Inventions of Truth

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Inventions of Truth

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Inventions of Truth

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INTRODUCTION

The American humorist Robert Benchley (1889-1945) famously described opera as “when a guy gets stabbed in the back and, instead of bleeding, he sings.” The joke is a good one. Not only does it play on the prevailing idea of opera as unrealistic (sight unseen), but his quip interrogates the central criticism of this particular genre: How can opera function as a relevant art form when it does not adhere to or support accurate representations of reality? This sentiment was born alongside opera and has clung to it with remora-like tenacity for over four hundred years. Oddly enough, rationality and a realistic portrayal of human emotion were the very things which the progenitors of opera were seeking to convey.

Loosely defined, opera was created towards the end of the 16th century with the intention of better fulfilling the Platonic and Aristotelian theories of art as imitation. This was a maturation of the Counter Reformation’s attempts to reform polyphonic church music, which challenged music’s relationship to its setting. The church’s problems with polyphony were twofold: simultaneous singing of lines clouded the meaning of a text, and it was simply unrealistic that several persons should be speaking concurrently with the expectation that an audience might understand. These 17th century calls for clarity eventually gave way to 18th century calls for musical context. How could music better reflect the meaning of the text? Merely imitating sentiments using sound, a tactic employed often in madrigals, was nothing more than an inhibitive parlor trick and a not genuine pursuit of mimesis. Serious proponents of the theoretical establishment of a
dialectic between music and text knew their search did not end with simple imitation. Opera as an art form was created as a tangible answer to this dilemma.

In its origins opera sought to answer concerns regarding music’s relationship to text, but the 17th century concept of music was not capable of answering these types of questions. Music, due to its nebulous representational nature, was not viewed as a serious art until the 19th century. In order to follow the development of music, and therefore opera, this paper explores the differences between operatic libretti and their original sources, beginning in the Enlightenment. The evolutionary process from urtext to libretti not only further defines the society in which it originated, but helps elucidate important changes in artistic interpretation and evaluation from one epoch to the next.

This study focuses on two works each from the 18th and 19th centuries, chosen for their popularity at the time of debut, the significance of their contribution to the genre of opera, their lasting compositional impact, and their frequency of performance in modern repertoire. All four works’ libretti are based on a pre-existing plot or work of literature that was readily available to the composers, librettists, and the opera’s intended audience. There are frequent references to the relationships between operatic composers and their librettists, the reasons these relationships changed over time, and how the process of adaptation from the original text to the libretto was influenced by the interaction between librettist and composer. While the social environment in which an opera matures has a lasting impression on the final product, the balance of control between composer and librettist is one of the most important determinants in how an antecedent plot line is used, manipulated, or maintained for the purpose of staging.
I. THE FIRST STEP IS ADMITTING YOU HAVE A PROBLEM:  
*Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) - Christoph Willibald Gluck / Ranieri de' Calzabigi

During the centuries leading up to the 1700’s, music, in the minds of most listeners, existed as a subordinate art form whose cultural significance was garnered through the successful accompaniment of a well-received text or liturgical writing. Music was required to be composed in vast amounts, performed for a specific task, and then discarded: a disposable luxury. The prominent Enlightenment theorist Jean Le Rond D’Alembert (1717-1783) addressed this specific subordination of music in his essay *On the Freedom of Music* (1759). How was it possible in a century during which “pens have been brought to bear on the freedom of commerce, the freedom of marriage, the freedom of the press, the freedom of the painted canvas, no one has yet written on the freedom of music?”¹ There were many, in fact hundreds, of writings on the topic of music during the Age of Reason that pre-dated D’Alembert’s essay. It was not until the mid-to-late 18th century when composers, audiences, and ruling parties alike began to recognize music’s deep potential for influence. Opinions on this development varied across social strata, but the collective awareness and burgeoning opposition only fueled its dissemination and general acceptance.

For composers, it meant the beginning of the end of their role as “court musician,” a position whose functions often resembled those of indentured servitude. Even Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), the Classical composer who enjoyed the greatest success

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during his lifetime, lamented his well-paid position as Kapellmeister to the supremely wealthy Esterhazy family: “I am doomed to stay at home. It is indeed sad always to be a slave.”² In order to fund his artistic endeavors, Haydn chose to enter into a contractual agreement with Prince Nicolaus Esterhazy (1714-1790), a commitment that was only up for renegotiation thirty years later upon the death of the monarch and the ascension of his son, Prince Anton (1738-1794). Although arrangements like that of Haydn’s were considered the norm throughout 18th century Europe, composers began to cast furtive glances outside the confines of monarchical employment. The desirability of the artistic freedoms associated with the role of a freelance composer began to weigh heavily against the financial stabilities afforded to contracted servants of the state.

