

Opera as a Mirror of Society: Power and Class from Monteverdi to Wagner

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Abstract. Opera has always represented more than mere entertainment; it has represented a reflective index of society's power and status constructs. Looking at three case studies, this paper will show how composers used musical language as a representation on ethical concerns of society during their time. Beginning with Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* in 1607 and through to Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* in 1786 and Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in the 1850s and 1870s, each epoch of opera history represents a different construct for sound and power. Monteverdi blended divine order and musical harmony; harmony became equality in Mozart's works; and Wagner reinvented power in relation to national will. The final project will examine how political ideologies and social constructions are immanent in harmony and performance. The works of Kotnik and others will illustrate how opera has developed in direct relation to Europe's shifting ideologies of power—from holy power to human reason to collective will. By comparing and contrasting these case studies, this paper will demonstrate not only the reflective purpose of opera when it comes to political change, but also how it has actively shaped the public understanding of power, class, and equality.

Keywords: Power, Class, and Society.

1. Introduction

Operas have always gone beyond entertainment to be an important artistic achievement among European musical traditions. With its unique combination of poetry, stage plays, and songs that not many other art forms can match, operas trace back to the courtly settings of the early Renaissance Italy and became an astonishing success on the grand platforms of mid-century Europe. Since opera has always relied on its audience and supporters to exist and be funded, it has always been a reflection of what they valued and held important. Presented to the rulers, the merchants, or the common people, it has always represented the ideologies and political structures that shaped the outside world outside the theater. Viewing an opera is to witness a society presenting its own picture of order and identity and, in art, reveals how individuals see their place in systems of authority.

When opera first appeared at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was the creation of intellectuals and aristocrats who dreamed of reviving ancient Greek theatre's glory. But from its first productions, however, opera was more than intellectual restoration. Opera was a social performance — a public act by which power could be projected and identity strutted. The aristocratic heroes, the myths and legends of the plots, and the music that tied them together served to confirm a divinely ordered sense of rank. As cultural sociologist Vlado Kotnik explains, opera's "social power has been in service for centuries to legitimate the power of authorities, to ensure the prestige of elites, and to heat the passion of masses" [1]. But even in these earliest works, opera had political significance in its own right, independently of sycophantic endeavors. Baroque allegories were a quotidian representation of governance and virtue, imposing political ideals in musical events. By the nineteenth century, this process had continued to hone itself: "Opera and musical theatre contributed to the effective public dissemination of a cultural and political self-image, becoming one of the most powerful loci of national consciousness in the nineteenth century" [2].

Opera's history between 1600 and 1870 reveals how the form reshaped itself again and again in response to evolving notions of class and power. In its portrayal of hierarchy, it changed with the society in which it lived. In the process, it was transformed from something of its moment into a part of history, giving form to political hopes and terrors in its narratives, characters, and musical idiom.

In Jane Fulcher's account, this opera "did not merely reflect society but intervened in it, articulating ideological battles over class, gender, and national identity" [3]. It addresses the interior life of human beings and yet bears and bears the mores and hostilities of entire cultures. Comprehending an opera, then, entails comprehending something fundamental to the world that imagined it, nourish it. What composers connect to, whose virtues it extolls, and which harmonies it chooses all have to do with the political and moral climates of the day. Opera doesn't stay neutral. It's a podium on which social verities are asserted, questioned, or recreated, and it achieves this flexibility by constantly reframing its topics, its publics, and its musical idiom to suit new discursive systems. As historian Lorenzo Bianconi explains, "opera's survival depends on its ability to transform its conventions—stylistic, narrative, and institutional—according to the changing expectations of its public" [4]. Its survival across the centuries depends on its ability to adapt, to move with the world it's heard by. Whenever the world itself changes, so also changes the character of its music.

Opera has always at the same time been a manifestation of ascendant hierarchies and a space in which hierarchies have been questioned and reordered. In Monteverdi, in Mozart, in Wagner, centuries-long track of how power was conceived, represented, and heard. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607) defines Renaissance order, in which religious harmony and social hierarchy were united. Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) signals the Enlightenment criticism of that order, in its stead placing cleverness and reason and moral equality in place of obedience. Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (written between the 1850s and the 1870s) reconceives hierarchy in terms of nationalism and mythical representation, translating that authority which had hitherto devolved on God and on the king into a new thought of collective destiny common to the people and to the nation.

