline takes a broad approach. She identifies that my worries seem to stem from a general lack of confidence, and prescribes *Quando me'n vo'* from Puccini's *La Bohème* from her menu of

musical remedies. It is an aria in which the singer Musetta boldly asserts her desirability in order to win back the painter Marcello's affections, but given that the words are in Italian, what is really important is the emotional impact of the music.

And that certainly comes across. There is something dramatic about the way my front room transforms itself the second Caroline puts on a backing track and launches into crystal-clear song. The whole experience is extremely intimate - not just because of where it is taking place, and the subject matter at hand, but also, I realise, because there is something almost primeval about the way an opera singer's voice cuts through and connects with the human soul.

But does it help me with my problem? Certainly, fatherhood issues have never been further from my mind, although I suspect that has less to do with the healing power of opera and more to do with the fact my head is full of new thoughts, such as: "Well, this is certainly weird," and "I wonder how long before my neighbours try to have me evicted?"

As an art project, the whole thing is enjoyably surreal, an unusual combination of the stirring and the awkward. But as a way to deal with your problems, that probably depends on what works for you as an individual. As Sofaer says after the session, the process is probably quite self-selecting: if you're the sort of person who calls an opera helpline, it is probably because you think someone singing you a personal aria is going to be of some benefit. Certainly, you can't argue with his feedback rate - he says around 70% of participants in Sweden sent back response cards, all of them effusive.

It is a response Sofaer anticipated, because opera is something that has affected him positively, too. "It is a privilege working with people who have trained their voice in this way," he says. "The power of hearing one other human being, where all they've really got is themselves ... that's something I find very emotionally affecting."

THE ARTS AND HEALTH

Lily Jencks, who has a very personal link to shaping how cancer care is delivered

# Creative HEALING

Three innovators reveal how art, architecture and music benefit our health. By Jackie McGlone

## ARCHITECTURE

### LILY JENCKS

The landscape architect was inspired by her mother's vision of cancer care in beautiful spaces

In a tranquil Glasgow outdoor space you can find a magical sight – the sky reflected in a dark forest floor. It is here, in the Maggie's Centre garden at Gartnavel General Hospital, that the landscape architect Lily Jencks heard of a 10-year-old leukaemia patient playing happily alone.

"She felt it was her place, where she could just be and not think about being ill for a while," says the director of Lily Jencks Studio in London. "That's the point – to give people a moment's breath away from the oncology unit. It was an escape not only for the child but also her mother. It was very moving for me to hear this story."

The architect, who designed the courtyard garden and the wooded glades surrounding the centre, explains the mystical effect is "all done with mirrors".

Jencks is the daughter of the late artist and garden architect Maggie Keswick Jencks, who dreamed up an innovative approach to cancer care as she faced a terminal diagnosis for breast cancer in 1993. Maggie believed the patient should be an informed participant in their care, within a supportive, relaxed, beautiful environment. Her husband, acclaimed architectural theorist Charles Jencks, shared her vision and was determined it should become a reality.

Maggie Jencks died at the age of 53 in 1995, a few months before the launch of the first Maggie's Centre in Edinburgh. There are now 17 Maggie's Centres providing cancer care across the UK, and one in the grounds of Tuen Mun Hospital Hong Kong, landscaped by Jencks and designed by Frank Gehry, a family friend. Gehry is one of several 'starchitects' who have created buildings for the charity. Rem Koolhaas designed the Gartnavel



The garden at Gartnavel in Glasgow, above, and the Maggie's Centre Hong Kong, designed by Frank Gehry

power of nature," says Jencks. "We're aware some buildings can be bad for our health, while gardens have a life force, an energy to them. We're very good at proving the bad things but it's hard to prove quantifiably good things."

Jencks was 15 when her mother died. "It was a very, very difficult time," she says. "I still find it difficult to talk about, but when I was working on the gardens for the centres I was definitely trying to channel her thinking on landscape."

Her mother, an expert on Chinese gardens and author of a definitive book on the subject, was "an inspiration" during Jencks's work in Hong Kong, which uses unusual water features. Current projects range from a sculpture park in Turkey, on which she is collaborating with her father, to "internal gardens" for a pop-up gym in London. "The health thing again," she exclaims.

"Being in a garden connects you with a wider world," she says. "One of the reasons we love gardens is that things are always changing, evolving, blossoming, even dying. In my own garden, I play with notions of time, the cycles of the seasons, and the light. For me, and I hope for people who use Maggie's Centres, gardens are places where we can contemplate our own place in nature and our relationship to it. It always helps to take a walk in a garden; it's like meditation."

Visit [www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org) and [www.lilyjencksstudio.com](http://www.lilyjencksstudio.com)

## I believe environment can hinder or help in healthcare. Gardens have a life force, an energy

centre, while Norman Foster created the Manchester Maggie's and Zaha Hadid the Fife building.

Every centre factors in the power of landscape. When Jencks's mother was drawing up plans for the Edinburgh centre, she wanted peaceful waiting rooms with

a view of a garden, natural light and the changing seasons.

"Certainly, I believe that environment can hinder or help in healthcare, although we need more research into the restorative

Maggie Keswick Jencks, left





Artist Joshua Sofaer and soprano Caroline Kennedy believe in the positive effects of song

## MUSIC

### JOSHUA SOFAER

The artist believes opera can help boost health and wellbeing

**T**he prescription for many emotional problems is call in a great composer. So says Joshua Sofaer – not a medical man, but an artist specialising in social sculpture, performance, installation and collaborative art.

Lonely and depressed? Listen to the Toreador song from Bizet’s *Carmen*. Missing a loved one? Puccini’s *Quando me’n vo’* from *La Bohème* may help, says Sofaer, who will arrange for an opera singer to make a house call and sing a specially chosen aria while you lounge in your comfiest armchair or recline in bed.