Under court employ, an artist’s creations were subject to the jurisdiction of the ruling party. Though fame and notoriety were attainable along this route, composers and librettists faced heavy scrutiny from their respective monarchies, which required their compositions to comply with the tastes and principles of their masters. Composers could oftentimes take refuge in the ambiguity of musical compositions however, when it came to opera, they had to align their artistic impulses with those of their patrons. In opera, or “drammi per musica”—dramas for music, as they were called in Gluck’s and Mozart’s days—what could not be found easily objectionable in the music was in plain view during a staged drama.³ A composer’s artistic liberties were at their most vulnerable when their work was attached to a story line. The narrative of an opera holds the greatest potential for objection and kept composers on constant vigil for talented and deviously innovative

librettists. To work alongside a poet who could balance both censorship and artistic integrity was the key component to maximum artistic freedom in 18th century opera.

One of the first successful operas to highlight this particular and essential bond between composer and librettist was that of Gluck’s and Calzabigi’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Gluck, who chose never to enter into a position of long-time vassalage, made his home in Vienna, but found himself equally as comfortable in any opera-friendly city.⁴ Fearing the fate of composers like Haydn, who famously wrote to a friend, ‘‘I never can obtain leave, even to go to Vienna for four-and-twenty hours’’,⁵ Gluck primarily worked for theater houses and by commission, a choice that afforded him freedom in travel and composition.⁶ One of Gluck’s recurring employers, Count Giacomo Durazzo (1717-1794) of Vienna’s Imperial Theater, unwittingly changed the course of opera and Gluck’s career when he introduced the composer to Ranieri de' Calzabigi (1714-1795).⁷ The Italian poet had just arrived from Paris with an exciting new libretto: *Orfeo ed Euridice*.⁸

As Casanova (1725-1798) described in his autobiography, Calzabigi was a “very calculating” man, “well-versed in theoretical and practical finance, familiar with commerce in all countries, learned in history, witty, worshipper of the fair sex, and poet.”⁹ The majority of sources regarding Calzabigi make note of his “calculating”

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⁸ Heartz, *From Garrick to Gluck: Essays on Opera in the Age of Enlightenment*, 314.
demeanor, a particularly important characteristic concerning Orfeo. Calzabigi’s writings are the only primary sources available on the composition and adaptation of the Greek myth into the opera; therefore, we must temper his recollections with our knowledge of the poet’s inclination towards narcissism. If we trust Calzabigi’s words at face value, his Enlightenment sensibilities, so frequently expressed throughout his correspondence, held a significant influence over Gluck’s compositions. Twenty-five years after their initial collaboration, Calzabigi addressed the composition of Orfeo in a letter dated from 1794:

I held that music, on whatever verses, was no more than skilful [sic], studied, declamation; further enriched by the harmony of its accompaniments, and that therein lay the whole secret of composing excellent music for a drama; and that the more taut, energetic, impassioned, and touching the poetry, the more the music which sought to express it well, according to its proper declamation, would be the right music for this poetry, the best music…

Though Calzabigi undoubtedly enforced Gluck’s inclinations, it is safe to assume that both composer and librettist, regardless of who influenced whom, were brothers in their reformist goals. Gluck’s dedication to Alceste (1767), the second opera in his reform trilogy, bears a striking resemblance to the sentiments expressed in Calzabigi’s letters.

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11 Robert Cannon, *Opera* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 64. Some historians suggest that although Gluck signed the dedication to Gluck’s Alceste, it may have been written in part by Calzabigi. Despite the uncertainty, the message clearly represents Gluck’s views as expressed in his written correspondence.
12 After Orfeo, the first opera in what is known as Gluck’s “reform Trilogy,” the pair continued to compose two more operas in their new French-Italian hybrid style: Alceste (1767) and Paride ed Elena (1770).
“I thought to restrict music to its true function of helping poetry to be expressive and to represent the situations of the plot, without interrupting the action or cooling its impetus with useless and unwanted ornaments.”