As Richard Taruskin notes, Wagner "transferred the seat of the sacred from divine monarchy to national community," turning his operas into musical dramas and also into "acts of cultural self-definition" [5]. Monteverdi, Mozart, and Wagner were no longer simply musicians, but commentators upon, and interpreters of, their own eras. Each lived at a time in which the meaning of power was being redefined. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, set against the backdrop of the Mantuan Court, reflected the Renaissance conviction that harmony in music was in correspondence to harmony in the cosmos. This faith in cosmic equilibrium also gave legitimacy to worldly hierarchy, placing the ruler at the center of both musical and moral order. It was an age that experienced its rulers as divine trustees of stability and that employed music to make that order real. A century and a half later, Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* was born in Enlightenment Vienna, its capital bustling with gossip and with scorn and with social strain. His opera refrained from no exposure of privilege and no amplification of the voiceless and in its pages contained the Enlightenment's redefinition of power — that reason and virtue, and not birth, give authority. By the nineteenth century, Wagner's nineteenth-century Ring Cycle transmuted comedy into myth and looked to no longer to courtliness nor to individual freedom, nor to anything short of communal destiny, to give it all meaning. Set against the backdrop of the unification of a fragmented Germany, Wagner's creation provided a fractured nation with a common myth — that their past, their identity, and their music all belong together.

The line that runs from Monteverdi to Mozart to Wagner is a musical line, to be sure, but also cultural. Monteverdi lent sound to religious hierarchy, Mozart lent sound to human equality, and Wagner lent sound to national identity. In each instance, "sound" becomes more than melody — it is the medium by which power and faith become audible. At each segment in the history of opera, opera didn't just react to changes made by society, but rather it has helped shape them. Through the use of language, music, and emotions, it gave people a way to reflect on who they were and to become. It's an opportunity to foreshadow changes that never took root in real life.

The Vienna, Bayreuth, and Mantua operatic theaters also served as expressions of power, mediated by the audiences and the musically controlling cliques that sustained the myths of monarchs and gods, not merely in parallel with the myths, but intrinsically embedded in them. An understanding of opera goes beyond a familiarity with its composers and musical works; it entails a sense of the social contexts that afforded the production of these sound terrains. These contexts are the royal courts wishing to build harmony, the Enlightenment epoch wishing to realize justice, and nations desiring

peace. Opera persistently raises questions by depicting civilization. Charting unfolding over the centuries compels reflection to regard the present.

2. Case Studies

2.1. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607) Harmony and Control

At the start of the seventeenth century, opera functioned more as the song of the nobleman and not the voice of the people to any degree. Opera flourished amidst elevated spaces where the aesthetic and the religious functioned together as a whole. It was a symbol of power and beauty. In this world was Claudio Monteverdi, a musician who took the theoretical exercises of scholars and made of them living drama. His magnum opus, *L'Orfeo*, did more than divert the Mantuan court; it lent voice to the order of society. To grasp how opera had its origins as an art of hierarchy and harmony, it is first necessary to enter Monteverdi's world.

Opera emerged in an era when Europe was rediscovering the ideals of ancient Greece and Rome. The late Renaissance celebrated balance, proportion, and the belief that harmony in music reflected harmony in the universe. As music historian Richard Taruskin notes, early opera "was born from the desire to recover the moral and rhetorical force of Greek drama" [5]. Society itself was understood as a kind of cosmic composition, in which every person had a role to play, and order was the highest form of beauty. When Monteverdi composed *L'Orfeo* in 1607 for Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga's court in Mantua, he was not merely creating entertainment for the elite; he was giving musical form to the philosophical and social order of his age — a world convinced that divine will, reason, and art were all parts of the same grand design.

The conditions under which *L'Orfeo* premiered were symbolic in themselves. It was premiered not in a public theater at all but in the private rooms of the palace of the Gonzaga, in front of an audience of aristocrats, poets, and humanist intellectuals. As María Sancho-Vellón puts it, early opera "served as a courtly symbol, affirming the power of its patrons in the display of harmony and domination," in particular in Italian ducal courts [6]. These men and women regarded themselves as culture's custodians, heirs to classical knowledge and to God's favor. Art was not a challenge of authority to them, but a declaration of it. Out in the non-palatial world, all was flux: the discoveries of Galileo, the aftermath of religious war, and the ascendancy of new social classes; in these palace walls, music delivered stability. In Monteverdi's opera, rebellion was not beauty; it was obedience elevated to the sublime.

