

Reclaiming Female Agency in the Performance of Wagnerian Opera

KATARINA GROBLER

Opera culture has shaped itself around women. They have long been viewed as the feature and jewels of its art form: no prima donna, no opera.¹ For many years, it has disseminated values, morals and didactic messages to audiences about femininity and a woman's identity in the world. Although these ingrained stereotypes are seemingly out of fashion, it is opera, the art of extremes, from which our current theatre and film tradition has emerged.² Opera continues to be an area of importance amongst feminist scholars, particularly when examining strategies that contemporary directors use to overcome issues of gender and produce art which is more reflective of the current social landscape.

However, tension still surrounds the topic of female agency in the performance of opera. In the context of post-structural feminist analysis, agency is defined as "the discursive constitution of a particular individual as having presence (rather than absence), that is as having access to a subject position in which they have the right to speak and to be heard."³ Exactly *how* the women of opera are heard and what they say (as well as what they don't) when they speak is where the division lies. This discourse has exemplified itself in Wagnerian opera. Known for its virtuosic, demanding female vocal roles and strong female characters, it can be viewed to inherently hold a high level of agency through the sophistication attributed to its female roles.⁴ Conversely, in *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women*, French philosopher and feminist Catherine Clément argues that many of opera's traditional dramatic plots feature the death of

¹ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), 5.

² Susan McClary, "Foreword," to Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), xvii.

³ Bronwyn Davies, "The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* no. 30 (1991): 51.

⁴ Nila Parly, *Vocal Victories: Wagner's Female Characters from Senta to Kundry*, trans. Gaye Kynoch (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2011), 11.

the female character, or heroine, while the men (despite their moral circumstances) survive to tell the tale.⁵ In these operas, it is the men who become the agents; absence of the female characters allows the men to be perceived as the authors of the narrative resolution. Similarly, Eva Rieger in *Richard Wagner's Women* explores the different ways in which female characters in Wagnerian opera are given symbolic associations through leitmotifs. These at times emphasise the negative stereotypes women are subject to in the dramatic narrative.⁶ Here, the orchestra asserts itself as a separate agent capable of communicating meaning—ultimately heard as a second “voice” by the audience. This idea of “voice” becomes central to the argument: opera, driven by its ability to seduce audiences through the power of the human voice, can provide a high level of agency to the female characters through song. This musical power can then liberate them from other oppressive forces in the work. As Nila Parly argues in *Vocal Victories*, the women of Wagnerian opera “exist as sound and superior vocal volume, here they hold their own and escape their murderous fate.”⁷ Carolyn Abbate takes this point even further in *Unsung Voices*, by identifying particular sites of “reclamation” within the dramatic narrative in which the level of agency can be increased, depending on what “voice” the female character assumes at these points, both metaphorically and musically.⁸ She introduces the idea that while the text and music are fixed within the score, the freedom for interpretation lies within the hands of the performer.

In this article, I will explore how contemporary directors actively use the opportunities provided by Wagnerian opera to create a larger platform of agency for their female characters. I will argue that a high level of female agency is critical to elevating the status of opera's female characters and achieving a feminist vision of gender equality in performance. Further, I will argue that there are more strategies for reclaiming agency within the realm of stage production and performance than that which are currently being discussed in literature. This will extend the work of Abbate and Clément, who have focused mainly on the issue of agency through

⁵ McClary, foreword to *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, xiv.

⁶ Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2011), 13.

⁷ Nila Parly, *Vocal Victories*, 18.

⁸ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), x.

score analysis of music and dramatic text. Specifically, I will build on Clément's argument to ask: can agency be reclaimed in a rendition of complete allegiance to the dramatic narrative, or do certain creative liberties need to be taken in order to produce feminist art? Are there possible renditions of feminist performance where female eroticism isn't repressed or consumed as a commodity by audiences? And finally, can feminist art, with its subverted conventions, satisfy audiences in the same way that traditional opera productions might? These questions will become central to my discussion.

