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Double Meanings in Operatic Social Interactions, Characters, and Symbolisms in *The Magic Flute*, *La Traviata*, and *Carmen*

Lyuming Xu

North America International School, Shanghai, China
xulvming@126.com

Abstract. Opera is connected to society through character behavior and the impact of characters on the plot and music. The research focuses on understanding characters through alternative perspectives and how their actions help interpret their personalities and implications for opera. The paper analyzes the characters' social statuses and power struggles that affect the meaning of emotions and intentions in the plot. The three operas, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Verdi's *La Traviata*, and Bizet's *Carmen*, reference the novel character analysis approach that dissects the symbolic contrary perspectives of understanding the operas.

Keywords. Music history, opera analysis, opera society, opera interpretation

1 Introduction

Opera is an artistic and complex art form representing music to the audience. Opera combined with orchestra off the stage and the singing on the stage creates a solid visual and aural genre that can be explored artistically and through research. Opera is an art form that originated in Western Italian musical culture, involving groups of musicians and performers working together, culminating in a grand performance. Opera originated in the late 16th century, first playing in courts as dramatic musical works before expanding its influence all over Europe and beyond [1]. One of opera's most significant characteristics includes sung lyrics that create meaning for the synopsis and the character's actions onstage. The development of scripts for opera characters requires a detailed examination of each character's personality, actions, and behaviors [2]. Character evaluations help opera performers and researchers understand why certain operatic protagonists and antagonists choose specific actions over others. There are many ways society can understand the meaning opera brings to music and how to interpret the synopsis performed by the singers. Each opera reflects different important meanings hidden behind the opera's relation to the culture and society [3].

There are many explanations for character behaviors in operas, depending on the different perspectives one takes to interpret the actions. A deep understanding of characters and their behaviors is essential to visualizing the opera and its meaning in society. Comparing character traits and their personalities can help analyze their behavior and influence on operas. Categorizing opera characters by personality and by their intentions helps analyze operatic meanings.

This research evaluates different perspectives of primary operatic characters and the meaning these characters present on opera's social and cultural aspects. This research does not take a sole stance on each character. Instead, this research shows how character visualization can help interpret their personalities in multiple ways.

This research looks into multiple operas in Western music history. The first example discussed Papageno and the Queen of the Night from *The Magic Flute* by Mozart. The Queen of the Night can be described both as a protagonist and an antagonist. Papageno can be described as both a brave and cowardly character. The second example from *La Traviata* by Verdi shows how Violetta's character is shaped through love dilemmas and marriage, reflecting different perspectives on her actions. The third example from *Carmen* by Bizet shows how the opera's main character is powerful and powerless in her abilities and the lack of abilities to influence the opera's plot.

2 Opera and Society

Historically, the meaning of opera to society has changed through time. Opera's place in European music history changed depending on the genre's importance in different musical cultures [4]. According to Rosselli, opera can be seen as a social occasion and an opportunity to interact socially [5]. An opera is an event focusing on music, art, and entertainment. In Vienna's early 17th and 18th centuries, opera existed for nobles and upper-class citizens. The noble class would have the best seats for the performance. In Italy, there were a few public opera houses where everyone could watch opera, although the cost of attendance was high. The opera performance started very late, and people could attend the opera after finishing work, dinner, or shopping, creating an open and relaxing operatic environment.

"At the New York Academy of Music 1865, the bulk of the audience makes for the foyers when a notoriously poor tenor is announced as an emergency replacement in *Il Trovatore*, but when he suddenly manages a loud high C many of them come back" [5]. Rosselli's comparison of the audience in the past and today shows the difference in opera's meaning between two historical points. On one side, audiences have similar ideas and behaviors about wanting unusual and surprising entertainment. For example, an uneventful opera performance may make the audience feel immersed. A high C is challenging for tenors to sing, but not impossible. The audience is focused on the

performance but not the performer, meaning they are interested in the music quality. A strong performance of an aria can change the mood of the audience. Audiences' focus on the stage and singers has been crucial in all historical epochs of opera performance. Conversely, the meaning of opera and its interactions in music history have changed over time. Opera's relaxing and social atmosphere was more evident in the 17th and 18th centuries when compared to today. Throughout history, moving through the chronological timeline, operatic performance became more formal, setting up a stage of more seriousness in opera performance practice. The 17th and 18th centuries pin importance on the operatic environment, where the social element of opera can be shown on and off the stage. In modern professional opera performances, the focus is on the stage, particularly on music, synopsis, and characters. The operatic history and its environment develop two different meanings in how opera was and is perceived in societies.