Sofaer, 44, is the creative force behind *Opera Helps*, an art project he launched in 2012 while working at *Folkoperan*, a small opera house in Stockholm. At his flat in Soho, London, the artist explains the roots of *Opera Helps*.

“*Folkoperan* means ‘people’s opera’, so I had this idea of taking opera out of often intimidating, red-velvet spaces and introducing it to people in the privacy of their homes. I had this hunch they would have an immediate emotional response, that we could help people with problems.”

His UK team of seven singers – sopranos, mezzo-sopranos and baritones – completed their first tour in spring 2016 to positive reactions from audiences across the north of England, who got a dose of Sofaer’s musical “medicine”. Although the half-hour sessions are free, he stresses they are not a substitute for therapy. Rather, it’s “sustenance for the soul, a transformative experience, touching people here,” he says, indicating his heart.

Soprano Caroline Kennedy, who has performed with English National Opera (ENO) and Scottish Opera, is one of the team. “We are not therapists,” she says. “We’re trained singers, but we give participants a list of counselling services, as well as a menu of other arias they might find helpful.” She adds it has been a revelation to her how music can contribute to emotional health and wellbeing.

“Music just makes you feel better – it’s healing,” agrees Sofaer, who fell for opera while working as a barman at the London Coliseum, when he would catch ENO performances. “I put access to art and culture on a par with the importance of human friendship and love – it’s fundamental to being alive.”

**One woman suffering from depression said a weight had lifted off her**

### THE POWER OF MUSIC

#### THERAPY

● The British Association for Music Therapy says: “Music plays a fundamental role in our identity, culture, heritage and spiritual beliefs. It is a powerful medium which can affect us all deeply ... It can stir memories and resonate with our feelings, helping us to express them and communicate with others.”

#### CANCER CARE

● Music therapy can help adolescents and young people cope better when faced with treatment for cancer, according to a study in *Cancer Journal*.

#### DEMENTIA

● Broadcaster Sally Magnusson set up *Playlist for Life* after noticing the effect of music on her late mother’s dementia. The charity provides an iPod so people with dementia can listen to personally meaningful music.



He admits the institutions surrounding opera are often elitist, but dismisses the idea it is inaccessible.

“Barbers in Italy used to sing while working in their salons,” he remarks, quoting research by neuroscientists at New York University

revealing how an intense aesthetic experience, such as listening to music or looking at visual art, activates the emotion and rewards centres of the brain.

“People come to us with deeply personal problems – from feeling lovesick to coping with something as profound as bereavement. When a singer visits, they listen, then they choose a suitable aria. Operatic singing in a domestic space is amazingly haunting – the space is never the same again.”

Kennedy concurs. She has made more than a dozen house calls, including for someone lately diagnosed with terminal cancer “who was incredibly positive”.



“You’re a stranger in someone’s home and they can be quite distant as they’re unsure whether to trust you. Suddenly they start to confide, often getting emotional – one couple just cried and cried. You listen carefully, but once you sing there’s a transformation. I do feel emotional afterwards but Joshua is an accredited relational dynamics coach, so he’s trained us in how to distance ourselves, despite the eye-to-eye contact, which we never have in theatres.

“I never realised just how cathartic music can be. I’ve performed for someone with severe cerebral palsy and for a family – wife, husband, three daughters and grandparents – who wanted to discuss womanhood and show their girls how to share. Some people are elated afterwards. One woman suffering from depression said a weight had lifted off her. I felt as if I’d sung to someone’s soul.”

Sofaer concludes: “We get fantastic feedback – ‘I wanted to hug the singer; I felt I had been blessed with a unique gift.’ It’s terribly moving and humbling to feel you’ve made a difference – thanks to the power and beauty of great art and the human voice.”

Visit [www.operahelps.com](http://www.operahelps.com)



📅 17 March 16



## Opera on call: artist's project brings arias into the home

This weekend and throughout April and May, intimate operatic experiences will be taking place people's homes – courtesy of Opera Helps, a project by artist Joshua Sofaer.

• live music

• performance

The premise of [Opera Helps](#), a project by artist [Joshua Sofaer](#), is simple: people apply with a problem and if the project can meet their needs, a professional opera singer will be visit them in their home to listen to what's troubling them.

Whether specific or more general – 'Are you lovesick or facing divorce? Has your partner stopped listening to you? Do your children disrespect you?' asks the Opera Helps website – the singer will then select the aria they feel best relates to the problem. This will then be sung as the participant relaxes at home in their preferred room. Performances last about 30 minutes.

Opera Helps first took place in 2012 in Stockholm, Sweden, after Sofaer was invited to work with the small opera house [Folkoperan](#). For 2016 the project tours the UK with event producers [Wunderbar](#). The first performances are taking place in Tyne and Wear (17 & 19-20 March).

“Historically, opera was always a popular art form,” says Sofaer. “Even 50 years ago hairdressers in Italy would sing arias as they worked. Yet now it is seen as something highbrow, for the rich and highly educated, inaccessible to most people.”



By relocating opera to the home and relating it to personal problems, people are introduced to the music who wouldn't otherwise have given it a chance. The power of the voice in the domestic space creates an intense and moving experience; the participant hears music in an unfamiliar way, encouraging them to listen attentively as they reflect on their problem.

“Although the problem is the reason for meeting,” continues Sofaer, “paradoxically what people really focus on is the music. People listen to the music more acutely because they feel uniquely addressed. Ultimately, it's about the potential of art and music in our lives.”

From April 2016 further Opera Helps performances will take place in Durham (1-2 April), Northumberland (15-16 April), Teeside (29-30 April), St Helens (20-24 April), Colchester (6-8 May) and Norfolk and Norwich (13-22 May).