In order to understand how the various elements of opera function in performance, their individual purposes need to first be explored more deeply. In the first part of this article, I will introduce these elements as components of representation, through which meaning can be expressed in various ways. I will situate the idea of agency as a vehicle for female empowerment in each of these components, varying in degree and dependent on the director's vision. The second part of this article will analyse the strategies for agency that directors employ to suggest a feminist interpretation of Wagner's works in performance. Specifically, I will be looking at Yuval Sharon's 2018 production of *Lohengrin* at the Bayreuth Festival, and the "Copenhagen Ring," directed by Kasper Bech Holten and produced by the Royal Danish Opera in 2006. Both productions have made a significant impact in Wagnerian performance practice, particularly the "Copenhagen Ring," which has divided audiences over its extreme use of feminist gestures. In contrast, the feminist gestures appear subtler in Sharon's production of *Lohengrin*, yet audience reception has remained similar. The reason for why this is so will be explored further in the second part of this article. If we are to move away from traditional practice and towards a more inclusive vision for operatic performance, it is essential that feminist productions can satisfy and be enjoyed by audiences. This can only be achieved with greater focus on gender analysis in the musicological field. This article seeks to achieve this by providing an understanding of feminist production values in Wagnerian opera, in order to pave the way for its greater appreciation.

Opera and its Layers of Representation

A complex genre, opera combines various art forms together to create a unified vision of an external reality in performance. As Robert Donington states in *Opera and its Symbols*, “words are the most articulate component, music the most expressive, and staging the most localizing.”⁹ These are the three main components of representation in opera. Previous scholarship has criticised feminist analysis for its heavy focus on dramatic text and ignorance of its music: Pierre Boulez, in his book *Orientations*, theorises that the music, which is objective in its form, is powerful enough to “purify the junk of the text and its meaning.”¹⁰ However, if the role of the music is to express what the text is to articulate, associations between harmony, rhythm, structure and the text can be made. Susan McClary explains this in the foreword to Clément’s text, using an example from Carmen’s *Habanera*. She makes the argument that before Carmen even opens her mouth, the slippery chromatic descent in the orchestra already establishes her as a promiscuous character—that the “tonal cards are stacked against her from the outset.”¹¹ As an audience, we have learnt to recognise tropes such as chromaticism paired with women as symbolising female eroticism and impurity. She claims that this “harmonic promiscuity” creates an overpowering desire for diatonic closure—the character’s death becomes musically necessary (“cadence at all costs”).¹² This is an example where the music represents, or reflects, what is happening in the dramatic narrative. Or viewed in reverse—the dramatic text reflects what the music has been communicating to audiences for years. These tropes can also be found in Wagnerian opera. Eva Rieger, in her analysis of Wagner’s musical language, illustrates this:

Whereas the diatonic can mean brightness, affirmation, or strength and power—positive characteristics—chromaticism since the seventeenth century has been used to depict weeping, lamenting, suffering and the enduring of pain and can also

⁹ Robert Donington, *Opera and its Symbols: The Unity of Words, Music, and Staging* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 9.

¹⁰ Pierre Boulez, *Orientations: Collective Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 261.

¹¹ McClary, foreword to *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, xiv.

¹² *Ibid.*

denote malevolence, sin and misfortune. Wagner uses all of these associations in his music. This is why his music today remains so comprehensible to everyone: he continued the tradition of the affects and thus built on the foundations of what his listeners already knew.¹³

Essentially, women have long been trapped within these musical confines. Death and tragedy are necessary for the narrative climax to occur, and our musical practice compels us to seek satisfaction in the fall of its female characters. As a result, it is difficult for women to even begin in an equal subject position compared to their male counterparts who often have diatonicism to support them. As Susan McClary explains:

It is an example of how a discourse as apparently abstract as music can be fundamentally informed by prevailing attitudes of “How women are,” of how these attitudes are metaphorically articulated in musical imagery, and of how these images can be wielded either as weapons of misogyny or as signs used out of context in ironic, self-empowering strategies.¹⁴

Fundamentally, agency becomes a choice. If a director is able to recognise opportunities in the score where an ironic interpretation can be made (either through musical expression or by contrasting what is occurring on the stage), then agency can be reclaimed. Particularly in Wagnerian opera, where leitmotif iterations are often used as foreshadowing techniques or rhetorical comments to provide an extra layer of meaning, this can easily be achieved. While the actual music and text of the opera cannot be re-written, it is the musical interpretation of these themes alongside creative staging choices that can allude to alternative narrative ideas and resolutions.