What was needed was a form that could carry this vision, and the myth of Orpheus was the ideal vehicle. Orpheus was the musician who, according to Greek mythology, could move rocks and seduce monsters. Orpheus is often even characterized with the ability to persuade the gods of the underworld with his singing. His voice symbolized the Renaissance notion that speech was the most powerful force, not violence. It was the ultimate symbol of order by persuasion. Monteverdi and his librettist, Alessandro Striggio, connected their work to a worldview that emphasized the interdependence of morality, music, and speech. This was done by establishing this story. Ellen Rosand states that the song of Orpheus "represents a union of rhetoric and music, the very basis of humanist aesthetics" [7]. The ruler's statement became associated with Orpheus's song, which encapsulates the idea of calmness, logic, and the capability of bringing order from chaos.

The methodology of Monteverdi further explains this idea. His switch between aria and recitative was a moral statement and a stylistic breakthrough. Aria, with its rich melody, conveyed emotion that is purified by structure. Recitative, with its speech-like cadence, symbolized reason and clarity. When this is all taken as a whole, they represent the view of the Renaissance that emotion should complement intelligence rather than consume it. Monteverdi's writing becomes more and more sophisticated in Orpheus's appeal to Charon, "Possente spirto," with each word becoming more complex than the one before, but always staying within the parameters of discipline. "This aria, a representation of reason dominates emotions through the control of musical language" [8] "stands as

a tiny example of Monteverdi's art." Consequently, the piece's harmony serves a musical analogy of the state of the world.

This moral order is reinforced even by the instruments in the opera. Monteverdi makes specific melodies for each world in the drama. The world of the shepherds is brought up by beautiful strings and harpsichords. The underworld, on the other hand, is augmented by melancholy winds and trombones. And the heavens by glorious cornets. The theological dichotomy of heaven, earth, and Hades is a reflection of this timbral divide. Such differences were actually desirable for a Renaissance ear as they were guarantees of order. Every person and sound was in their place accordingly. As a result, *L'Orfeo* gave life to the view of social order as regular, melodic, and correct to his audience.

The exploration of gender in the opera greatly enhances its portrayal of Renaissance ideals. For example, the death of Eurydice, which precipitates central action, is afforded minimal treatment in the text. She simply provides a short musical interlude before leaving the scene. Accordingly, there is the foregrounding of the male protagonist Orpheus's voice, which is characterized by great sorrow. Furthermore, the Messenger, who is charged with delivering the news of the death of Eurydice to the masses, delivers the news with an implicit sense of desolation instead of an explosive show of grief, thus underlining the relatively insignificant role that she has played. These moments where the voices of females are silenced are intentional rather than accidental. It is a reflection of a contemporary culture where the ideal male attains virtue by reasoned intellect and speech, while the archetypal female upholds social order through obedience. According to Jane Bernstein, "Renaissance musical culture often confined women to symbolic silence, casting their absence as necessary to preserve harmony" [9]. The male exercise of authority and influence in the emotional and aesthetic sphere is highlighted in the extraordinary control over language and music that is represented by Orpheus, as it seeks to remodel the central narrative in ways that go beyond mere change.

L'Orfeo ends with Monteverdi's highly formal and serene conclusion, reflecting a deep feeling of reflection. Earlier performances of the Orpheus narrative ended in disaster when Orpheus' grief and pride drove the Bacchantes to dismember him. Monteverdi breaks from this norm. In his 1609 adaptation, Apollo lovingly raises Orfeo to heaven as he descends to save him. Instead of building to a peak, tragic parts fade and give way to something ecstatic. This innovation represented the aspirations of the Renaissance and was not merely a plot surprise. As Taruskin points out, Monteverdi's answer of substituting exaltation in place of violence was consistent with the courtly ideology, according to which the heaven's authority was going to intervene and set everything right. The finale chorus creates the impression of a musical exhalation with peacefulness and restoration of order. For the Monteverdi audience, the conclusion was clearly both gratifying as well as comforting. In a society with political turmoil and religious strife, the notion that reason and beauty would still save the day would have seemed to be an illusion. The end of the opera offers no resolutions, but an emotional response – an indication that order exists amidst the tumult around.

While this notion of peace might appear remote or illusory to contemporary audiences, the listeners of Monteverdi perceived it as the fundamental truth. During a turbulent time, *L'Orfeo* confirmed that music might unite heavenly law with human sorrow. It gave Renaissance humanism's abstract ideas—that proportion, balance, and reason were ideals—emotional depth. Through Orpheus's voice, the audience heard the sorrow of a lover and also the harmony of the cosmos. They heard the sound of a world that still thought in terms of harmony — musical, moral, and social.