The project has been developed in partnership with [Heart of Glass](#) in St Helens, [Colchester Arts Centre](#) and [Norfolk & Norwich Festival](#). Sofaer and Wunderbar worked with [OperaCoast](#) to recruit the singers.

“To listen to music, chosen specifically for you, just a few feet away, is a powerful experience,” says one unattributed Opera Helps participant on the project's website. “After two bars, I weep. When the aria is over, life feels renewed.”

**Applications are still open for Opera Helps in Norfolk and Norwich and for further performances in Tyne and Wear. [www.operahelps.com](http://www.operahelps.com)**

**More on a-n.co.uk:**

[Joshua Sofaer, artist as leader research](#)

[www.a-n.co.uk/reviews/the-human-library-wunderbar-festival](http://www.a-n.co.uk/reviews/the-human-library-wunderbar-festival)

BY DAVID WHETSTONE

12:59, 25 FEB 2016

Updated 13:00, 25 FEB 2016

# Got a problem? What you might need is an opera singer in your lounge

**A new arts project called Opera Helps is offering one-to-one opera performances in the comfort of your own home.**

Whether it's a plumbing emergency or an empty fridge, most people nowadays know how to call in the right person to rectify the situation.

But what if it's an opera singer you need rather than a plumber or eggs, milk and frozen chips?

A new project called Opera Helps is inviting applications from people who think an aria in the front room might be just the ticket. It's the brainchild of artist Joshua Sofaer who plans to present the UK premiere of an extraordinary project that he previously tried – with apparent great success – in Stockholm.

Producers Wunderbar describe Opera Helps as a site specific art project where professional opera singers visit people in the comfort of their own homes and sing to them. Wunderbar, organisers of rather off-the-wall participatory art projects, invited Joshua to the region once before.

In 2009 he was the man behind Tours of People's Homes in which ordinary Tynesiders opened up their homes in the manner of the National Trust – but not quite. One Newcastle couple offered to give visitors a bath while other volunteers offered an insulting dinner. This time, according to Wunderbar, the artist is harnessing “the power of opera” to help individuals with any personal problem they might have.

Unlike the plumbing emergency or an empty fridge, of course, most people are unlikely to know that their problem needs an opera singer. Opera singers were never in the Yellow Pages and they're not renowned professionally for their home visits.

Intriguingly, Wunderbar add: “Unlike therapy or a trip to the doctor, (Opera Helps) doesn't aim to cure the problem but past participants have found the experience deeply affecting, feeling that their private space seems different afterwards.”

Presumably they don't mean because the neighbours are banging on the walls or door. Opera singers are trained to project their voices to the back of an auditorium.

This won't have escaped Joshua Sofaer. He's an opera fan who says listening to the music has had a direct emotional impact on him, brightening his mood and leaving him refreshed.

“Historically, opera was always a popular art form,” he says.

“Even 50 years ago hairdressers in Italy would sing arias as they worked. Yet now it is seen as something highbrow, for the rich and highly educated, inaccessible to most people.

“By relocating opera to the home and relating it to personal problems I truly think we can introduce people to the music who wouldn’t otherwise have given it a chance.”



L-r: Mae Heydorn and Joshua Sofaer

Now ‘audiences’ are being sought – and anyone from across the North East who has a problem (anything that they find worrying) is invited to apply for a session. According to Wunderbar, the singer will listen to the participant describe their troubles and then perform a suitable aria.

The idea is that the power of the voice in the domestic space will create an intense and moving experience, encouraging the participant to listen attentively while reflecting on their problem.

Sessions are free and last about 30 minutes. After the performance, participants will be handed an ‘opera menu’ and a list of places where they can seek further help with their problem if they wish.

Joshua, an accredited relational dynamics coach as well as an artist, is training nine professional singers for the bespoke service.

They include Swedish mezzo-soprano Mae Heydorn and North East-based soprano Carole Marnoch who a few years ago performed at the Stadium of Light.

They are being taught “to listen appropriately and not to offer advice or counselling but to empathise and to ask simple, open questions”.

To apply for an Opera Helps session, fill in the form on [www.operahelps.com](http://www.operahelps.com) or tel. 07783 340789

This week’s announcement of Opera Helps is timely. Opera North are at Newcastle Theatre Royal next week (March 2-5) with performances of *Così fan tutte*, *L’Elisir d’amore* and *Andrea Chénier* while, near Brampton, some of the UK’s best young opera singers are engaged in a week of Samling masterclasses building up to a public masterclass and concert at Sage Gateshead on Saturday (February 27).

BY DAVID WHETSTONE

19:54, 23 MAY 2016

Updated 19:55, 23 MAY 2016

# How an opera singer can blow your problems away with a single aria

One of the Opera Helps participants recalls her experience of having a professional soprano perform in her living room



Opera singer Carole Marnoch delivers an Opera Helps session on Tyneside (Photo: TOPHER MCGRILLIS)

Art projects come in many forms and most fit neatly into genres. But Opera Helps, which involves one-to-one operatic performances in a person's home, was one that stood out.

It was the brainchild of artist Joshua Sofaer who, back in 2009, was in the North East to set up Tours of People's Homes, in which people on Tyneside opened up their homes as if they were visitor attractions.

It was the people at North East art festival Wunderbar (specialists in art projects tailored to public participation) who brought Joshua up here last time and they, too, are behind the Opera Helps sessions in the North East.

Back in February, the organisers were calling for volunteers to take part. They were after people who had some kind of problem – emotional rather than practical – that they wanted... if not solved then at least made easier to bear.

They were unlikely to be people who were convinced that a personally delivered aria would be the answer to their prayers – how many people could possibly know that? – but they had to be open to the idea.