The transformation between different settings and perceptions of opera in European societies occurred gradually. Vienna was known as a rich people's paradise in the 18th century. Vienna's upper class spread into the old and new nobilities, creating many problems in Vienna with the development of the middle class, which made the society complex. Integration into one society created more equality among Vienna citizens, which led to more opportunities in the opera world. With time, less importance was placed on one's social class. The new wealthy class supported Mozart, and his ideas were encouraged by the intelligentsia from the new nobility. The operas Mozart wrote were preferred by people, which shows Mozart's status in opera and society. Mozart's work also reveals what was happening in society, especially the decay of the monarchy, which is reflected in Mozart's compositional style. Dancing became a part of opera shows, bringing the audience happiness and transforming the operatic environment. The waltz, one example of a dance form, became more appealing to the audience and attracted more people to visit and watch opera performances. There were different dance styles, too, giving society more charm. Steptoe states, "Amateur musicians flourished, and publishers hastened to supply the market not only with chamber works but with keyboard reductions and variations on popular operatic pieces." [6]. This was the time when opera music became more popular. Professional and amateur music enthusiasts could attend performances, which added new audience members to the opera culture. Producing music became much more familiar for everyone, giving more chances for the opera's music development.

3 The Personality Contradictions in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*

In his opera *The Magic Flute*, Mozart hides the double meaning between bravery and cowardliness, as seen in the actions and personality of Papageno. Queen of the Night

is another character who simultaneously displays the characteristics of protagonist and antagonist. Analyzing operatic characters helps understand and interpret the plot within their actions. The character Papageno in *The Magic Flute* is a talkative and kind birding man. After Papageno finds that Tamino fainted in Act I Scene I, Papageno talks a lot to Tamino about saving him and introduces himself as a bird catcher. However, he is not speaking the truth. Papageno faces many challenges with Tamino, but Papageno always stays with Tamino and saves Pamina. In the opera's music, Papageno's playing of the ascending scale on the flute creates a beautiful decoration due to the speedy notes, as shown in Figure 1, setting a comical characteristic in the opera, revealing Papageno's conversational personality [7].



Fig. 1. Measures 6-19 from Aria No. 2 from Act I Scene I from *The Magic Flute*.

Papageno can summon many animals, showing listeners his association with nature and connections with the animal world. At the same time, Papageno's weakness is being challenged. For example, Papageno worries about challenges and fears failing to rescue the princess. At the same time, Papageno shows bravery when facing many challenges. When Papageno sees Monostatos wanting to bother Pamina, Papageno forgets everything he was afraid of before, swaying the silver bell to make Monstatos dance while saving himself and Pamina. Papageno's characteristics resonate due to his innocence. One of the charms of Pagageno's character is that Papageno tries everything

and succeeds.

When compared to Papageno, Tamino's character is more stable and responsible. Tamino is confident, thinking deeply and making many decisions before starting the challenge. In Act I Scene I, Tamino sees Pamina's picture, as the music is slow and has lyrical accompaniment, as shown in Figure 2 [7].

46 **Nº 3. Arie.**
Larghetto.

Clarineti in B. *tem.*
Fagotti. *tem.*
Corui in Es. *tem.*
Violino I.
Violino II.
Viola.
Tamino.
Violoncello e Basso. *Larghetto.*

Dies Bildniß ist bezaubert schön, wie noch kein Auge je ge. sehn! Ich
fühl' es, ich fühl' es, wie dies Götterbild mein Herz mit neu.er Regung füllt, mein Herz mit neu.er Regung füllt.

Fig. 2. Measures 1-15 from Aria No. 3 from Act I Scene I from *The Magic Flute*.

Tamino's voice resembles an instrument performed in the music, with a soft and peaceful sound, making the atmosphere very romantic. Tamino's high and bright voice integrates when the strings sustain harmony. Tamino answers by singing, and the dynamics of his voice show a powerful, determined heart.

The Queen of the Night can represent evil. At the request of the Queen, the three ladies intentionally rescue Tamino from the snake. The Queen pre-plans everything and carefully strategizes her actions in the opera. For example, if she lets Papageno tell Tamino a lie, then she can get a reason to punish Papageno. The Queen's purpose is to show how her power is in front of Tamino, thus gaining Tamino's trust. As a reward, Tamino will go to save the Queen's daughter. However, the Queen can also be considered the opera's protagonist. The Queen wants revenge, wishing to reclaim the Circle of the Sun, wanting her powers back from the priest Sarastro. "Sarastro and the

priests insinuate that death and despair is the Queen's nature as well as a punishment meted out to all who associate with her, but the Queen's reference to death and despair in 'Der Holle Rache' seems less a threat than a shriek against fate" [8]. The Queen is helpless and hopeless, wanting to express her unlucky fate and emphasize the emotion because she tries to save Pamina, who does not listen to the Queen. The Queen is suppressed and hopeless, losing everything in the process. The Queen's might and strengths are evident in the opera, but a hidden meaning shows an opposite situation. With the strengths behind her abilities, she also lacks power and control, which decreases her authority and ability to influence actions around her.