Gluck’s and Calzabigi’s unanimous desire to simplify the dimensions of opera echoed the formula set forth in the widely read Saggio sopra l’opera in musica (1755) by the Venetian philosopher and “art connoisseur” Count Francesco Algarotti (1712-1764). Algarotti’s preface begins by asking patrons to recognize “what little effort [purveyors of opera] put into choosing a libretto, or a plot, how little they care if the music will go with the words, or if the manner of singing and reciting is genuine.”

Lauded by the likes of Ferdinand Brunetière (1849-1906) for its ability to “instruct and to please,” Algarotti’s text worked as an Enlightenment-themed instruction manual for both Gluck and his newly acquired librettist. Imbued with the Enlightenment ideals of the Philosophes and the Encyclopedistes, the Saggio touched on the most important of their philosophies:

The collaboration of all the arts, the welding of the ballet into the dramatic action, the primacy of poetry over music, the orchestra as a means of heightening the expression of the recitative, the appeal to reason and the verisimilitude, and [the satisfaction] of the oft-repeated Encyclopedist phrase that music attains its fullest expression only when allied to words.

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Although both Gluck and Calzabigi generally aligned themselves with the framework of these schools of thought, Gluck took great umbrage with the primacy of poetry over music. Music rose to the level of a legitimate art form during the 16th century, but even during Gluck’s time, it was still considered subordinate to poetry. The “musical” topics discussed by men of culture were almost exclusively devoted to the text-dependent genre of opera, Europe’s most popular form of stage entertainment. From the century’s first operatic altercation between the Frenchmen Abbé François Raguenet (1660-1722) and Jean-Laurent Le Cerf de La Viéville (1674-1707) to Algarotti’s mid-century Saggio, opera was debated under the assumption that “the greatest effect of music derives from its being subordinated and ancillary to poetry.” This presupposition clouded constructive deliberation and opened the door to the querrelles, a series of combative writings and retorts noted for its well-known participants which lasted over half a century and obsessively pitted the values, linguistics, and styles of French and Italian opera against each other. It is important to mention the bulk of Enlightenment thinkers involved in the querrelles were from France, Italy, and England. Germany did not focus as intently on the difficulties surrounding the relationships between words and music due to a broader interest in instrumental music, which was encouraged by the Lutheran church. In direct opposition to the Catholic Church, Martin Luther extolled secular music as a “preciously, worthy, and costly treasure.” In the forward to Georg Rhau’s (1488-1548) Symphoniae (1538), Luther famously wrote that any man who does not “regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does

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not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs.”\textsuperscript{18} Germany’s early acceptance of instrumental music as an independent genre was one of the more important influences in the determination of the path opera would take at the hands of the German Romantic Composers in the 19th century.

Although Gluck and Calzabigi adhered stringently to the physical rules of operatic reform (superiority of the form’s whole over its individual parts) set forth in the \textit{Saggio}, they decided to set \textit{Orfeo} in Italian, disregarding Algarotti’s insistence on French as Europe’s “universal language.”\textsuperscript{19} Gluck was generally opposed to the linguistic wars waged in Paris and he viewed \textit{Orfeo} as a chance to even out the levels of importance distributed betwixt poetry and music. In an open letter published by the \textit{Journal de Paris} (1777) to the prominent Parisian critic and \textit{Philosophe}, Jean-François de La Harpe (1739-1803), Gluck suggested that the “union between words and song must be so close that the poetry has to appear to have been patterned on the music no less than the music on the poetry.”\textsuperscript{20} As if to prove his point, Gluck’s musically revised and expanded French version of \textit{Orfeo} (1774) premiered in Paris to equally successful reviews as the original Italian-language production of twelve years prior. The dual successes of both \textit{Orfeos} proved an effective argument against the inflated importance of linguistic priorities. As a result, both Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Baron von Grimm, the staunchest of the \textit{Italianissimi}, “lived to see Gluck’s personal triumph on the Paris stage . . .

\textsuperscript{18} Doctor Martin Luther, forward to Georg Rhau’s \textit{Symphoniae}; a collection of choral motets, 1538. \hfill \textsuperscript{19} Oliver, \textit{The Encyclopedists as Critics of Music}, 128. \hfill \textsuperscript{20} Gluck’s open letter to La Harpe, in the \textit{Journal de Paris}, 1777, from Fubini, \textit{Music and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe}, 233.
[whereupon] they reversed their positions.”

