

Mechanisms

[- Mncameishs -]

A Chamber Opera Study on Neurodiversity

Music by J.E. Hernández | Libretto by Marianna Mott Newirth



FINAL libretto synched to FINAL score
February 1, 2024

**"WORDS OR LANGUAGE,
AS THEY ARE WRITTEN OR SPOKEN,
DO NOT SEEM TO PLAY ANY ROLE IN MY
MECHANISM OF THOUGHT."**

ALBERT EINSTEIN IN A LETTER TO
FRENCH MATHEMATICIAN, JACQUES HADAMARD

Commissioned by

Opera Theatre of St Louis
New Works Collective

World Premiere March 14, 2024

Vocal Forces

- Aurora (Roe) (Coloratura Soprano)
 - An 11-year-old neurodivergent girl just discovering her abilities and her challenges.
- Lori (Mezzo Soprano)
 - Roe's mom -30's; neurotypical woman, business professional balancing work, family and life; in denial about her daughter's challenges.
- Dean (Tenor)
 - Roe's dad -30's; man who may or may not be on the spectrum, math professor at university; attuned to his daughter's abilities.
- Mrs. Waldman (Mezzo Soprano)
 - Roe's 5th grade math teacher - 40's, neurotypical woman, elementary school teacher. Set in her ways because they've always worked for her over 20 years of teaching.
- Roe's Classmates
 - Child 1 (Bass Baritone)
 - Child 2 (Soprano)
 - Child 3 (Tenor)
 - Child 4 (Bass)

NOTES:

Any time there is a slash at the end/ and /beginning of dialogue, this indicates a character is rushing to cut off another character's comment.

*Each color in this opera represents a number: gold=0 white=1 pink=2 yellow=3 green=4 blue=5
This will be represented musically and in the visual guise of floating lanterns or bubbles of light operated by puppeteers, as well as interactive projection.
What's important to convey is that colors are a character in this piece.*

*Set is minimalist - a suggestion of place; the sofa, the floor, the kitchen area, the classroom chairs, and the isolated teacher's desk.
A few key props; colored pencils, report card covered with red 5's, a laptop computer, a dishrag...
Please make visual room for the colors to interact with and comment on the action.*

Overall, this short opera wants to evoke a sense of memory. Scenes 1 and 4 should feel timeless.

I: OVERTURE

II: Something's Wrong with Roe!

Evening in the living room of Lori & Dean's St Louis home.

*Slowly colors swirl and the light begins to illuminate Roe.
She is in a primordial space in a room, maybe a living room,
or her own room. She is in a memory steeped in a fiction of the past.*

ROE

SOFT SONG
SIMPLE SONG
ON THE FLOOR
BY THE DOOR
COZY
PEBBLE CARPET
PILLOW FEET

Two more lights reveal Roe's parents, Dean & Lori.

LORI

DEAN, DO YOU SEE?

They are near to her, vulnerable. They slowly start to rise.

DEAN

SEE? SEE WHAT? WHERE WAS I...

[spoken to himself]

Let M be the midpoint of
a chord PQ of a circle through which/...¹

LORI

/SEE HOW SHE HOLDS THE PENCIL?

DEAN

AWKWARDLY.

LORI

YOU AGREE!

DEAN

NOT NORMAL.

LORI

IS SHE STUPID?

DEAN

LORI, SHH!

LORI

IS SHE SLOW?!

DEAN

I DON'T THINK SO. DO YOU THINK/

LORI & DEAN

/SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH ROE?(!)

*Focus back on Roe playing on the floor with the pencils.
She can't quit figure out how to hold them, so she plays,
letting them fall through her fingers in a percussive game.
This gives her joy.*

ROE

BIT BY BIT FIT
COLOR STICKS
IN MY HAND - IN MY HAND.
POKE - CLICK
FUNNY IN MY FINGERTIPS.
AND I LIKE, I LIKE
I LIKE THE COLORS.

Lori is searching for answers to her question about Roe's development.