Apart from musical interpretations, we also need to consider how the performers on stage become *actors* of the dramatic text. Characterisation plays a big role in establishing the social dynamics within an opera. By constructing the image of each character in a new or different way, opera directors are able to alter the subject

¹³ Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁴ McClary, foreword to *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, xiv.

positions of traditional patriarchal hierarchies. Consequently, this allows their female characters to occupy more space in the dramatic text. Wagner himself describes the role of his singers first and foremost as actors:

In the present state of opera they can scarcely be expected to remember that their prime responsibility is to be actors, and, in order not to confuse the means with the ends at the very start, they should not be allowed to concern themselves with the enhanced musical expression of their speech until their effectiveness as actors has been sufficiently prepared.¹⁵

This “expression” is left up to the performers themselves—Wagner entrusted his singers to look upon his instructions “with proper instinct.”¹⁶ The method for how they went about this did not matter to Wagner; as long as they effectively expressed the ideas behind his text, he was satisfied.¹⁷ For contemporary directors, this is where an overarching feminist vision is able to subtly integrate itself into the work—due to the inherent need for dramatic expression in the text, the same vocal line has the potential to be performed in infinite characterisations.

And finally, there is staging choice. This includes lighting design, set design, costume design, and spatial positioning. If we refer to Donington’s definition of staging being “the most localizing,” we can affirm that this element of opera is most often used to directly represent or enhance the drama and music through its use of symbolism.¹⁸ However, contrasts can again be made to create irony or another extra layer of meaning. For example, lighting effects can be used to spotlight certain characters in order to assert their subject position. Although Wagner often writes very specific stage directions, there is still some freedom for interpretation. In Wagner’s revisions of the *Ring* after its first performance at Bayreuth, staging revisions were not included. He simply stated “Costumes, scenery, everything must be done anew for the repeat performances,” which suggests that he did not regard this aspect as

¹⁵ Geoffrey Skelton, *Wagner in Thought and Practice* (London: Lime Tree, 1991), 131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Donington, *Opera and its Symbols*, 9.

definitive.¹⁹ By taking this opportunity for free interpretation, female characters have another layer through which they can reclaim their agency in each performance.

Consequently, we can observe how the notion of agency becomes a key vehicle for female empowerment in performance. In order for agency to be reclaimed on any component of representation, an interpretation that places women in an equal (or higher) subject position where they are able to speak and be heard needs to be taken. Perhaps more than any other composer, Wagner offers us the opportunity for a wider possibility of interpretations due to his emphasis on all aspects of opera's art in his compositional process. His desire in creating the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total art work," also places great importance behind the idea of unity. Therefore, in order for a feminist rendition of Wagnerian opera to be successful, agency must be reclaimed on all levels so that a unified vision is communicated to its audiences. This is the role of the director; in the creative process, they are the ones who bring together the interpretations of the performers, orchestra and stage craftsmen.

Yuval Sharon's *Lohengrin* and Kasper Bech Holten's *Ring Cycle* both use three specific strategies in their feminist productions: characterisation techniques, staging choice and narrative manipulation. For many contemporary opera directors, focus on characterisation techniques, staging choice, and narrative manipulation are seen as the main areas where reclamation of female agency can occur. Further, the most critical point occurs at the conclusion of the opera. Allowing the female characters to survive as a part of the narrative resolution is seen as the ultimate reclamation of agency for the opera's women.²⁰ As established in the discussion above, feminist strategies all work alongside other elements such as musical interpretation to propagate this feminist vision. They do not work in isolation: feminist symbols are built into every component of representation in order to make the more overt gestures viable. However, for the purposes of the following analysis, I will frame my discussion around the techniques of characterisation, staging choice, and narrative manipulation as the key strategies for reclaiming agency in the performance of Wagnerian opera.

¹⁹ Skelton, *Wagner in Thought and Practice*, 113.

²⁰ McClary, foreword to *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, xvii.

No Questions Asked: The Issue of Female Disobedience in *Lohengrin*

First performed in 1850, Wagner's *Lohengrin* revolves around the female character of Elsa, who, after being accused of murder by her former suitor Friedrich of Telramund, promises herself as a wife to Lohengrin, a mysterious figure unknown to her, in exchange for his assistance. The core of the opera's plot resides on the "forbidden question," a moral theme that Wagner draws on from Greek theatre and mythology. In Act Three, Ortrud, a wicked sorceress and new wife of Telramund, manipulates Elsa into asking Lohengrin to reveal his true identity to her on their wedding night. Lohengrin does, but as a result, is forced to depart; Elsa, who is grief stricken, falls to the ground dead. Despite this, the opera is perceived as embodying a happy fairytale-like ending with Gottfried (Elsa's brother) returned to the people as the new ruler of Brabant, and the Grail leitmotif of consolation and hope sounding pleasantly over Lohengrin's departure.²¹ This is a perfect example of how the need for diatonic closure compels us to celebrate Lohengrin's success at the expense of Elsa's death. The conclusion of the opera sees the good of humanity returned to us through the male world view: "The hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture."²² In other words, the male character becomes the agent for narrative resolution and change, and the absence of the female protagonist gives him the freedom to do so.