Far away from the linguistic battlefields of Paris, Gluck dealt with a more personal communication dilemma upon first addressing the composition of *Orfeo*. His new librettist, Calzabigi, was unable to read or understand musical notation and Gluck’s grasp of Italian, according to Calzabigi, made it “impossible for him to declaim even a few lines coherently.” Calzabigi resorted to communicating by way of an invented system of signage, which he hoped “would at least indicate the most salient points.” The duo’s relationship, had it not been for the consequences, would have had the makings of a frustrating farce. Unexpectedly, this initial linguistic barrier resulted in an even purer simplification of both the poetry and the music, which produced their epoch-defining work of reform. Though Calzabigi has an evident knack for self-mythologizing, his assertion that he “provided [Gluck] with the matter, or if you will, the chaos; the honour of this creation [was] thus shared between us,” was the most accurate summation of the pair’s collaboration to be captured on paper.

The composition and successful staging of *Orfeo* was more than just a trend-bucking addition to Europe’s operatic repertoire, it was an artistic representation of the encroaching changes in store for the priority and influence of music. Yes, both composer and librettist felt the pull of the European intelligentsia’s popular return to classicism, a return that heralded “simplicity, truth and lack of affectation” as “the sole

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21  Heartz, *From Garrick to Gluck: Essays on Opera in the Age of Enlightenment*, 317.
23  Ibid., 56.
principles of beauty in all artistic creations,“ but more importantly, *Orfeo* commenced the closing of an era during which music was regarded as a subordinate component of opera. Mimicking the new thoughts of Enlightenment thinkers dedicated to the critique of power struggles across European societies, *Orfeo* began to wrench artistic control away from the impresarios and egotistical performers of the opera world and place it firmly in the hands of the creators.

Until *Orfeo*, opera was typically produced in a contractually mechanized fashion. Subject matter was chosen by the jurisdiction of whoever was in control of the public entertainment, who in turn answered to an employer in the ruling party. Excerpts from a contract issued on July 8, 1791 by Domenico Guardasoni (1731-1806), impresario of the Italian opera in Prague, clearly delineate the importance of an opera’s components within an 18th century context. The first order of business was to secure “primo musico of the first rank, for example either Marchesini or Rubinelli . . .,” the engagement of which was the most “important and expensive task” in the staging of an opera. Following the employment of the desired performers (or the best substitutes, perhaps “Crescentini, or Violani”), Guardasoni’s contract promised his employers of the Estates of Bohemia “second . . . to have the poetry of the book composed on one of the two subjects given to me by His Excellency the governor and to have it set to music by a famous composer.”

The third and fourth promises in Guardasoni’s proposal addressed the “changes of scenery made expressly for this spectacle” and the commitment “to illuminate and to

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27 Ibid., 42.
decorate the theater with garlands” respectively.\textsuperscript{28} As was typical of an 18th century opera proposal, the opera director and his employers would never leave the subject matter of a production up to one of the creators and they cared very little for whoever the composer might turn out to be so long as he was reputable. This particular contract was initially offered up to and refused by Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) in 1791. Guardasoni eventually settled for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) who composed the music to what would eventually become \textit{La clemenza di Tito}.\textsuperscript{29}

As was the case with all operas, the above-mentioned contract was drafted for an event. In this instance, Mozart’s commission was part of the celebration of Leopold II’s (1747-1792) coronation festivities. If an operatic performance suited the tastes of the elite and raised the envy of neighboring monarchies, the composition was ruled a success. Though it was to remain in place for decades (Guardasoni wrote the cited contract 29 years after he first performance of \textit{Orfeo}), Gluck’s and Calzabigi’s opera was an intentional first step towards a redistribution of artistic control within the realm of opera. Gluck, wholly familiar with the disastrous effects of favoring the egos of performers and the opinions of proprietors over the artistic integrity of an opera, had “resolved to free \textit{Orfeo} from all the abuses which have crept in either through ill-advised vanity on the part of singers or through excessive complaisance on the part of composers.”\textsuperscript{30}

\textit{Orfeo} was a work of reform from its very inception. As Guardasoni’s contract detailed, the topics for prospective operas were first approved by the ruling party and

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{30} Hedwig and E. H. Mueller von Asow, eds., \textit{The Collected Correspondence and Papers of C. W. Gluck}, 22.
then delegated by the impresario in charge of negotiating the production. In a shuffling of this order, Calzabigi recited a previously completed set of verse for Count Durazzo upon his arrival in Vienna, who then “encouraged [him] to have it performed in the theater.”