Monteverdi's triumph was not to have pampered authority but to have elevated it. Hierarchy had become beauty; obedience had become art. What the nobles in Mantua's palace that winter's night in 1607 heard was the tale of Orpheus; they heard also themselves. In the disciplined passion of the music, they knew their own ideals — devotion, self-control, and divine order translated into sound. In *L'Orfeo*, opera was founded not as protest but as self-portraiture: a mirror raised to civilization in its most self-confident phase [10, 11].

2.2. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) — Enlightenment and Equality Music

By the time that Mozart set *Le Nozze di Figaro* in 1786, the harmony that had previously characterized Monteverdi's world had already started to break. An era of intellectual enlightenment had taken the place of the Renaissance order. On the European mainland, the Enlightenment attack on the foundations of monarchy, faith, and social hierarchy was in full flow. Philosophers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot challenged authority and declared the superiority of the individual. No longer a noble announcement, opera was now a theater on which equality and reason could be dramatized, veiled, and challenged. According to Richard Taruskin, "opera buffa became the Enlightenment's theater of ideas, where laughter substituted for revolt and wit for rebellion" [5].

Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* — The Marriage of Figaro — stands at the heart of this new world. Based on Pierre Beaumarchais's controversial play, which had been banned in France for its biting satire of aristocratic privilege, the opera tells the story of a servant, Figaro, and his fiancée, Susanna, who conspire to outwit their master, Count Almaviva. On the surface, it is a comedy of disguises, secrets, and misunderstandings. But underneath the humour is a deep critique of authority. As Julian Rushton notes, Mozart "translated Beaumarchais's radical spirit into sound — giving musical dignity to servants and irony to masters" [12]. *Le Nozze di Figaro* utilizes music to bring the political ideas of the Enlightenment into harmony.

It made its debut in the city of Vienna. It was a paradox that Emperor Joseph II's court embodied: it was in favour of reform in the name of the Enlightenment even while it still clung to aristocratic ritual. Here, in its opera, a was tacit rebellion. It was an event that needed both aristocrat and common people to join in to laugh at privilege in its excesses. Mary Hunter interprets Vienna's audiences as seeing Figaro simultaneously as court entertainment and social allegory — a fine line between criticism and constraint [13]. What had been an emblem of sophistication, the opera house, was, at least for a few hours, a world of equality.

Le Nozze di Figaro is radical in its plot, and in how its music itself articulates social revolution. In previous opera, musicality signaled rank: noble persons sang dignified arias, and servants sang simple, comic tunes. Mozart dismantles this convention entirely. Servants and masters in Figaro sing in the identical musical language. The Count's refined, contained music is equaled—and regularly beaten—by the singing of his servants. John A. Rice notes that "in Mozart's ensembles, the equality of voices becomes a metaphor for the equality of persons" [14]. The same beauty, wit, and depth belong to everyone. Where Monteverdi's music instituted hierarchy, Mozart's destroys it. Harmony itself becomes democratic.

This equality finds fullest life in the opera's ensembles. When multiple characters sing at onetime, Mozart interweaves their melodies into rich harmonies in which no single person dominates. Each character maintains their individual traits, yet they are all united together by a common musical theme. According to Hunter, "the conviction that reasoned coexistence, rather than dominance, produces harmony" [13]. Imagining a society in which mutual understanding substitutes prescriptive hierarchy, the music of Mozart can accomplish something beyond mere diversion. Mozart was possibly expressing a social structure that was still being attempted by philosophers.

The aria "Se vuol ballare, Signor Contino" from Figaro is a prime example of Mozart's societal view. The beat is playful, almost giving a sense of mockery, while the melody dances smoothly over the surface. However, its substance is rebellious. Figaro tells the Count that he, as the servant, will dance if his lord wishes him to do so. It is impossible to misinterpret the metaphor: authority is reversed. Rushton states that "the aria's elegance conceals its subversion — wit becomes a weapon sharper than rebellion" [12]. This allows revolutionary ideas to remain unpunished by disguising what could have been dangerous as satire [12]. Mozart hides revolution inside grace, letting humour and satire run beneath the noses of noblemen.