However, Yuval Sharon's 2018 production of *Lohengrin* challenges this idea and allows the female characters not only to survive, but also to thrive within the dramatic narrative, which subscribes to a far more feminist outcome.²³ Sharon uses the three aforementioned strategies to achieve this: characterisation techniques, effective staging choice, and narrative manipulation.

First, characterisation techniques are used to subvert the moral hierarchy. Unlike a typical production, the characters in Sharon's

²¹ Tiina Rosenberg, *Don't Be Quiet, Start a Riot!: Essays on Feminism and Performance* (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2016), 45.

²² Quoted in Rosenberg, *Don't Be Quiet, Start a Riot!*, 45.

²³ David Allen, "Bayreuth's First American Director Arrives With *Lohengrin*," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2018, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/arts/music/lohengrin-bayreuth-yuval-sharon-review.html>.

performance showcase their multiple layers—they are portrayed as human (rather than mythical) beings and reveal both their strengths and flaws to the audience. This portrayal inherently gives them a different level of power and authority within the narrative—for example, King Heinrich is now characterised as a scheming politician rather than a trusty German monarch. Lohengrin is depicted as a controlling, arrogant male character, and Ortrud becomes Elsa’s main force of liberation by encouraging her to demand the right to her husband’s name.²⁴ By emphasising specific qualities that are already present in certain characters, Sharon allows audiences to understand their relationships in a different context. Consequently, the level of power within the social hierarchy of the narrative is distributed more evenly, allowing the possibility for reclamation of agency to occur.

The second strategy used is symbolism through staging techniques. In Act One of Sharon’s production, Elsa sits with her head bowed over on the floor, fenced in and encircled by three tall daggers. This symbolises her helplessness and entrapment in her current narrative situation. On the other hand, Lohengrin stands outside the circle, safe, and at a distance from Elsa, arms wide and open, singing toward her. Here, the staging choice and body language of both characters clearly depicts him as the agent of power who is destined to save the damsel in distress. So far, this conforms to Wagner’s original vision for the opera, however the knives used on stage allude to a darker side of this particular relationship. In his essay *Oper und Drama*, Wagner states: “A woman loves because she must. Without love, a woman is nothing.”²⁵ This is a view that the operatic genre has built itself upon: almost every female character is bound to the dramatic plot centering on her relationship to the male character/s within the narrative.²⁶ Sharon explores this quite literally in his staging: Elsa is often physically tied to Lohengrin or trapped in his methods of control. For example, in Act Three, the tension between Elsa and Lohengrin reaches a climax point as he restrains her in bondage: “[Elsa]

²⁴ Alex Ross, “Wagner On Trial at the Bayreuth Festival,” *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2018, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/08/20/wagner-on-trial-at-the-bayreuth-festival>.

²⁵ Quoted in Rosenberg, *Don’t Be Quiet, Start a Riot!*, 27.

²⁶ Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, 8.

crosses her arms again in her bridal procession; in her bridal chamber, she wants to read the Bible, but Lohengrin, that charismatic, handsome, political figure, wants sex, and he'll tie her up to get it by force."²⁷ Through this method of staging, Sharon is able to challenge opera's traditional portrayals of female love, as well as point towards one of today's most prevalent social issues: domestic violence. However, in this moment Elsa is able to reclaim agency on stage by asking Lohengrin the "forbidden question." Although this is an exact enactment of Wagner's score directions, it is the *manner* in which she does this which is different. Here is where characterisation and staging work together to create a feminist vision: in the traditional Wagnerian narrative, Elsa is manipulated into a desperate state of impatience by Ortrud to ask Lohengrin for his name. But due to the subversion of the moral hierarchy as mentioned earlier, Ortrud now works together with Elsa in encouraging her to seek empowerment by *demanding* the right to her husband's name. As stated by Sharon: "In Act One, she needs external help, a rescue. But by the third act, she's strong enough to stand on her own two feet."²⁸ It is evident that "love," in the traditional Romantic sense, remains absent in this rendition of *Lohengrin*. By rejecting the control that her partner demands of her, Elsa not only changes her fate in the dramatic narrative but also reflects the feminist ideal of the twenty-first-century woman. In this way, the reclamation of agency for the women of this opera creates impact on a multitude of levels.