The proposal order was unusual and forward for the times, but Calzabigi’s brazenness was enforced by a long history of previously sanctioned *Orfeos*. He knew in advance that his subject was well-trodden territory and that he was unlikely to run into any difficulties regarding censorship. Glucks’ and Calzabigi’s *Orfeo* was around the thirtieth recorded Orpheus story set as a *drammi per musica*, a list which included many successful versions from the likes of Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) and Georg Philipp Telemann (1668-1767). In 1761, with the state’s blessing secured, Calzabigi began the process of molding his verses for the stage and for the audience whose sense of aesthetic he intended to revolutionize.

Calzabigi’s writings never suggest a precise reason for his selection of the Orpheus myth, but here are three impetuous that, given Calzabigi’s forward to the opera and his *Essay on the Dramatic Poetry of the Abbe P. Metastasio* (1775), appear the most plausible. Firstly, Calzabigi’s desire for a “return to simplicity” was not a new idea in opera. In fact, the original concept and form of opera created during the salon sessions of Count Giovanni de Bardi, the count of Vernio between the years of 1577 and 1582, was an attempt to reform the state of Renaissance music. It is important to note, however, that Bardi’s Camerata focused on a return to the musical principles of Ancient Greece and not a return to the subject matter of Ancient Greek dramas. The use of surviving Greek

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Tragedies as the basis for opera can only be traced back to the 1660’s, beginning with Pietro Andrea Ziani’s (1616-1684) and Aurelio Aureli’s (1652-1708) performance of *Antigona delusa da Alceste* in 1660 Venice.\(^{32}\) As we can see, opera originated as a revolutionary genre, born out of a desire for change and its progenitor’s desire for a musical return to the common core of Ancient Greek music theory. The selection of the Orpheus myth was thereby in keeping with the original intent of opera’s inventors and it maintained a significance beyond the Enlightenment predilection for classically themed art, influenced by Europe’s then-obsession with ancient theater.

Not only was the Orpheus myth already part of the standard operatic repertoire, but the story itself had already sustained two thousand years’ worth of popularity. The earliest literary reference to Orpheus is a two-word fragment by the 6th century BC lyric poet Ibycus: *onomaklyton Orphen*, Orpheus “famous-of-name.”\(^{33}\) This assured success combined with the inevitable comparisons that would be drawn between the protagonist’s artistic prowess and that of the opera’s creator must have been incredibly appealing to a man of Calzabigi’s contriving nature. Following a string of scandals, including a poisoning in Naples and a dubious lottery in Paris, Calzabigi arrived in Vienna intent on the vision of European recognition. Throughout the forewords, *argumentos*, and letters regarding the three operas upon which he collaborated with Gluck, his deceptive and manipulative attempts to highlight his genius are starkly apparent. In a review from the *Wiencrisches Diarium*, a bi-weekly Viennese newspaper, which was believed to have

\(^{32}\) Peter Brown and Suzana Ograjensekis, *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), i.

been submitted anonymously by Calzabigi for the October 13th, 1762 edition, the author audaciously praises the Orfeo ed Euridice libretto, extolling:

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice remains recognizable throughout, however poetically it has been dressed; it has lost nothing of its beauty at the hands of the poet. He has indeed made some changes, but all are reasonable ones! They are in the nature of embellishments, and are to be regarded as clear traits that indicate the hand of a master. The outline is new and the unity natural. Tenderness and the miraculous are the general rule; the expression is condensed into the language of tender passion, without superfluous ornament.

Surely, a gentleman of Calzabigi’s shameless, self-serving qualities could not resist the potential for comparison with a character like that of Orpheus, whose musical virtuosity is so masterful he can resurrect the dead.

Lastly, the choice of the Orpheus myth was a perfect representation of what Calzabigi had intended to accomplish with his new work: a perfect melding of words and music than had previously existed in Italian opera. Since one of the presiding complaints regarding the degradation of opera attacked the disparity between the emotion displayed on stage and that of the accompanying composition, a storyline involving an actual musician was the most apropos of selections. When Calzabigi selected the theme of Orpheus in the Underworld, he automatically sidestepped the oft-decried mantra of critics; “Opera is absurd because it is not realistic.” Singing and music are the catalyst for action throughout the myth, which ensured that the ludicrousness of “men . . . seen
singing in the midst of their activities while engaged in serious matters,” would not factor into the criticisms of Orfeo. In this respect, Calzabigi’s elusive tendencies saved his work from unnecessary judgements and simultaneously perpetuated the ideas of the Philosophes, his role models, who insisted “showing objects less directly gives more power to our imagination” and “speaks more mightily to our soul.”