Opera singer Mae Heydorn who can perform just for you (Photo: Victorine Pontillon)  
As Wunderbar put it at the time: “Unlike therapy or a trip to the doctor, (Opera Helps) doesn’t aim to cure the problem but past participants have found the experience deeply affecting, feeling that their private space seems different afterwards.”

Amazingly, you might think, 27 people have so far availed themselves of this unusual art project in the North East.

One of them was Suzanne Hardy who works on e-learning programmes [at Newcastle University](#).

Suzanne, who lives [in Washington](#) , said she had been curious about the Opera Helps project. That, of course, wasn’t enough to qualify.

“My problem,” she elaborated, “was that I recently turned 50 and I’ve been starting to think about my own mortality and my parents’ mortality and thinking about what was going to happen when they weren’t around any more and how my life would change. “I was dwelling on it quite a lot, having had this recent big birthday... so that was the problem I wrote in with.

“The other reason was I wanted to just have an experience of somebody coming into the house and singing an operatic aria in a small domestic space.

“I used to work in Leeds, at West Yorkshire Playhouse, and used to go and see quite a lot of opera at Opera North.

“Opera is a really amazing artform. Because it tends to have more money than other artforms it always looks spectacular.



Artist Joshua Sofaer, creator of Opera Helps  
(Photo: Wai-Tai Li)

“But how would something designed for a big space fit into a small space? I was intrigued.”

Suzanne was given an appointment for 11am which is when a singer called Carole, who used to be with English National Opera, arrived with “a little sound system”.

Recalls Suzanne: “She sat down and asked me to tell her about the problem and listened attentively. Then she said, ‘The aria I’ve chosen for you is Musetta’s Waltz from La Bohème’. It’s one of my favourites. She told me the story and then she sang it.

“I was really overcome. Three bars in I burst into tears. It’s quite a thing to be four feet away from a mezzo-soprano singing for you. There was a very direct emotional connection and it felt as if she was giving me a very special gift. Afterwards I wanted to give her a hug.”

Suzanne says the whole experience lasted just 30 minutes. But did it help?

“I definitely felt more easy thinking about age and mortality afterwards. I’ve listened to the same aria on CD since then and I do kind of get goose pimples, so there is definitely a connection between how I think and that aria.

“The whole experience, for me, was very empathetic. There was no embarrassment or awkwardness.”

Comments from other participants include: “It put me on a natural high”; “feeling special”; “I was left feeling listened to, respected and elated”; “it touched my heart”; and “what a beautiful, wonderful project”.

The good thing, if this appeals, is that there are to be more Opera Helps sessions in the North East on May 27, 28 and 29 and they will be the last. To apply for a slot, visit [www.operahelps.com](http://www.operahelps.com) or tel 07783 340789.

# Opera singers to perform arias online to people struggling during pandemic

NEWS AUG 6, 2020 BY MATTHEW HEMLEY



*Opera Helps Online. Photo: Will Knight*

Professional opera singers will perform arias to people struggling with personal issues during the pandemic as part of a new online initiative.

Opera Helps initially began as a site-specific project, offering support to people in their own homes. However, it will now be run as an online offering in association with arts company Wunderbar.

Anyone can apply for a slot, with appointments being made to accommodate those selected.

At the session, the singer will “listen attentively to the participant’s account of their troubles” before selecting an aria to sing.

“Face to face on screen, the power of the voice beaming into a domestic setting creates an intense and moving experience. The participant hears music in an unfamiliar way, encouraging them to listen attentively, while focusing and reflecting on their individual problem,” founder Joshua Sofaer explained.

Tuesday 8 December 2020

# The Daily Telegraph

BRITAIN'S BEST QUALITY NEWSPAPER

Tuesday 8 December 2020 The Daily Telegraph

## Features & Arts

# Aria unhappy? This opera website can help

A pioneering charity promises to combat problems – from divorce to depression – with music. *Louis Wise* is prescribed a personal recital

One Tuesday morning, I am talking to someone via videoconferencing, like so many of us do now. I am even sharing very personal thoughts and feelings with him, as a fair few of us have done this year too. But then something happens which is rare, even in these weird times: the man, a tenor named David, starts singing an aria to me – specifically *Ombra mai fu*, the famous “Largo” from Handel’s *Xerxes*. The song lasts about two minutes; the whole encounter just 17. And yet it is one of the most profound experiences I will have all year. The name of the initiative could not be more fitting: Opera Helps.

The premise of this charity, dreamt up by the London-based artist Joshua Sofaer, is simple. If you have a problem, you can confide it to a professional singer, who will listen to you and then, based on your testimony, sing you something from the canon. The aim is to help you see your worries with fresh eyes, and alleviate them where possible.

It is not professional therapy, Sofaer emphasises when we speak afterwards via Zoom, but it is music “operating in a therapeutic way”. And in a moment where many are feeling particularly isolated or anxious, its appeal seems obvious. “What I’ve been shocked by is the level to which people consider it to have helped,” he says. “Somebody left a comment on my YouTube page just this morning saying, ‘It’s completely changed how I reflect on the problem.’” Opera Helps was set up by Sofaer in 2016. Back then, the premise was that the singer would turn up at the listener’s house, and serenade them in person. “The feedback was incredible,” says Sofaer. “People would be thrown back in their seats by the volume in their front rooms.” Lockdown made Sofaer’s team wonder if they could do it online; in fact, the very nature of the project



Music as therapy: Louis Wise was sung the ‘Largo’ from Handel’s *Xerxes*, here in an ENO production starring mezzo-soprano Alice Coote as the titular Persian king

made it eligible for Arts Council England’s emergency funds. “We can employ singers (six at the moment), who desperately need to be employed at the minute, and we can reach people who are isolated in lockdown.”