Altering the narrative's typical conclusion is the final strategy that Sharon employs to reclaim agency for his female characters. Elsa does not collapse from grief upon Lohengrin's departure (as originally stated in Wagner's stage directions), and Ortrud also remains alive beside her onstage. In another subversion of the moral hierarchy, Lohengrin is depicted leaving the kingdom in shame while Elsa walks off into an unknown future, with the audience left to fill in the blanks. While the dramatic text and music have not been re-written here, the staging directions have been altered to suggest a different narrative resolution. As Sharon sees it,

²⁷ Allen, "Bayreuth's First American Director Arrives With Lohengrin".

²⁸ Yuval Sharon, "You really feel the Bayreuth myth," interview by Hans Christoph von Bock, *DW*, July 23, 2018, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/yuval-sharon-you-really-feel-the-bayreuth-myth/a-44779710>.

“the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.”²⁹ Here Sharon’s argument exemplifies the need for breaking traditional structures in the future of the operatic genre.

However, it is believed that a key feature of opera is its dramatic climax. How this is enacted continues to be a contentious issue amongst feminist scholars. Tiina Rosenberg discusses the dramatic climax in relation to notions of femininity: “A good woman is a loving woman...it belongs to her utopian potential. That is why a woman’s fall is so profound and her tragedy so great.”³⁰ Along with Clément, Rosenberg argues that in this way, female characters are consistently exploited within the dramatic narrative for an audience’s pleasure: “The moral dramaturgy of opera requires that at least one head must fall. We need a betrayal and someone who is both victim and scapegoat, or else the operatic orgasm will not be achieved.”³¹ What do audiences make of Sharon’s ending? Largely, Rosenberg’s theory prevails as it seems that they are unsatisfied—Joshua Barone comments that “people left scratching their heads, trying to make sense of what they had seen,”³² and in his review of the production, David Allen states that this mode of “feminist critique remains subtle in the extreme; when it finally makes itself obvious, it creates not satisfaction but confusion, as two different artistic visions meet.”³³ These comments raise questions on what we recognise as feminist gestures in our art. Largely, they allude to an expectation of extremity. They also invite us to consider what aspects of femininity we have normalised (i.e. loyalty and devotion) and our expectation of feminist art to be in opposition to that. Yet, traditional notions of femininity can become self-empowering strategies when used in the right context, and are inherent to the feminist movement. In her vision for the future of opera, Clément writes about the creation of a “feminine erotic”: an emergence of women who, like Carmen, can enjoy their erotic energy and still say no when they please but who (unlike Carmen) are permitted to

²⁹ Sharon, “You really feel the Bayreuth myth”.

³⁰ Rosenberg, *Don’t Be Quiet, Start a Riot!*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³² Joshua Barone, “Bayreuth’s First American Director Made Wagner a Feminist. What Now?,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 2018, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/27/arts/music/bayreuth-festival-wagner-yuval-sharon.html>.

³³ Allen, “Bayreuth’s First American Director Arrives With Lohengrin”.

survive.³⁴ The lack of Elsa’s overt sexual liberation in Sharon’s production may play a role in why audiences were unsatisfied with Sharon’s ending—for this is exactly what they might have expected at the conclusion of a supposedly feminist production. Sharon’s delicate balance of subtle feminist gestures in combination with key points of agency reclamation remains as an opera yet to be fully understood by audiences as “feminist” art. Yet, its use of characterisation, staging, and narrative manipulation techniques still allows its female characters to reclaim agency in a multitude of ways.

Tragedy or Triumph? Brünnhilde and Femininity

Perhaps one of the most controversial discussions around the female characters in Wagner’s operas remains around Brünnhilde in the *Ring* cycle. While the opera’s narrative is loosely centered on the theft and possession of a cursed ring, the drama largely evolves to follow the character of Brünnhilde, who acts as the main catalyst for the progression of the storyline (particularly after *Die Walküre*). This, along with the complexity of her strong, warrior-like personality and the immense musical demands of her vocal role, has been viewed as liberation in the form of dramatic and vocal agency, or her “musical rescue” that saves her from all the other problematic representations she is subject to.³⁵ Certainly, the *Ring* pushes many boundaries with its representations—as mentioned by Rupert Christiansen, “the opera ends with what the Guinness Book of Records claims as the longest aria in the repertoire, the “Immolation” scene. *Das Rheingold* ought to be in the Guinness Book of Records as well, as the only nineteenth century opera without a prima donna.”³⁶ However, there is still debate over whether this is enough to pierce through other habitual operatic norms—particularly its ending, where the soprano meets her inevitable death as she (once again!) sacrifices herself in the name of love and devotion to the male hero.