Calzabigi’s 1764 forward or argomento, which was published unsigned and yet undoubtedly written by Calzabigi, to Orfeo commences with a quotation from Virgil’s (70 BC - 19 BC) Georgics:

Te, dulcis coniux, te solo in litore secum,

te veniente die, te decedente canebat.

This excerpt from book four of the Ancient Roman poet’s poem is the only source mentioned in the original libretto or Calzabigi’s correspondence that references a text upon which the libretto was based. Ten years later, in Gluck’s preface to the score for Alceste, the composer alluded to Calzabigi’s cross referencing of both Virgil’s Georgics (29 BC) and Ovid’s (43 BC - AD 17/18) Metamorphoses (8 AD) as the basis for his libretto. The libretto itself does not read as a conflation of both Virgil’s 76 line Orpheus recounting and Ovid’s more elaborate 105-line version, but more accurately as what can be described as a third retelling of the myth as part of an evolutionary series.

In order to understand Calzabigi’s addition to the Orpheus canon, it would help to

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discuss he plots and differences between the two preceding Roman texts, beginning with the story as it is recounted in Virgil’s *Georgics*. Virgil commences with some backstory regarding the death of Orpheus’ young bride Eurydice, starting with line 453 of Book IV. As she is chased headlong down a river by the mischievous demi-god Aristaeus, the doomed maiden fails to see a dangerous serpent in the grass, whose bite is responsible for her demise. Orpheus, mourning the loss of his wife through song, “made his way to the land of the dead with its fearful king and hearts no human prayers can soften.”³⁷ In an attempt to reclaim his wife, the grief-stricken husband descends into the underworld, lamenting his life’s loss through song. The sheer power of his musicality rendered the very house of Death and deepest abysses of Hell . . . spellbound, and the Furies with livid snakes entwined in their hair; Cerberus stood agape and his triple jaws forgot to bark; the wind subsided, and Ixion’s wheel came to a stop.³⁸

Because of his musical prowess, Orpheus is granted permission to lead his wife back to the world of the living, but, as imposed by Proserpine, only if he could succeed in doing so without looking at Eurydice. Upon nearing the upper world, a “sudden frenzy” seizes Orpheus, and “on the very verge of light, unmindful, alas, and vanquished in purpose, on Eurydice, now regained looked back!”³⁹ When Orpheus’ gaze caught that of his wife, she spoke the following:

‘What madness, Orpheus,

³⁸ Ibid., 253.
³⁹ Ibid., 253.
what dreadful madness has brought disaster alike upon
you and me, poor soul? See, again the cruel Fates call me
back, and sleep seals my swimming eyes. And now fare-
well! I am borne away, covered in night’s vast pall,
and stretching towards you strengthless hands, regained, alas!
no more."\(^{40}\)

And with those words, Eurydice is whisked down into the world of the dead, and her
unfortunate husband is left to mourn her memory without the hope of reunion.

Ovid’s retelling was written about a generation after that of Virgil’s and begins
with the ill-omened union between Orpheus and his wife. As stated in line 8 of
Metamorphoses Book X, “the outcome of the wedding was worse than the beginning; for
while the bride was strolling through the grass . . . , she fell dead, smitten in the ankle by
a serpent’s tooth."\(^{41}\) After he made the living world weep with his songs of mourning,
Orpheus, the bard of Rhodope, dared to go down to the Stygian world through the gate of
Taenarus is search of his wife. Upon reaching Hades, Orpheus continues his sad lament,
begging the keeper of the underworld to “unravel the fates of my Eurydice, too quickly
run.” He swore if the fates denied his request, they would be forced to “rejoice in the
death of two.”\(^{42}\) Overcome by the power and beauty of the Orpheus’ song and the
accompanying music of his lyre,

The bloodless spirits wept; Tantalus

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., 255.
University Press, 1984), 65.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 66.
did not catch at the fleeing wave; Ixion’s wheel
stopped in wonder; the vultures did not pluck at
the liver; the Belides rested from their urns, and
thou, O Sisyphus, didst sit upon thy stone.  