Sessions are free, but when you book in online, you are also asked to donate an amount of your choice via PayPal, which really helps, says Sofaer. “It’s quite expensive per person, because you have to pay the singer and the person administering the set-up.”

Whatever the medium, the fundamental requirement is that you come with a genuine problem. Opera is a high-stakes, high-emotion art after all. Sofaer reports the moving story of a

couple who elected to do it together when the husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer; he can’t report exact details, since the sessions are confidential, but says that their daughter got in touch to say the experience was “fundamental” in helping them face his passing. “Opera just cuts through so much, and gets straight to the emotional core.”

All of which explains how I came to be doing my own session with David. I decided I wanted to explore a lack of confidence, which has long seeped into both my professional and personal lives, and stopped me from making bolder decisions. This is what I relay to David when he calls me on Google Duo

**‘Opera just cuts through so much, and gets straight to the emotional core’**

(a videoconferencing app that, apparently, has better audio than Zoom). David, a calm presence, asks me neutral, probing questions, but is careful not to enter into anything bordering on therapy; he just lets me talk. He then tells me he has decided to sing *Ombra mai fu*, and explains why. In this famous aria, Handel’s titular Persian king enjoys a moment of pause and contemplation before the struggles ahead. Granted, he would like to conquer Europe – I’m more wondering about the men I date. But we each have our own struggles, I suppose.

When the chords of the aria start up, I first think I know this one, and luckily I love Handel. (Sofaer tells me a lot of



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people get 19th-century fare, especially Puccini, “because it’s very immediately emotional”). Then comes a deeper recognition, an emotional one, as the chords speak to a mood which is hard to describe in words. To my own surprise, I even experience a chill up the top of my back, which I know is often a prelude to crying.

However, I don’t cry – I smile. And not in an awkward giggly way (which I was worried I would do), but a genuine smile of gratitude. When was the last time anyone ever sang directly to me like that, and with such heart?

When my parents sang me to sleep? It is the process of consciously linking the music to my problems that makes the experience so special, says Sofaer. “By confronting the person’s problem in the first place, you make the musical experience more intense – because people have a deeper personal connection to the music.”

And it is therapeutic, even if it’s not therapy, which requires much more investment on both sides, confirms Hilida Burke, psychotherapist and couples counsellor. Yet some basic parameters remain the same.

“Ultimately, with the therapeutic process, a lot of it is about being paid attention to – about being looked at and engaged with,” she says. What’s more, using music in this way is helpful because it is a way of “bypassing the mind” – getting past unhelpful thought patterns. “These can really hold us back from healing and from trying new things and being more creative. (Opera Helps) may not be everything you need to do to heal, but it can be a really important component of the healing process.”

After my session, I listen to the Largo on my own again, on Spotify. If it isn’t quite the same sensation as direct serenading, it has at least given me something in which to anchor my predicament.

And it also reminds me of something which classical music seems especially good at: that many before have felt the same mood as me, and many more will do so again.

For more information visit [operahelps.com](http://operahelps.com)

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# A dose of opera can lift us out of the gloom

Inventive projects are demonstrating that what we need in these troubled times is the transformative power of song

Libby Purves



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**D**o you hear the people sing? Sing out, my soul! Sing inside yourself the one wild song! Nothing is lovelier, nothing grander yet more humble. No instinct is more human than singing, although it links us to the chirping bird and howling wolf. Whether your taste is for Pavarotti, Adele, roaring *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* at the rugby or skipping along with Morecambe and Wise doing *Bring Me Sunshine*, song is necessary. Of all the necessary cruelties of this season, the banning of choirs — even for worship — is among the bitterest.

Determined spirits have used Zoom and other platforms with remarkable effect: the Self-Isolation Choir performing *Messiah* was a hallelujah moment to remember, with 6,300 tiny stamp-sized faces singing in their own homes in deep lockdown. We are of course luckier than our great-grandfathers in the Spanish flu pandemic because we

have recordings. Be grateful for that. But whether in chorus or audience the best singing is live: a miraculous breath sweetening the air.

We have lately been coached to be repelled by that idea, to mask up and cower from “aerosols”. We are warned to regard the breathing of others with the sort of shuddering phobia which six months ago would have got us referred to a psychiatrist. Pray that this aberration passes into memory. Meanwhile I relish ingenious projects that affirm song’s value.

One is the Imperial College NHS Trust deal with the English National Opera for “social prescribing”: a six-week programme of singing

Whether in chorus or audience the best singing is always live

taught by professionals. It is designed to alleviate breathlessness and corresponding anxiety, especially in those whose lungs were compromised by Covid-19. Opera is ideal, better than pop because it goes the extra mile, unamplified, deep-chested and free of breathy, whining autotune artificiality. The trained operatic voice fills great spaces as one slight human body

transcends itself in great cascades of sound or projects a whispering heartbreak to the upper circle.

It is also ideal because grand opera is unashamedly, barnily emotional. And if we need anything right now it’s an outlet. Bored and confined, scared or grieving, thwarted by the mask-and-queue hampering of daily life or just irritably tense about getting back from France, we need to vent it. Bring on the big emotions!

So I wish luck to another project: Wunderbar’s collaboration with the artist Joshua Sofaer has revived, online this time, a thing called Opera Helps. The idea is to harness the medium’s “redemptive power” to alleviate individual distress. You apply — free — to make an appointment with one of six singers (taught to ask simple open questions, not offer advice). You confide what is troubling you. The singer chooses a suitable aria to perform for you privately, live but on screen. It isn’t therapy, promises no cures. The whole thing lasts half an hour and is promised to be confidential. They did it in Sweden, then a few years ago across northeast England, each time with real visits from singers. It won’t be tiny.”