LORI

LOOK, LOOK AT THESE...A LIST OF LEARNING DISABILITIES.

Lori shows her laptop to Dean. They read together.

LORI

DYSPRAXIA.
[DIS-PRAK-SEE-AH]

DEAN

DYSLEXIA.
[DIS-LECK-SEE-AH]

LORI

DYSGRAPHIA.
[DIS-GRAF-FEE-AH]

DEAN

SYNESTHESIA.
[SIN-ES-THES-EE-AH]

DEAN

DOES SHE HAVE ONE OF THESE?!

ROE

COLOR STICKS - COLOR STICKS
FUMBLE THROUGH MY FINGERTIPS.
MAKING MARKS ON THE FLOOR.

Dean & Lori look towards Roe, concerned.

LORI & DEAN

THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH ROE!

ROE

COLORS FALLING...

Roe exits stage while singing.

III: Mechanisms

*Dean and Lori go to opposite sides of the stage, entering their own private world.
The mood transitions into morning light, indicating that it's now the next day.
Lori is straightening up the living room while Dean is preparing Roe's lunch.
Roe sings off stage...*

ROE [OFF STAGE]

... COLORS CALLING

GOLD-WHITE / PINK-YELLOW / GREEN-BLUE

*Lori is looking for Roe's backpack,
calling out to her.*

LORI

ROE, I DON'T KNOW WHERE
YOUR BACKPACK IS.

*Dean is happily making
Roe's lunch, calling out to her.*

DEAN

ROE, COME DOWNSTAIRS.

LORI

SHE'S SO SLOW.

LORI & DEAN

IT'S TIME TO GO TO SCHOOL.

DEAN

PEANUT BUTTER
SANDWICHES.
SPREAD THE BREAD
JUST RIGHT...

*Lori finds Roe's report card and starts
reading it with growing dismay.*

LORI

ROE, FOURS AND FIVES!
FOURS AND FIVES!

DEAN

... CUT THE CRUST OFF
SO ROE LIKES IT FOR LUNCH.

LORI

EXPLAIN THIS, ROE.

*Roe emerges from the dark.
A light (special) shines on her.*

ROE

WHAT?

LORI

SOMETHING'S WRONG
WITH THESE GRADES!

ROE

FIVES AREN'T RED,
THEY'RE BLUE.

LORI

WHO CARES WHAT COLOR IT IS?!
YOU'RE FAILING FIFTH GRADE MATH!

Dean crosses the stage towards Lori.

DEAN

WHAT ABOUT FIFTH GRADE MATH?
MATH'S MY SPECIALTY.

LORI

DEAN, DO YOU SEE?

ROE

DAD, DON'T...

Dean looks toward Roe.

DEAN

I SEE... I SEE MANY RED FIVES.

LORI

WELL?...

DEAN

WELL... WELL I SEE... I SEE MANY RED FIVES.

The atmosphere changes as Lori's anger grows.

LORI

YOU'RE NOT HELPING.

DEAN

ROE HAS A DIFFERENT
KIND OF ACUITY.

Standing off to the side, unnoticed.

ROE

WHAT IS 'ACUITY'?

LORI

THESE GRADES WILL SET HER BACK!

ROE

SET ME BACK?!

Lori turns to address Roe head on.

LORI

YOU HAVE TO WORK HARDER
THAN THE OTHER KIDS.

ROE

THAT'S NOT FAIR!

LORI

YOU HAVE...
CHALLENGES!

ROE

YOU KEEP TELLING
ME THAT!

LORI

YOU HAVE TO TRY HARDER!
TRY HARDER;
HARDER, ROE.

ROE

No!

DEAN

LET IT GO,
BOTH OF YOU.

*Lori crosses to the other side of the stage
into the space that Dean had previously occupied.*

ROE

MOM'S SO MEAN.

DEAN

SHE LOVES YOU ROE.
YOU KNOW THIS.