The comedic elements in *Le Nozze di Figaro* serve as an optimal vehicle for criticism. Mozart recognized that laughter could achieve what anger could not. Given that joy disarms its audience, the opera's social critique is rendered both profound and accessible. When the Count kneels before the

Countess in the final act and beseeches her for forgiveness, Mozart's composition transforms mockery into a moral revelation. Laura Tunbridge describes this moment as "a reconciliation that transcends hierarchy — the transformation of social order into moral order" [15]. The Countess's act of forgiveness represents not an indication of surrender but a demonstration of moral superiority. In that moment, kindness prevails over power, and decency triumphs over privilege.

Gender is an ordering determinant in the recasting of morality. Women maintained order in Monteverdi's world by being quiet and expressing deference. By contrast, they embody reason and intellect in the case of Mozart. The Countess and Susanna join forces to move the action toward the end. Their bond subverts established gender and class biases. "Mozart's heroines think, plan, and act with moral intelligence — a musical articulation of Enlightenment ideals extended to women," as Jane Bernstein notes [16]. The sharp-witted Susanna and the unwavering Countess show empathy as the superior knowledge and expose the foolishness of masculine authority. Thus, the feminine voice, which serves as the opera's conscience, broadens the Enlightenment's belief in reason.

Its immense stress is also felt in *Le Nozze di Figaro*. It was written at the heart of chaos, just three years before the French Revolution. The laughing that erupted in Vienna in 1786 was a mask of comfort. Unconsciously, they realized that Mozart's portrayal of masters and servants was a reflection of their own. According to Taruskin, "Figaro's success lay in its ability to transform social criticism into pleasure — the revolution heard, not declared" [5]. Equality could scarcely be ignored once it was conceived.

Mozart's pieces are prime instances of the Enlightenment's emphasis on both balance and transparency. Both broad and conversational characteristics are reflected in his ensemble. His harmonic progressions, on the other hand, develop with a sense of logical flow. Each composition is infused with dynamism and awareness. According to Rice, "Mozart's music exemplifies the Enlightenment faith in reason — beauty born of order, and order animated by feeling" [14]. The idea that creativity and intellect are fundamentally interconnected. It is proven by the transition between humor and ethics. *Le Nozze di Figaro* maintains its significance through its embodiment during a period in which society and art share a common language. It turns political critique into the understanding of the people through the means of humour, forgiveness, and satire. It suggests that freedom may be spoken of before it even occurs and that liberty should not be taken away. Music itself becomes philosophy in this world of masks and reconciliation; it is a reason, a feeling, and mankind all in perfect harmony.

While Monteverdi's harmony encouraged his listeners to hear and view harmony as power and control, Mozart encouraged them to hear it as empathy. Thus, in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the opera no longer celebrates power but humanizes it. The palace becomes a stage for a mirror of society, the music, and the sound of Enlightenment itself.

2.3. Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle — Mythology & Concerns of Control

The nineteenth century marked as a clear shift from the ideals of the world of Mozart, where reason, equality, and liberty were losing way to something far more chaotic. Enlightenment optimism was transformed by the storm of the revolution, the birth of nationalism, and the dynamo of industrialization. Europe transformed from the continent of the courtly aristocracy to that of the nations, the transition that necessitated an innovative type of authority. With the erosion of the old aristocratic and divine forces, mythology emerged to take on the mission — to be the discourse that could intertwine the emotional, moral, and national dimensions of life. At this time emerged the German composer and playwright Richard Wagner, and his epic composition *Der Ring des Nibelungen* aimed to recreate meaning through the acoustic medium. According to Barry Millington, Wagner's enterprise is "nothing less than to create a total myth for the modern age — an art that could replace the lost religious unity of Europe" [17].

Wagner's Ring Cycle, which comprises *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Das Rheingold*, and *Die Walküre*, matured over the course of two and a quarter centuries and is more than the sum of its operatic components. It is a complete cosmos, an otherworldly kingdom that encompasses the

political and religious turmoil that occurred within the constraints of nineteenth-century Europe. By drawing upon the material provided within the corpus of myths among the Norse and Germanic tribes, Wagner developed an epic where deities and demigods, and human beings do battle over the ownership of the Rhinegold, the token of unbridled power. Beneath the surface of the fabled narrative is the contemporary metaphor for desires, moral failure, and fragmentation. Roger Parker and Carolyn Abbate relate that "Wagner's myths are always about the present; their archaic settings conceal the anxieties of modernity — greed, technology, and domination" [18,19].