So far my own problems (Let me

out! Let me travel! Open the damn theatres!) have seemed too trivial to bother them with, but it is tempting. We who have self-medicated with opera all our lives will get the idea immediately, even if we might quail at actually opening the door to a thumping great Caruso, or having a soprano take her first deep breaths in our front room and rattle the ornaments. It may even be, perish the thought, that more people will

If you cannot fathom the lyrics then let the emotion roll over you

brave the experiment now that it is only online.

But it is a wonderful idea. I suppose much may be sung in English, but total grasp of the lyrics (or indeed the plots) never was all that important. Let the emotion roll over you and take clues from odd words. Not sure I could face any Wagner, nor Mozart’s *Queen of the Night* aria (that pitchy one now inextricably connected with Florence Foster Jenkins).

But there have been many days when Germont’s gentle baritone comfort of his son in *La Traviata* (*Di Provenza il mar, il suo!*) is all I have needed. Try Dmitri

Hvorostovsky’s last performance the year before he died (it’s on YouTube). In some troubles one might need *Madame Butterfly*’s tragic optimism in *Un Bel Di*, or Dido’s lament. Or, in first love, *Voi Che Sapete*. In proper despair, try the resigned beauty of *La Vergine degli Angeli* from *Forza*. If you need bracing up there’s always a drinking song to be found, or *Nessun Dorma*’s triumphant roar of “Vincerò!”.

My only problem would be that in a perfect world an entire chorus would appear on the doorstep, enabling me to be prescribed the prisoners’ chorus from *Fidelio* or the lamenting Hebrew slaves from *Nabucco* dreaming of far shores. Or at the very least two chaps, to knock out the goddess duet from *The Pearl Fishers*.

Its raw operatic emotion that is being mined here, and it scores on three counts. First, like the NHS and ENO project, it employs trained singers, who need it. Second, unlike much opera-chat, it reaches across all pretensions and elite expertise to affirm that operatic emotions afflict us all. And third, it reminds government (which, despite the tide-over money, is still not getting the point) that live artistic performance matters as much as aviation, and probably infects fewer people. Except, of course, with hope.

REVIEWS • OPERA

Published 21 August 2020

## Review: Opera Helps by Joshua Sofaer

*Friendly overtures: Rosemary Waugh writes on her confidence-boosting one-to-one therapy session from an opera singer.*

ROSEMARY WAUGH



Opera Helps Online by Joshua Sofaer. Pictured: Caroline Kennedy. Photo: Will Knight

Over the years, I've tried a variety of ways to enhance my experience of existing on this planet. An abridged list includes talking therapy, hypnotherapy, old school psychoanalysis (I didn't Google 'transference' pre-session and just wondered why she never, ever said anything), group relaxation classes, guided meditation, acupuncture and pills (various kinds).

Over the years, I've tried a variety of ways to enhance my experience of existing on this planet. An abridged list includes talking therapy, hypnotherapy, old school psychoanalysis (I didn't Google 'transference' pre-session and just wondered why she never, ever said anything), group relaxation classes, guided meditation, acupuncture and pills (various kinds).

During lockdown I've particularly leant on the self-administered 'therapies' of walking, cycling, yoga, pilates, mini-trampolining and swimming, because I, like Søren Kierkegaard, believe that "If one just keeps on walking, everything will be all right". Only I switch the word 'walking' for 'moving', believing that if one just keeps stretching, bouncing, peddling, balancing, breathing and scoring lines through the water, everything will be all right. But above and beyond all this, the therapeutic resource I've used most heavily (and perhaps obsessively) to help soothe and energise, calm and rejuvenate is art. Visual art, theatre, dance, music, literature, poetry, large-scale puppetry: you name it, I've used it to offset the negative effects of everything from major spinal surgery to being dumped (the latter arguably hurts more, but maybe that's because no one gives you intravenous morphine for it). My faith in art as a healer is one reason I go to the theatre so much – because if one just keeps entering that empty space, everything will be all right.

### Review: Opera Helps by Joshua Sofaer Show Info

DIRECTED BY Joshua Sofaer

CAST INCLUDES Caroline Kennedy

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[Review: Opera Helps by Joshua Sofaer](#)  
Rosemary Waugh

Opera Helps is a therapeutic experience based around this same simple belief that art – in this case opera – can help people with their troubles. Established by Joshua Sofaer in 2012 in Stockholm, it first arrived in the UK in 2016. Back then it worked like this: an opera singer would visit a participant in their home, listen to their worries the way a friend would and then sing them an aria that might guide them towards some kind of resolution. It's now back for autumn 2020 in a lockdown-friendly online version working on exactly the same premise.

The creators, and the opera singers who take part, correctly stress that this is not a stand-in for professional therapy – they are not trained therapists (although they do conscientiously provide guidance on mental health services should you need them) and they can't promise to 'solve' your problem. Instead, they just listen, let you know what aria they've chosen and then go ahead and sing it. It kind of sounds ridiculous on first description, but in retrospect (and having tried it) I now sorely wish each of those deathly silent sessions with the psychoanalyst had ended with her hitting the high notes and me bathing in the beauty of an operatic classic.

While making the sessions available to journalists, the organisers request that anyone who takes part shares a genuine problem and, in doing so, engages with the session the same way anyone else would, not as a sort of aloof observer. I chose to talk about feeling held back by a chronic lack of self-confidence. I landed on this because, a) I'm genuinely plagued by this issue and b) Gaining 'boldness' is what Sofia in Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* is continually exhorted to do and, for whatever reason, that book had been in my head all last week because I suspect that within its covers lies the solution to a great number of the questions circulating in my head at 3am (cf. the power of literature to sort you out). I also thought that it takes a special kind of boldness to have, at some point in your life, said: "Actually, I think I'm going to become an opera singer." Meaning that whoever I spoke to would be well-placed to advise.