*Lori makes an angry noise
then stands alone.*

NOW, TELL ME ABOUT
THESE FIVES.

ROE

A CERULEAN BLUE!

*A beautiful blue light comes into Roe's hands
as Dean has a dawning realization.*

DEAN

FIVE IS BLUE TO YOU?

ROE

A BALL OF LIGHT
BLUE/GREEN AND WHITE!

DEAN

YOU HAVE A MIND,
MAGNIFICENT.

ROE

DO I?

DEAN

LET'S FIND OUT
WHAT THESE COLORS
ARE ALL ABOUT,
SHALL WE?

ROE

I DON'T THINK I CAN!

DEAN

GOOD. DON'T THINK. SEE.
WHAT'S EIGHT TIMES THREE?

ROE

I'M SCARED.

DEAN

TAKE A LONG,
DEEP BREATH.

ROE

PINK AND GREEN.
SHIMMERING ALL OVER THE FLOOR
BECOME...TWENTY-FOUR!

DEAN

RIGHT.
SIX TIMES FIFTY-SEVEN?

ROE

GREEN YELLOW PURPLE BLUE
FEELS LIKE FEATHERS...²
THREE HUNDRED-FORTY-TWO.

Lori looks from across the stage at them.

LORI

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO HER?

DEAN

RIGHT AGAIN.
ROE, YOU KNOW
HOW TO DO THIS.

ROE

THAT'S NOT HOW
THEY TEACH
IN SCHOOL.

LORI

WHAT CAN WE DO?

ROE

DAD...WHAT IS 'ACUITY'?

DEAN

A KEEN ABILITY
TO SEE, HEAR AND FEEL
WHAT OTHERS MAY NOT.

IV: Coping Mechanisms in Mrs. Waldman's Class

Roe puts on her backpack and walks out toward the shadows.

*The entire atmosphere shifts. We see lights of many colors flashing around.
From the shadows, pieces of a classroom emerge.
Four figures, Child 1, 2, 3 & 4 emerge as well
and begin to swirl around incredibly slowly,
beginning to speed up.*

MRS. WALDMAN

CLASS - CLASS!
PAY ATTENTION.

CHOIR OF KIDS

HACK - CRACK
I WANNA SNACK
BACKPACK
FLAPJACK
HACKATTACK

MRS. WALDMAN

OPEN YOUR BOOKS
TO LONG DIVISION.

The children all groan.

CHILD 3

[spoken] aww, I hate math.

MRS. WALDMAN

[Spoken] Divide a dividend with a divisor,
the quotient obtained is the number of groups
that can be made. The remainder identifies elements left ungrouped.

MRS. WALDMAN

1 2 3 4 - 2 3 4 - 1 2 3 4

ROE

WHITE PINK
YELLOW, NO...WAIT... GREEN!
PINK BROWN?

Roe begins to panic.

WHITE, YELLOW, PINK, BROWN... SLOW DOWN!

Dean sings from offstage, like a memory.

DEAN (OFF STAGE)

ROE, DON'T THINK. SEE.

ROE

TOO FAST - TOO FAST

MRS. WALDMAN

TWO-HUNDRED-AND-FIFTY DIVIDED BY SIX.
SHOW YOUR WORK
IN LONG DIVISION.

Roe stands up and raises her hand.

ROE; QUESTION?

ROE

CAN YOU SLOW DOWN?
THE COLORS NEED TIME
FOR ME TO FIND THEM.

All the kids laugh.

MRS. WALDMAN

[Spoken] What colors?!
Pay attention!

CHILD 2

SHE'S SITTING ON THE FLOOR.

CHILD 1

AND STARING AT THE DOOR.

CHILD 3

[Spoken] May I do that too, Mrs. Waldman?

MRS. WALDMAN

FOCUS!

This dialogue is all spoken.

CHILD 3

She's stupid.

CHILD 1

and slow.

ROE

No, I'm not!

CHILD 2

What's wrong with her?

CHILD 4

Seriously!