There are different identifications that Queen takes in the opera's plot, and one of her identities is being strong-powered. The Queen in the opera wants to save her daughter Pamina, but she also wants to control and limit her. When Pamina does not listen to her, the Queen is powerless. The Queen in the opera was also perceived as kind and helpful. In one example, the Queen reveals her begging character trait to ask Tamino to rescue her daughter. The Queen lacks the power to do this herself and needs others to help her, showing that she is not evil or dark.

Multiple scale variations with complex chords in different keys with compact or loose tempi make the music fluid. Music tells the emotion that happened in the story, and Brown-Montesano writes, "Gone are the emotional vacillations of the Larghetto; the Allegro expounds renewed confidence and an almost manic delight at the possibility of victory" [8]. The Queen of the Night's first aria is symbolic of the opera's plot, concentrating on the coloratura and showcasing the changes in mood and energy in the music, representing the darkness and its sudden appearance with nervous emotion, where the Queen is ambitious, as her characteristics alter from tenderness to unpowered shouting. The music is sudden and unexpected, represented by the Queen's agitated and powerful voice, reaching high notes, revealing her hopelessness and anger.

4 Violetta's Personal Dilemmas in Verdi's *La Traviata*

The opera *La Traviata* reveals multiple events about the relationship between society levels and love presented in society [9]. Violetta is displayed as a courtesan in this opera, meaning she does not hold much power. This is because the noble class sometimes controls Violetta. In terms of Violetta's character, she falls in love at the beginning of the opera and stays in true love until the very end. In Act I, in the song *Libiamo ne'lieti calici*, the music sounds fluid and romantic. Verdi uses a time signature 3/8 in the dance, implementing counterpoint and legato in the strings section, creating a deep harmonic movement. When Violetta sings "La vita è nel tripudio," translated as "Life is just pleasure," she thinks pessimistically that she fears the day when she is no longer in love. Violetta claims that her life would be finished when there is nothing

worthwhile for her to live for without love. Violetta becomes a realist when facing the world, given her past living a poor lifestyle. However, Alfredo sings back, “Quando non s’ami ancora,” translated as “If one hasn’t known love,” encouraging her, showing that he does not believe her love will disappear, telling her to wait for love to make her life more pleasant. During this time, Violetta’s mind breaks away from daily life, and she starts believing in love. Her illness at the beginning of the opera tells that she was hurt deeply and found it hard to live for a long time, which gives a foreshadowing cover in the opera, making Violetta’s life troublesome. At the end of Act I, Violetta deeply loves Alfredo and is prepared to spend her life with him. On the other side, Violetta knows she has little time to live, succumbing to the idea that she has not lived enough to understand or experience the full extent of love.

Alfredo’s father asks Violetta to leave Alfredo, and Violetta knows that she is not rich enough for Alfredo. Her thoughts are more profound; Violetta respects Alfredo’s father’s decision not to allow Alfredo to marry her. Wealthy men had absolute rights in that period because Giorgio told Violetta his daughter’s fiancé did not like a courtesan. Alfredo’s father is more slant to his daughter but not Alfredo. Violetta does not have enough power compared to Giorgio’s daughter, which is why Giorgio’s daughter’s husband is trying to avoid Violetta. In the music of *Pura siccome un Angelo*, the vocal parts between Giorgio and Violetta are loud and energetic. Violetta first shows her anger, refuses to listen to Giorgio, and then feels hopeless. Violetta may also think about Alfredo’s future; Alfredo can find a better soulmate. This is also a way to express love because Violetta understands that getting married to Alfredo will make Giorgio unsatisfied. Violetta sacrifices herself and tries to save Alfredo and his family’s lives, which shows her respect and what she can do for Alfredo.

In Act III, Violetta dies as the opera develops towards the climax. Violetta always cares about Alfredo. At the same time, she is deceptive because she does not want to tell Alfredo that she is going to die. Alfredo suggests they live together, even though he knows it is too late. Violetta wants to live with Alfredo but rejects his proposal to live together. Violetta’s heart becomes unstable, and she does not know what to do. Should Violetta listen to her heart or follow the noble class? On the way to death, nothing is more critical than Violetta’s ideas. She is a conscientious person and always states her thoughts. The control of the wealthy class destroyed what her life could have been. On one side, she wants to get married. On the other side, she knows she will die. Violetta’s dilemmas create a decisive inner struggle for a struggling character with a few possible action choices in the opera but many inner emotional struggles regarding her possible actions.