Just as in Virgil’s rendition, the sheer beauty of Orpheus’ music grants him permission to
take his wife back to the world of the living, as long as he “should not turn his eyes
backward until had gone forth from the valley of Avernus.”

Up until this point, Ovid’s recounting of the Orpheus myth reads like an
embellished companion piece to the work set forth by Virgil. Both tales continue
similarly up until the conscious divergence in the reasoning behind Orpheus’ fatal error.
Instead of repeating Virgil’s “gripping frenzy,” Ovid’s protagonist looks at his wife out
of a combination of fear for Euridice’s safety (as they mounted the “steep path, indistinct
and clouded in pitchy darkness”) and his eagerness for a glimpse of his lost love.
Despite his newly acquired humanizing qualities, Ovid’s pitiable hero suffers the
traditional Orphean fate, turning to clasp nothing but air. This time, however, Eurydice
makes no complaint against her husband:

for of what could
she complain save that she was beloved? She spake
one last “farewell” which scarcely reached her
husband’s ears, and fell back again to the place

43 Ibid., 66.
44 Ibid., 68.
45 Virgil, Georgics, 253.
46 Ovid, Ovid IV: Metamorphoses, Books IX-XV, 69.
whence she had come.\footnote{Ibid., 68}

Virgil’s retelling of the Orpheus myth is entirely tragic. Not only does Orpheus lose his wife a second time, but the bard is later ripped to bits by a jealous passing group of Ciconian women. Even though Virgil goes to the trouble of recounting the sacrifices administered by Aristaeus, the man indirectly responsible for Eurydice’s first death, in the wake of Orpheus’ demise, the reader leaves the story with the impression of eternal separation. Ovid, in addition to the augmentation of his characters’ personalities, bestows audiences with a sense of closure beyond the propriety of sacrifice. In Book XI, after Ovid’s Orpheus is reduced to a floating head by “the crazed women of the Cicones,”\footnote{Ibid., 121.} we are told that the bard’s shade fled beneath the earth and “found Eurydice and caught her in his eager arms.”\footnote{Ibid., 125.}

The G. Schirmer publication of the Italian-language Orfeo ed Euridice libretto cites Opera News, an American music magazine published since 1936 by the Metropolitan Opera Guild, in a brief historical summary preceding the argomento.

Without a reference to either Virgil or Ovid, the introductory paragraph suggests that the only way in which Calzabigi’s libretto differs from the original myth is in the finale, “where the hero rejoins his wife rather than being destroyed by bacchantes (as in legend).”\footnote{Opera News, Introduction to Orpheus and Euridice, C. W. von Gluck, Orfeo Ed Euridice, original text by Ranieri de Calzabigi, English version by Walter Ducloux, (New York: G. Schirmer, 1962), 1.} Perhaps, if Calzabigi had solely referenced the idea of the myth, rather than any formal sources (which, given the introduction to Gluck’s libretti, is obviously not the
case), the ending of *Orfeo* could then be regarded as “pure spectacle.”**51** However, Calzabigi explicitly referenced Virgil and his editing of the story was intended to produce a third installment of the narrative in keeping with the changes that had been made from Virgil’s to Ovid’s version. This poet wanted to make his mark on history and what better way to do so than to pick up where the ancients had left off?

By commencing with the pursuit of Aristaeus, Ovid simplified the introductory action that took place in the *Georgics*. Calzabigi decided to go a step further. Act One, scene one of the opera opens with Euridice already dead and Orpheus in the midst of mourning at her tomb. After Calzabigi’s protagonist dismisses the chorus of shepherds and shepherdesses who “increase [his] desolation,” he immediately launches into the solo aria “Chiampo il mio ben,” singing “Gods, give her back to me/ Or let me die with her!”**52** Virgil made no mention of Orpheus’ willingness to die barring a reunion with his wife and Ovid only suggested this claim in passing. Calzabigi latched onto this sentiment and placed it front and center. Calzabigi kept his adjustments proportionate to those of Ovid and he managed to synchronously intersperse his adaptation with the pedagogical reformations he and Gluck touted as essential to their operatic reformist goals.