Caroline, the opera singer who kindly gave up part of her Tuesday morning to listen to me mumble circuitously about my lack of straightforwardness, was reassuringly calm, extremely sweet and very patient. After a few Google Duo hiccups during which I forgot how headphones, computers and microphones work, we had a short conversation in which she explained the process (reiterating that it's not a substitute for professional counselling) and then gave me space to talk for a while. She then announced she'd decided to sing Musetta's aria [also known as Musetta's waltz or *Quando me'n vo'*] from *La bohème*.

Sung in Act II of Puccini's Paris-based opera, Musetta's aria proclaims her own beauty and desirability to a crowd of Latin Quarter drinkers, including her former beau Marcello, whom she wishes to win back. She appears on the scene with Alcindoro, the elderly and wealthy government official who is now nothing more than a source of disinterest. Translated into English, courtesy of Aria database, the lyrics go like this:

*When I walk all alone in the street  
People stop and stare at me  
And look for my whole beauty  
From head to feet*

*And then I taste the slight yearning  
which transpires from their eyes  
and which is able to perceive from manifest charms  
to most hidden beauties.  
So the scent of desire is all around me,  
it makes me happy!*

*And you, while knowing, reminding and longing,  
you shrink from me?  
I know it very well:  
you don't want to express your anguish,  
but you feel as if you're dying!*

Bold? Yes. Musetta is basking in the reflected glow of her own radiant, sexy beauty. She knows precisely what she wants (Marcello) and she gets it, pretty swiftly. But Musetta is more than the coquettish sex goddess this scene sets her out to be. Towards the end of the opera, she is instrumental in reuniting the dying Mimi with

Rodolfo one last time and, as Caroline explains, contains layers of vulnerability – she just keeps them well hidden.

I think we can all agree that if there's one thing nicer than having someone sing a personalised aria at you on a rainy morning, it's having someone sing an aria where the character says, 'I know how beautiful I am, I know you know I am beautiful, and I know it makes you sad not to possess me and my beauty.' And when that message is delivered in a lovely, lilting soprano voice travelling directly into your own living room, it's considerably better than if someone just shouted, "Mate, you're hot: own it!" at you in toe-curling good faith.

One of the glories of opera is its ability to convey outsized emotions with complete conviction. In that sense the entire artform is a clarion call to boldness. Couple this with the seemingly magical ways music works in the human brain ([as this moving account of Clemency Burton-Hill's ongoing recovery from a brain haemorrhage describes](#)), and it seems almost obvious that a dose of opera – or other artform of your choice – would work as remedy for our holistic ills. Isn't it just sad, I think as I get ready to go out and sing about how hot I am to a crowd of unsuspecting café-goers, that we live in a time and a place where art is seen as something that's disposable in moments of crisis, rather than a pathway to joy and healing and togetherness and... yeah. *Un bel di*.

***Opera Helps was first performed in 2012 in Sweden, with Folkoperan, before a UK run in 2016. This online version is free to take part in; apply for your session at <https://operahelps.com/>***

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Rosemary Waugh

Rosemary is a freelance arts and theatre journalist, who regularly writes for Time Out and The Stage.



## Joshua Sofaer: Opera Helps Online

By [Caro Moses](#) | Published on Friday 28 August 2020



### TW:LONDON

Hello there! Welcome to ThisWeek London.

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I was immediately intrigued when I heard about Opera Helps Online, which sees opera singers engaging digitally with members of the public to try to help them in dealing with personal problems.

It's a project that was initially delivered live in people's homes a number of years ago, but now, in a response to COVID-19, will be reaching people via internet means.

To find out more I spoke to the project's creator, artist and opera enthusiast Joshua Sofaer.

**CM:** Can you start by telling us a bit about the history of 'Opera Helps'? What inspired it and what were its intentions?

**JS:** It was initially commissioned by Folkoperan in Stockholm in 2012.

Mellika Melouani Melani, the Artistic Director of Folkoperan – which means 'People's Opera' in Swedish – was looking for ways in which opera could reach different audiences and did not rely so heavily on the conventions of traditional staging. She started an experimental festival called Opera Showroom, and she invited me to think of a piece for that festival. That is how 'Opera Helps' started.

My own experience of opera has been that sometimes you enter into a sublime cathartic world that leaves you transformed, and at others it's like cats screeching from the stage. What is that about? It's not that the quality of the singing is necessarily any better or worse. So, then I thought it must be about you as an audience and auditor.

'Opera Helps' forefronts the problem the audience member brings as the reason for meeting. When the problem is in the air, the opera singer selects an aria that they think addresses it in some way and they sing it

directly to you. The paradox is that by fore-fronting the problem, people listen to the music more acutely. You feel uniquely addressed. Ultimately 'Opera Helps' is about the power of music and of audiences.

**CM: Can you explain how the sessions originally operated?**

JS: You contacted 'Opera Helps' with a problem. We sent a singer to your home. They listened to the problem and then selected an aria from the classical repertoire that they thought addressed the problem some way, and sang it to you with a professionally recorded orchestral backing track.

**CM: Obviously COVID restrictions made things difficult so you are now doing it online – how does that work? Is it significantly different to how it worked originally?**

JS: The principle is the same. Now sessions are done online. I feared that the intensity would be reduced. It's true that there are new technicalities that we have to deal with, but at the same time I'm really gratified at how much of the feeling and meaning is still conveyed across digital space.

The force of the sound in your room is not quite the same, but doing it online means we can reach a lot more people, theoretically anywhere in the world where there is a device and a signal.

**CM: Can you tell us how the performers involved have been trained / prepared to participate in these sessions?**

JS: The singers that we work with are all professional opera singers with concert and theatrical productions at the centre of their careers. They have years of experience, so we didn't need to do further training in that regard.