Wagner reinterpreted opera as an all-encompassing creative medium with his conception of Gesamtkunstwerk, or "total artwork." He felt that the distinctions between word and tone, symbol and sound, should be erased as poetry, music, and staging merge into one, inseparable experience. In the same way that the newly formed German nations aimed for political union, Wagner saw art as a holy means of achieving cultural unification. According to Taruskin, *The Ring* was "an aesthetic and ideological response to fragmentation — an attempt to make art itself the site of national synthesis" [20]. His enormous orchestras, unceasing music, and fluid scenery turned opera from a spectacle into a ritual that allowed viewers to engage with the metaphysics of fate instead of just being entertained.

Leitmotif's, the concept of a repeated musical linkage to characters, things, or mood. They change over the course of the play to mark moral and psychological growth. Hundreds are employed by Wagner over the course of *The Ring*, including the golden theme of the Rhinegold, the majesty of Valhalla, the sword's triumphant theme, and the evil throb of the curse. "The leitmotif is not a term but a process — a way in which sound becomes memory, prophecy, and judgment at once," writes Thomas S. Grey [21]. The listener is taken on a tour of memory and fate by Wagner's orchestra that takes on the persona of the cycle's ultimate narrator. The end result is an acoustic world where history itself seems to remember and think.

Wagner redefined hierarchy with this musical structure. While hierarchy was heavenly and uncontested in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, it was social and subject to criticism in Mozart's *Figaro*. *The Ring*, a self-destructive cycle of ambition and loss, is where it becomes sad. The gods of Valhalla, under Wotan's leadership, represent the inconsistencies of nineteenth-century governance: morality subordinated to expediency, authority based on compromise. Wotan violates the rules he enacts by using lies to construct his world, which leads to inexorable destruction. Wotan's downfall "is the tragedy of authority based on contract, not love," according to Wagner himself [22]. His fall is similar to the former European monarchy, which were lifeless empires whose masks belied moral decay. Wagner argues that when power and control suppress empathy and compassion, it will not last.

Wotan's daughter Brünnhilde transforms the sad prophecy into a symbol of hope. The moral and emotional foundation of the *Ring* is supported by her transition from an obedient Valkyrie to a moral rescuer. She chooses empathy and compassion over obedience as she defies her father in order to save Siegmund. She had to suffer the consequences; however, Brünnhilde is ultimately the key to restoring balance to the world. She ends the cycle of greed and restores natural order by throwing the cursed ring back to the Rhine and voluntarily embracing the flames. Wagner depicts an original kind of heroism with the character of Brünnhilde. Bryan Magee states that, "one based on self-knowledge and sympathy rather than conquest" [23]. She converts destruction into an end of purification through sacrifice. Ironically, the fire that destroys Valhalla becomes an agent of renewal.

The arc of Brünnhilde also represents a significant shift in how women are portrayed in opera. Women upheld order in Mozart's universe by intelligence and moral wit, whereas in Monteverdi's, they did so by being silent. In Wagner's work, a woman breaks the cycle completely by understanding rather than seduction or obedience. According to Susan McClary, Brünnhilde "sings the world into moral awareness — she claims the moral voice that patriarchal culture denied her" [24]. Her resistance reinterprets heroism as compassion rather than dominance. The feminine voice actually becomes the conscience of civilization in Brünnhilde's soaring goodbye, which follows Eurydice's quiet and Susanna's cunning.

It is impossible to miss the *Ring*'s political undertones. *The Ring* promotes Wagner's idea of a unified cultural identity and was written during a time when German nationalism was on the rise. The

downfall of Valhalla parallels the demise of tainted political regimes, and the renewal of the world suggests a cleansed collective conscience. But Wagner's nationalism was spiritual rather than narrow political; he contemplated "a nation united not by state but by myth — a common imagination of destiny" [17]. In the operas, myth becomes the new religious concept and unites humanity in common symbols of loss and regeneration.

Musically, Wagner's innovations were as expansive as his thoughts. His orchestras were gigantic, his harmonies constantly in flux, his melodies freed from traditional forms. He substitutes individual arias with an ongoing stream of symphonic drama, where each moment grows organically out of the previous one. His notorious chromaticism — harmonies that put off resolution — reflects the impatient modern psyche. Taruskin finds that "Wagner's tonal suspension is the sound of history losing its center — music as perpetual striving" [16]. In this way, the Ring becomes an allegory of modern consciousness itself: unsteady, yearning, and constantly in quest of meaning.