MRS. WALDMAN

FOCUS ...!

ROE

I HAVE ACUITY!

All the kids speak again.

CHILD 3

Sounds like stupidity!

CHILD 1

She can't even read.

CHILD 4

That's so lame!

CHOIR OF KIDS

HACK - CRACK - I WANNA SNACK - BACKPACK

*Roe disassociates -
Walks downstage.
Addresses audience directly.*

ROE

LEFT - RIGHT

I CAN'T READ WHEN LETTERS

FIGHT ON THE PAGE.

WHAT'S A NUMBER?

I SEE PINK...

THAT'S TWO!

I KNEW I KNEW IT.
COLOR UNDERSTANDS.

[Spoken] I have acuity.
I can do it!

*Mrs Waldman hits the desk (or table) with a ruler.
All lights drop dark revealing a special on Roe.
Time is shifting.*

MRS. WALDMAN

PAY ATTENTION! PAY ATTENTION!

ROE

S T O P!

V: Parent/Teacher Meeting

*The scene starts transitioning into a parent/teacher meeting
with Roe still in the foreground and her parents/teacher behind her.
It's real.*

THIS WHOLE SCENE IS SPOKEN.

LORI

Hello Rebecca.

MRS. WALDMAN

Lori, you look wonderful as usual.

About Roe,
she has...difficulties/

LORI
/Dyspraxia.

DEAN
/Dyslexia.

LORI
Dysgraphia.

DEAN
Synesthesia.

LORI
She is not one of these!

DEAN
She might be.

MRS. WALDMAN
Her obsession with color
is a distraction in my math class.

DEAN
Maybe your tired, old teaching
is the trouble!

MRS. WALDMAN
Do you know what it takes to teach/

DEAN
/I teach math at university/
MRS. WALDMAN
my class must follow my path.

DEAN
Roe has a mind, magnificent.

LORI
But what if she...

MRS. WALDMAN
I maintain order
in my classroom.

DEAN
Is that so.

LORI
Can't you...?

MRS. WALDMAN
No!

DEAN
Lori, Roe...
LET'S GO!

Transition back into song.

ROE
ARE THEY GOING TO
SEND ME BACK?

VI: New Mechanisms

*Lori & Dean follow Roe out of the classroom.
Roe is well ahead of them.
Lights and colors shift and we see torn pieces of the classroom strewn about.
Child 1, 2 & 3 are in the distance.
The colors and lights slowly reveal Roe, centered in her living room.*

ROE
SOFT SONG
SIMPLE SONG
ON THE FLOOR
BY THE DOOR

*Roe takes off her shoes and
steps onto her old familiar carpet.*

COZY
PEBBLE CARPET - PILLOW FEET.

*Lights and colors swirl to slowly reveal
Dean and Lori entering the living room from the darkness.*

DEAN

LORI, DO YOU SEE
HOW SHE SEES THE COLORS?

LORI

SHE'S SPECIAL, THE WAY SHE SEES.

DEAN

I AGREE!

LORI

I THINK I CAN SEE...

ROE

BIT BY BIT FIT
COLOR STICKS IN MY HAND
NOTHING'S WRONG WITH ME.

POKE - CLICK
NUMBERS IN MY FINGERTIPS.
AND I CAN SEE EACH ONE
HAS A DIFFERENT COLOR.

LORI

THE WAY SHE SEES THE WORLD

DEAN

THE WAY SHE SEES THE WORLD

LORI

I CAN ALMOST SEE THEM.

DEAN

I CAN ALMOST SEE THEM.

LORI

WHAT A BEAUTIFUL WORLD.

DEAN

WE LOVE YOU, ROE.

ROE

COLOR SPEAKS - COLOR TEACHES.
COLOR HAS ACUITY. THIS IS HOW I KNOW!

All lights to black but the special on Roe.

COLORS CALLING.

END OF OPERA

1- The Butterfly Theorem by W.G. Horner 1815 source-www.cut-the-knot.org