Similarly to Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Brünnhilde’s tragic fate is determined by her inability to integrate romantic love into her life.

³⁴ McClary, foreword to *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*, xvii.

³⁵ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 212.

³⁶ Rupert Christiansen, *Prima Donna: A History* (London: Bodley Head, 1984), 148.

In *Unsung Voices*, Carolyn Abbate addresses this issue by broadening the idea that “plot-Brünnhilde” in the libretto exemplifies the “romantic victim,” and the opposing (or complementary) figure is “voice-Brünnhilde.” As discussed earlier, this is an instance of where the music and narrative can work together or against each other as separate “agents.” Abbate states: “but [voice-Brünnhilde] is not simply some generalised redeeming music; rather, she is a ‘tragic-heroic’ persona who exists, as it were, ‘in between,’ constituted in the *Ring* through both her verbal and her musical discourse.”³⁷ However, the staging and characterisation of Brünnhilde’s character in real-world performances is what makes this distinction: according to Abbate, it is defined by Brünnhilde’s moment of laughter upon Siegfried’s death. If her laughter is false and turns to grief and lament, she is romantic; if she laughs truly and without regret, she celebrates her revenge upon a man whose deceit has bespoken his dishonor.³⁸ This, then, can be interpreted as a site of reclamation in giving agency to the female character. Further, Abbate makes the connection that Brünnhilde’s final B at “[*lachende*] *Lobe*” in the Immolation Monologue refers to the “hoijotoho” laughter which introduces her as both character and voice-object in the first moments of *Die Walküre* in Act Two, a heroic characteristic, as she “laughs eternally” at the moral corruption of her patriarchal universe.³⁹ This is an instance where the musical elements work together with characterisation techniques to provide an opportunity of reclamation for the female character.

However, Nila Parly’s argument that Brünnhilde’s virtuosic and dominant vocal display in the final Immolation scene surpasses *all* previous gender issues is questionable.⁴⁰ Eva Rieger addresses this during her analysis of the “leitmotif of release”: “Brünnhilde has been raised to the status of nobility only because she has remained faithful to Siegfried from birth to death. Trombones in their deep register usher in a male world of public domain and representation, while Brünnhilde represents the world of love... Sharing the same fate as Elisabeth, Elsa, and Senta, Brünnhilde devotes her whole

³⁷ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 213.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Parly, *Vocal Victories*, 386.

being to a single man.”⁴¹ Exemplified through Wagner’s ideal of the *liebested*, we see another strong, heroic woman consumed by suicide due to her inability to successfully integrate love into her life. In contrast, Abbate argues that as we hear Brünnhilde’s final high B ring out over the last moments in the opera, “plot-Brünnhilde” dies while “voice-Brünnhilde” remains triumphant.⁴² She also makes the point that Brünnhilde’s referencing of leitmotifs in the Immolation monologue is not a reference to the particular character or object with which it is musically associated, but rather her own previous musical enunciations of this; therefore we celebrate *her* presence in the dramatic narrative.⁴³ However, if Brünnhilde is so instrumental in bringing about love and change within the dramatic narrative, why destroy her? In *Wagner and the New Consciousness*, Sandra Corse explains: “[Wagner] could not resolve the problem of love versus power in his own mind. He could not accept Brünnhilde as the heroine... but kept trying to make her fit his own notions of the self-sacrificing woman.”⁴⁴ Due to this, Brünnhilde’s tragic fate can still be questioned, despite her seemingly heroic strengths.

While different interpretations can be made about Brünnhilde’s level of agency already inherent in the text of the *Ring*, it is ultimately in the realm of performance that a feminist vision can emerge. The “Copenhagen Ring,” directed by Kasper Bech Holten and produced in 2006 by the Royal Danish Opera, produces such a vision. Like Yuval Sharon’s approach in *Lobengrin*, Holten also uses strategies of characterisation, staging and narrative manipulation to give agency to the female characters within the production.

As narrative manipulation is the most overt feminist gesture presented to the audience, I will begin by exploring how this strategy is utilised in combination with staging techniques. In Holten’s production, narrative manipulation occurs not only at the end of the tetralogy, but throughout. From the beginning, Brünnhilde is portrayed as the narrator of this story, which gives her greater agency by establishing her as the protagonist. This is exemplified through the staging in the opening scene of *Das*

⁴¹ Eva Rieger, “Love is the Essence of the Eternal Feminine,” *Women & Music*, 6 (2002): 10.