Why look to myth to give form to his age? Because myth, in contrast to history, brings the temporal and the eternal together. It enables the nineteenth-century particular struggles — nationalism, secularism, industrialism — to assume timeless shape. In *Myth and Opera*, Abbate and Parker have it this way: "Wagner's mythic world is modernity seen through a mirror: its ruins turned to prophecy" [18]. By recourse to myth, Wagner provides not evasion but transfiguration: the potential to discover continuity in an age of disruption.

The Ring Cycle represents both change and victory. From the divine order of Monteverdi, the social equality of Mozart, to the fate-destined myth of Wagner, the Ring Cycle brings an end to the lengthy conversation about opera with political control. However, despite its power, it ends in humility. The gods vanish, but love stays. Instead of sadness, there is rebirth as the last notes fade and the Rhine regains its wealth. Even when the globe burns, the music endures because it is timeless, thought-provoking, and renewed.

3. Comparative Analysis

Opera's connection to power shifted with the organizations that supported it, as well, ranging from aristocratic courts in the Monteverdi to theatres during the period of the Mozart and Wagner festivals. For almost three centuries, it progressed beyond the reinforcement of the divinely made world to investigating the concept of the equality of man and, subsequently, common destiny. And it did more than replicate these evolutions; it has allowed people to imagine what power sounded and looked like. According to Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, opera has a singular ability to musicalize social order so that the listener is able to comprehend the form of the social order as well as its breakup [18]. The sequence running from *L'Orfeo-Figaro* to *The Ring* reveals an overall narrative in regards to the manner Europe's moral imagination was being remade.

In Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, composed at the beginning of the seventeenth century, harmony was order. Music was a sonic representation of a divinely ordered cosmos, in which beauty lay upon obedience and proportion. All aspects of the opera — its mythical plot, its interchanges between recitative and aria — ratified the Renaissance faith that faith and reason could exist in perfect equilibrium. In Ellen Rosand's words, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* "was thought of as a musical reflection of cosmic order — art serving both symbol and sanction of hierarchy" [25]. Orfeo's voice, authoritative and disciplined, was the ruler's ideal: domination through self-control. His singing transformed personal feeling into public order, and it proposed that music's function was to confirm rather than to undermine authority. Harmony for Monteverdi's audience was not only aesthetic but also moral.

By comparison, Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* emerges from an entirely other social world. Where Monteverdi's music sanctioned an enduring hierarchy, Mozart's proclaimed a more fluid, rational world. Rationality and discourse had supplanted divine fiat in the Enlightenment intellectual world, and harmony itself set about illustrating coexistence, and no longer submission. In *Figaro*, equality of sound equates equality of existence: master and servant sing in the same musical tongue. Mary

Hunter describes how "the new musical language of opera buffa became an allegory of Enlightenment social ideals — conversation in place of command" [13]. In its choruses, in which discordant utterances resolve into mutually concerting harmony, Mozart introduces into sound the Enlightenment dream that difference might coexist without lordship. In the collapse of the Count's authority, the drama demonstrates that reason and beauty, and not birthright, have emerged to define the new measures of virtue. Richard Taruskin describes how in its comedy, "Mozart achieves what philosophy could not: it sounds the utopia of rational coexistence" [5].

Wagner's Ring Cycle, on the contrary, comes back to myth not in regress but in reinterpretation. By the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment's faith in reason had cracked under the stresses of revolution and industrialism. In this era of dislocation, Wagner looked to myth to regain wholeness — a symbolic unity that could rise above politics and division. His operas transmute the Enlightenment's individuals into Romantic groups: the Volk, the nation, the common fate among peoples. Wagner's great musical forms redefine power as fate—cyclical, not linear; tragic, yet redemptive—while Mozart's harmony made power universal. In *The Ring*, as Barry Millington puts it, "history becomes myth, and myth becomes history's mirror; its gods fall because their authority, like that of Europe's rulers, has lost its moral ground" [17]. The centuries-long moral evolution comes to an end in the redemption of Brünnhilde, conceived of sympathy, not of triumph: the voice of obedience has turned into the voice of conscience.

Seen together, these three operas show a sustained consistency that supports their differences. Every opera renders the experience of social order in emotional form. The incorporation of aria and recitative in Monteverdi expresses the Renaissance conviction in the governance of feeling by reason. The Enlightenment desire for equality and conversation is accomplished in Mozart by the intertwining of the vocal lines. The progressive leitmotifs in Wagner bring the ideal of historical movement to the plane of harmony, which stands as the sign of the continual change inherent in modernity. Taruskin states that "harmony ceases to be a mirror of divine law and becomes the sound of history itself from Monteverdi to Wagner" [20]. The changing musical style over time mirrors the developing ethical imagination and imaginative advancement evident in Europe.