For the listening part of their role with 'Opera Helps' we trained them in Relational Dynamics. I myself am an accredited Relational Dynamics Coach, a training I took in order to be better equipped to hold the space for participants and colleagues that I work with in professional contexts.

The core skills that they learn are really about how to actively listen, ask open questions and give gentle prompts. There is also a lot about what they should not do, ie give advice or sympathy.

**CM: How do you choose the performers you are working with?**

JS: For this online version of 'Opera Helps' we are working with the same singers we worked with on the 2016 UK Tour. They were selected through audition and interview.

Independent opera singers have been severely affected by COVID-19. The theatres are shut and singing is considered dangerous. Part of the reason for making 'Opera Helps' online, now, is to support the livelihood of these singers.

**CM: How do you select members of the public to participate? How do they get involved?**

JS: Participants are self-selecting, inasmuch as we will offer the experience for free to anyone who we think has a problem we can work with, as long as we have slots available. People simply contact us at [operahelps.com](http://operahelps.com) and tell us their problem.

**CM: Can you explain how this process is helpful to people?**

JS: Actually, it's often the case that the harder the problem, the more effective the process can be. If you stub your toe, opera is probably not going to do that much. But if you are bereaved, or feeling isolated and alone, someone listening to you, picking out an aria for you, and singing it to you, can offer a space of reflection and an opportunity for release. We do not guarantee to solve the problem and yet we can bring some solace.

**CM: Can we talk a bit about you now, Joshua? Can you tell us a bit about your career, and the kind of work you do?**

JS: I work across visual and performing arts, with different media, and in different settings – literally from opera houses to night clubs! I suppose the thing that draws the work together is a concern with how people engage with the work and the possibility of their participation.

Right now, at the same time as working on 'Opera Helps', I am completing a large-scale public sculpture for two sides of the Sacramento River in California. It will be a series of light boxes spelling out the names of two women, nominated by their granddaughters, to become the new names of the docks.

**CM: How did you come to be pursuing this kind of career? And what hopes and aims do you have for the future?**

JS: I studied Drama and English Literature at Bristol University in the 90s but quickly became disillusioned with mainstream theatre. I then went to Central Saint Martins College Of Art And Design and studied Fine Art.

I suppose the work I make is a product of that education, or a reaction to it. I haven't really planned much.

My hope for the future is just to keep going. It would be nice to get bigger opportunities with larger resources but I'm also happy making small things. I love what I do and feel very privileged. I just want to keep going.

**CM: To what extent has your work been affected by the lockdown? Do you think it will have a long-term impact?**

JS: Everything was postponed or cancelled. It's had a massive impact.

Some of the work is on pause. Cap & Dove, a tiny travelling art centre of wheels, that was supposed to tour Greater Manchester this summer, has been delayed a year and will hopefully happen in 2021.

I am concerned that there will be shrinking opportunities for artists in the next few years. I'm just taking each day as it comes at the moment.

**CM: What have you done to stay sane over the last few months? What are you looking forward to about 'normality', if and when it comes...?**

JS: Well, I've tried to be conscious of my own well-being and have been taking exercise, listening to music, talking to friends, as many of us have.

If I'm honest, I have felt trapped. A lot of my work has involved international travel. I've also been conscious for a while that isn't sustainable. A lot of us have been thinking about what we can do from our studios or our desks. Lockdown has really pressed the question.

The thing I am most looking forward to is a world without border restrictions... but I don't think that day will come, regardless of COVID. Border restrictions were already being imposed globally before the pandemic for political reasons.

*'Opera Helps' Online seeks to harness the redemptive power of opera to help with people's personal problems. Anyone can apply for an 'Opera Helps' slot, which is completely free, via [operahelps.com](https://operahelps.com) or by calling 07943 939395. Arrangements are then made for a singer to meet you online.*

**LINKS:** [operahelps.com](https://operahelps.com) | [www.joshuasofaer.com](https://www.joshuasofaer.com) | [twitter.com/JoshuaSofaer](https://twitter.com/JoshuaSofaer)

Photo: Wai Tai Li

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READ MORE ABOUT: [Joshua Sofaer](https://www.joshuasofaer.com) | [Opera Helps](https://operahelps.com)

# NARC.

**NARC. MAGAZINE ONLINE**

## NEWS: OPERA HELPS ONLINE

OPERA HELPS CREATOR, JOSHUA SOFAER TEAMS UP WITH SOCIAL PROJECT PRODUCERS WUNDERBAR TO HARNESS THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF OPERA AND OFFER IT TO THOSE WHO NEED IT VIA THE INTERNET

**BY NARC. ON TUESDAY, AUGUST 18TH, 2020**

With the circumstances arising from the global pandemic we find that, quite rightly, mental wellbeing has become something of a priority to most people. Music is well known to be effective in helping people cope in hard times and as a result various arts organisations have been using it to help people through tough times.

Opera Helps is a project that before lockdown got professional opera singers to visit people at their home and sing to them one to one to harness the therapeutic power of opera to help with personal problems. With COVID-19 restriction the organisation has been unable to do that and so Opera Helps creator, internationally renowned artist and passionate opera enthusiast, Joshua Sofaer has been inspired to work with social project producers [Wunderbar](#) to adapt the concept for online delivery. Together they've launched *Opera Helps Online*, which invites people with problems to get in touch to arrange for an online visit from a professional opera singer.

The application process is simple and explained at [www.operahelps.com](http://www.operahelps.com). Taking part is an intimate and personal experience. If selected, one of six experienced professional singers that have been specially trained by Joshua (an accredited Relational Dynamics coach) will listen attentively to the participant's account of their troubles. They will then select a suitable aria to sing face to face onscreen to create a powerful and moving

experience that will allow the participant to reflect on their individual problem. The project continues until mid October and is completely free, with sessions lasting approximately 30 minutes.