⁴² Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 248.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴⁴ Sandra Corse, *Wagner and the New Consciousness* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 188.

Rheingold which works in the form of a flashback, with Brünnhilde kneeling on the floor of a large library and opening a book of her past, gently leafing through the pages of her own story. This is not in line with Wagner's stage directions—the opening of *Das Rheingold* is meant to be staged in a way to introduce audiences into the mythical world of the Rhine in Scene One.⁴⁵ By introducing her at the start of the opera, Holten gives Brünnhilde agency by allowing her to be in a subject position where she is physically present for a larger portion of the narrative.

However, the key point of narrative manipulation in this production occurs in the Immolation scene—the finale of the entire tetralogy. Unlike typical renditions, Siegfried, Sieglinde and Wotan are all present in this final scene to witness Brünnhilde's prayers and vows (complete with affectionate physical exchanges between all the characters). Again, this is not a part of Wagner's original stage directions. Particularly controversial is the presence of Wotan, who according to the text, should remain physically distant from Brünnhilde in Valhalla: "Fliegt heim, ihr Raben! / Raunt es eurem Herren, / was hier am Rhein ihr gehört!" (Fly home, you Ravens! / Whisper to your Lord / what you heard here by the Rhine!); however, this text is completely cut from the narrative.⁴⁶ Instead, Wotan is positioned slumped in an armchair in the library, ready to be consumed by the flames with everyone and everything else.

Following this, Wagner's stage directions ask Brünnhilde to throw herself into the fire, yet in this production, she walks offstage clutching her stomach and then re-appears in a white gown with a newborn child under a bright moon. This is an overt and extreme example of narrative manipulation; both the text and the stage directions have been altered. Yet the music supports this vision: in this scene, we hear the redemption motif which Sieglinde first sang at the announcement of her own pregnancy—the birth of a child symbolises restoration and a new order. This creative decision allows agency to be reclaimed in many ways. Firstly, by not allowing her to die, Brünnhilde is placed in a subject position where

⁴⁵ Richard Wagner, Otto Singer, and Carl Waack, *Das Rheingold* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1910).

⁴⁶ Nila Parly, "The Cry of the Valkyrie: Feminism and Corporality in the Copenhagen Ring," *The Wagner Journal* 3, no. 2 (2008), accessed February 1, 2010, <http://www.wagneropera.net/articles/articles-nila-parly-dvd-ring-copenhagen.htm>.

she is able to be seen as the author of her own narrative. Secondly, she breaks free from the traditional confines of the *liebestod*—her identity as a woman is not compromised by her inability to pursue a romantic union with her man. Instead, the *liebestod* is now understood as the union of love between Siegfried and Brünnhilde, in the form of a newborn child. Finally, the redemption motif takes on a new significance in this scene by acting as a glorification of the feminine, the woman—the one who brings life into this world.

Characterisation techniques are also employed in this scene: feminist scholar Elizabeth Fox sees vocal colouring as another element that gives Brünnhilde’s final statement a different “voice” in this production. According to Fox, her words “let the fire consume me” and “feel how the flames burn in my breast” in her Immolation monologue are portrayed as feelings of anger and betrayal towards the moral corruption of her universe, rather than suicidal thoughts.⁴⁷ This is an example of how Abbate’s idea of “voice-Brünnhilde,” combined with effective musical interpretation, can return agency to the female character. The choice of costume here is also significant—Fox links Brünnhilde’s white gown to symbols of femininity: “Brünnhilde appears in full maternity, not a self-sacrificing woman in love with an immature husband but a woman in full, one with her own life; a defiant daughter who survives loss and grief to nurture a child.”⁴⁸ Again, this is a way in which the notion of femininity has been presented in a self-empowering way. The production celebrates Brünnhilde’s sexuality while also placing her in the traditionally dominant, “masculine” narrative role of protagonist and narrator. Clément’s wish for a solution of feminist performance where female eroticism isn’t repressed or consumed as a commodity by audiences is somewhat realised; through her birth, Brünnhilde reclaims her femininity and sexuality in a way that does not objectify her. This form of sexual liberation is perhaps why this production is able to create more satisfaction for audiences than Sharon’s *Lobengrin*: Nila Parly states that this ending is “immensely satisfying,” as the cry of the Valkyrie

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Fox, “Brünnhilde’s Transfiguration by Fire; Or, How Feminist Can Self-immolation Be?” in *Analysis of Cultural Productions: Papers of the 30th Conference of PSYART Porto*, eds. José Gabriel Pereira Bastos, Diniz Cayolla Ribeiro, and Elizabeth Fox (Porto: Universidade do Porto, 2013), 100.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

(now the new born baby) echoes into the future, providing a sense of hope, restoration and resolution to the entire tetralogy.⁴⁹

Once again, while narrative rewriting is the key strategy that Holten employs to convey a feminist interpretation for this work, it is only in combination with staging choice and characterisation techniques that this opera is able to provide agency to its female characters in performance. This is significant as it allows audiences to gain a new perspective (a female perspective) into the work, and engage more deeply with the meaning behind its dramatic content.