This ethical cycle is further demonstrated by the shift of gender roles. In *L'Orfeo*, Eurydice's almost silence ratifies patriarchal thinking that order relies upon feminine constraint; she is the missing cause of Orpheus's rhetoric. In *Figaro*, Susanna and the Countess assert moral authority by the means of intellect and sympathy, becoming what Susan McClary identifies as "the Enlightenment's discovery of the feminine as rational and ethical subject" [24]. In *The Ring*, Brünnhilde's ultimate act — depositing the ring in the Rhine and ending the gods' reign — constitutes womanhood as the agent of ethical rebirth. Her song becomes no longer love's lament but civilization's conscience. This progression from silence to speech to redemptive retrieval tracks humanity's own ethical maturation: the voice of power becomes that of compassion.

Opera's audiences shifted as much as its subject matter. Monteverdi composed for Mantuan aristocrats, who knew art to embody God's order. Mozart composed for the emerging bourgeoisie, who wished to see in the opera house a mirror of their virtue and humor. Wagner composed for a nation seeking cultural identity. Each audience broadened the morality of opera's compass — from royal ritual to public entertainment to public legend. Abbate and Parker summarize this development as "the widening of opera's moral horizon — from the few who rule to the many who imagine themselves ruled" [23][18]. The progression of private chamber, public theater, and festival hall parallels the widening of the very definition of the public itself.

Through this long arc, opera illustrates that art is always more than a mirror, but a moral force. Monteverdi instructed that beauty legitimates hierarchy; Mozart that beauty challenges it; Wagner that beauty transcends it. Each in his own way reshaped what harmony itself means: at first, divine law; then human freedom; and then collective fate. All of them bear witness that the history of music is also the history of conscience — the ear of civilization learning to hear itself.

4. Conclusion

Whether the opera was performed in Vienna, Mantua, or at Bayreuth, it always managed to go above and beyond the surface level expectation of creative expression. It has served as a lens through which society has viewed itself. It has provided insight into the development of nationalism, socialization, and the growth of music across different historical periods. From Monteverdi to Mozart and finally to Wagner, the journey is not only a history of creative development but also a story of the dramatic shift in European conceptions of harmony. Harmony in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is a symbol of submission, the aural manifestation of a world that is governed by both heaven and human restraint. Every note reaffirms the belief that order is inherently holy, uniting power and beauty. In Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, harmony is portrayed as an equal opportunity in which passion and reason may coexist. His writings also express the Enlightenment idea that knowledge may take the place of obedience as the basis for legal regulations and that every individual has inherent value. And Wagner's Ring depicted harmony as a constant process of creation and destruction from which new meanings are derived. His mythic imagination redefined power as collective destiny, not divine right, and a broken world as the likeness, and possibly the promise, of unity. In concert, these operas illustrate how art and society share a single thread: each must redefine its harmony to exist. When the old equilibrium withers, music fashions a new one. When faith withers, imagination revives it. Opera endures because it brings history's tensions to sound — transmuting conflict into beauty, ambiguity into sense. It makes it possible to have societies hear themselves, to live through their contradictions, and to envision a solution that politics cannot offer. Opera's history also reveals the history of human conscience. Power, in Monteverdi, is outside and divine, in Mozart, human and moral, in Wagner, collective and spiritual. In each phase, music reflects and forebodes that phase. It bears the memory of the past and looks toward what may still be. It is that, therefore, opera, in its transformation, always matters. It refers to that epoch-transcending encounter between authority and liberty, between the self and the world. Opera endures when it brings abstraction to life. By melody and theater, it concretizes speechless ideas — hierarchy, justice, destiny, love. It teaches that power, in any guise, is not permanent or absolute, but must each day be recreated in terms of sympathy and art. To hear opera is to hear civilization thinking out loud, questioning its order, testing its principles, and noting, note-by-note, the score of its becoming. By far over four centuries since *L'Orfeo* first echoed in the halls of Mantua, opera still remains a witness and exercise of humankind's finest intentions. Sung in praise of kings, citizens, or states, it still asks the same questions: Who has authority? Whose ears should it be for? And after every discourse, how will we be reunited? Opera demonstrates that art is not to be viewed as an escape from life but is one of the most elegant endeavours by which we strive to understand. It is the language of human civilization—the encapsulation of our past history, intellectual endeavours, and feelings

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