5 Bizet's *Carmen*: Powerful or Powerless?

Carmen is a brave and energetic woman. Carmen acts differently than other female characters in the opera, expressing her opinion and disregarding others' thoughts. Carmen's actions show that she wants to be free, as seen in her dance in the *Habanera* in Act I. *Habanera* starts rhythmically yet gracefully. Initially, the vocal part has a repetitive rhythm, creating mysterious and robust emotions based on its motivic structure. The song *Habanera* holds a different mood compared to other music inside opera. The music of *Habanera* has a fluid sound, freeing it from the musical perspective and revealing Carmen's true personality. Carmen interacts with many men, showing her confidence, acting boldly, and letting the characters in the opera around her realize her allure. Carmen publicly conveys her ideas. This characteristic is appreciated because, in the opera, these women are portrayed with more traditional traits or as workers in a factory. Carmen has more power and bravery compared to other women in the opera. Carmen exaggerates in conveying her ideas about love and finding a husband. The lyrics, "Love is a rebellious bird," deeply state that Carmen thinks there are no rules when facing love, which is how she expresses her individuality and resistance to life.

Carmen shows her decisive and assured personality when Don Jose is sent to lock up Carmen in Act I. Carmen can acquire Don Jose's trust, even as a powerless character. This shows the weaknesses that Jose possesses. Don Jose listens to what others say, falling for Carmen's charm, which is a turning point in how Don Jose becomes immersed in Carmen. Don Jose gradually stops following the rules, revealing the contradiction of personality between Carmen and Don Jose. Carmen tries her best to reach her goals in any way possible. Don Jose's job as a soldier includes listening to what his officer says, meaning that Don Jose should be a good listener and respond to directions. Don Jose cannot control himself and starts losing his power toward Carmen. The subsequent part confirms this when Don Jose returns from jail because he released Carmen. Carmen shows that she does not care whether Don Jose is doing well in prison because she already reached her goal of escaping. In Act III Scene III, in the aria *La fleur que tu m'avais jetée*, the flower symbolizes Jose's love and loyalty. Carmen starts to think Jose is an enormous burden because Jose becomes increasingly immersed in her, but Carmen hates the behavior of Jose's control because she believes love is free and starts to become bored with Jose. This shows Carmen is strong and does not feel guilty for her wrongdoing. Don Jose sacrifices a lot, as indicated by the flowers he gave to Carmen, to show his loyalty to her. Don Jose gives up the rules he must follow as a soldier and betrays his officer.

In Act III, Frasquita and Mercedes turn the cards for Carmen's fate. Carmen seems to believe that card turning is influential. Carmen's fate, as shown on the card, includes

death. Destiny does not stop Carmen because she indicates her acceptance of what is happening and does not fear the future. The cards can symbolize the events happening around Carmen, foreshadowing her destiny. At the end of Act IV, Carmen dies, showing her looking for freedom and perceiving her ideas as a higher priority than her life. While Carmen is physically dead, her soul is free. Don Jose can not accept that Carmen has fallen in love with another man. It is not surprising that Don Jose kills Carmen. Don Jose shows the loss of control of the situation after he kills Carmen, which offers a bright comparison between these two main opera characters, who are opposites in their characteristics throughout the plot.

6 Conclusions

The opera reveals the connections between society and culture. The art of opera, combined with musical innovations developed by composers, transforms the characters' meaning and how these characters influence the genre [10]. Opera contains complex connotations. One-sided aspects of character analysis show little to opera analysis. Multiple perspectives of characters and their actions offer more depth into operatic analysis and compositional intentions of those involved in the opera production [11]. The paper focused on detailed analysis and interpretation of primary opera characters, conveying different perspectives and reflecting corresponding backgrounds based on operas' synopses. Contrasting interpretations open varied cultural and societal understandings of how characters shape the opera and how their actions and behavior affect the plot.

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This book presents a collection of selected papers that present the current variety of all aspect of music research, development and education, at a high level. The respective chapters address a diverse range of theoretical, empirical and practical aspects underpinning the music science and teaching and learning, as well as their pedagogical implications. The book meets the growing demand of practitioners, researchers, scientists, educators and students for a comprehensive introduction to key topics in these fields. The volume focuses on easy-to-understand examples and a guide to additional literature.

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