Conclusion

Undeniably, Wagner's female characters offer great potential for the reclamation of female agency in performance, perhaps more so than any other opera. To affirm Abbate and Parly's points: the strength, volume and virtuosity that these roles require already create agency by placing the female character in a position of musical power. In addition to this, many of the female characters in Wagnerian opera advance the dramatic narrative and are constructed with characteristics of heroism, sophistication and strength (traditionally masculine associations) as well as traditional notions of femininity as explored above. This advances their status beyond that of just a romantic victim, and allows the opportunity for exploration of a more holistic identity. Therefore, the ingredients for producing a successful feminist interpretation of these works are already in place, if the performance strategies of characterisation, staging choice and narrative manipulation are utilised by the director. The first step is to recognise these ingrained stereotypes and then break them through exaggeration, ironic interpretation or subversion.

In addition, as traditional operatic plots often result in the death of the female character or heroine, many contemporary feminist directors have ensured their women remain alive and triumphant, celebrating their role in the narrative beyond that of a romance-subject.

Clément's pivotal text *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women* has drawn much attention to this. As she sees it, the tragic fate of the female character becomes an important device for the build-up of dramatic tension, which eventuates as a pleasure-induced spectacle for the audience when her death eventually occurs. While feminist

⁴⁹ Ibid.

productions *can* reclaim agency for their female characters through subtle gestures and allegiance to Wagner's original stage directions and text, these are not as successful in producing a unified feminist vision if the women are left to die at its narrative conclusion. After all, can an opera really be feminist if it allows for these murders, as Clément sees it, to occur? Was there a point to saving the female character throughout the opera at all? As the conclusion of the narrative serves as the key sight of reclamation where agency can be returned, feminist productions need to push conventional boundaries to give women a subject position where they can speak and be heard as co-authors of the narrative resolution. Both Yuval Sharon's production of *Lohengrin* (2018) and the Royal Danish Opera's "Copenhagen Ring" (2006) use narrative manipulation in combination with staging choice and characterisation techniques to achieve this. Their ability to challenge the cultural norms and tradition of Wagnerian performance acts as a key instigator of social change. The rising movement towards gender inclusive representation means that the notion of agency needs to be considered in every production by future directors. This is the only way that opera will retain relevance and progress as a genre in the future realm of performance.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of agency as a vehicle for female empowerment in the production and performance of Wagnerian opera. While feminist musicology has addressed this issue by exploring how its female characters can assert their musical power through their vocal roles, less attention has been given to other staging elements crucial to the production of opera. This article addresses this gap by analysing two contemporary productions which suggest a feminist interpretation of the works: *Lohengrin* directed by Yuval Sharon at the Bayreuth Festival in 2018, and the "Copenhagen Ring" directed by Kasper Bech Holten and produced by the Danish Opera in 2006. Specifically, it analyses how characterisation techniques, staging choice, and narrative manipulation become the three key strategies for reclaiming agency in performance. This article argues that while each of these strategies is important, it is ultimately narrative manipulation in the dramatic climax which is most significant, as it allows its female

characters to reclaim agency in full by remaining alive on stage. In doing so, it points the way towards a future direction in feminist performance of Wagnerian Opera.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Katarina Grobler is a young Australian pianist about to commence her final year of undergraduate performance studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. She is an international artist, having given performances across Europe in Germany, Lithuania, Slovenia and Croatia, and in notable venues including the Sydney Opera House. In 2018, she also held the position of Vice-President at the Sydney University Piano Society, and is the current President of the Sydney Conservatorium Students Association. Apart from her performance studies, she has a passion for research surrounding the subject of gender in musicology. Recently, her article “Diversity and Gender in the Compositional Relationship of Robert and Clara Schumann” was published in the *Sydney University Student Anthology* (2019). Her interests in how women have shaped the music canon and the way they have been represented across its genres continues to be an area where she aspires to undertake further musicological research.