The most important, though not the most obvious adjustment in the libretto, is the introduction of the God of Love as an actual character. In the *Georgics*, Virgil does not mention love as either a God or a feeling and speaks only of “an aching heart.”**53** Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* advances to recognize Love as “a god well-known in the upper world,”**54**

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**51** Ibid., 1.


who can influence the actions of mortals. In this same strain of adaptation, Calzabigi introduces The God of Love at the beginning of Act 1, scene 3, who goes on to grant Orfeo permission to seek out his beloved in the underworld and who delivers the gods’ stipulations:

You, when ascending from Hades,
Shall refrain from beholding
Your wife while you flee.
If you weaken but once
You will lose her forever.\(^{55}\)

Unlike both Virgil’s and Ovid’s renditions, the opera’s Orfeo does not receive further instruction from either Hades or any incarnation of Proserpina/Persephone. Excepting the chorus, Calzabigi reduced the central characters to that of Orfeo, Euridice, and the God of Love. Ornamentation, clutter, and obtuse story lines were a part of operatic heritage that both composer and librettist were eager to shed. The task was to cut out any unnecessary action and to amplify each character’s emotional qualities using music. It was not by mere coincidence that Calzabigi stumbled upon a myth that lended itself so readily to such an intense reductive process. Struck by the steps Ovid took to limit the action, increase the drama, and gift audiences with a sense of existential relief, the librettist must have recognized the potential to follow through with even greater alterations and a more pointed conclusion.

In one of the more dramatic differences from both the Virgil and the Ovid,

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Calzabigi endowed his Euridice with a personality all her own. The ancient versions both blamed Orpheus for looking back at his wife, who existed solely as a foil, thereby eternally condemning her to Hades. In order to balance the triangle of characters he had created for the opera, the librettist decided to split the onus of Euridice’s retribution equally between husband and wife. Calzabigi’s Euridice, newly enriched with character traits equal to that of Orfeo, could not understand why, reunited as they were in happiness, her lover refused to meet her gaze. “Why, averting your eyes, / You seem to flee my glance?”\footnote{Gluck,} she demands as they navigate their way through the labyrinth of passageways to the land of the living. Her mounting distrust and unhappiness have a dramatic impact on her partner, which he conveys to the audience through a series of various asides: “Oh gods, how can I bear it? . . . / How I wish I could show her / My delirious passion! / It cannot be. O terrible decree!”\footnote{Ibid.,}

Though there is no explicit mention in the libretto, an integral part of Orfeo’s contract with the God of Love is contingent upon his silence as to the terms of the agreement. “Tell me your secret, I beseech you!”\footnote{Ibid.,} pleads Euridice, as she is led onward by the hand. “My secret I cannot teach you. / Silent I still must remain,”\footnote{Ibid.,} responds her husband as their sorrows mount. Finally, the burden becomes too great for either to bear and the young woman stops, weighed down by suspicion and doubt, to cry out “Ere I shall end my life, / Grant me, my love a final glance!”\footnote{Ibid.,} Orfeo, mad with despair, struggles against his desire to rush to her side and manages to refrain from turning
around. At this final dismissal of her request for her spouse’s attentions, Euridice sinks
down to the ground, the “icy hand of death”\(^{61}\) gripping her heart, and threatens to expire.
This final protest proves too much for the bard and he turns suddenly towards his wife,
killing her, just as she rises to meet his gaze. Euridice sinks to the ground and dies,
singing, “My Orpheus . . . farewell . . . / forever.”\(^{62}\)

Gluck and Calzabigi intended their reformed opera to be used as an instruction manual in the same way they had followed Algarotti’s *Saggio. Orfeo* was a representation of how opera should be and its designs were set forth as a pattern. In any pedagogical relationship, the most successful transfer of information exists between the parties with the strongest connection or shared critical consciousness. Calzabigi, in realization of this particular fact, knew that he needed more than a familiar storyline and superb musical score to establish the kind of relationship he envisioned between opera and audience. Act 4, scene 2 is the pivotal moment during which the God of Love stops Orfeo, who has pulled a dagger from his breast pocket, from committing suicide. Instead of reuniting the lovers in death, as Ovid did in the *Georgics*, Calzabigi rewards his audience with a staged reconciliation, reminiscent of the sacrificial scene amidst the triad of Abraham, his son Isaac, and the Angel of the Lord in the book of Genesis.\(^{63}\) The audience’s emotional investment in the two lovers was a given, but the cunning librettist added a subtle biblical reference as a final subconscious grab at the viewer's sense of metaphysical devotion to his story. In order to guarantee the full absorption of *Orfeo*’s reformist ideology,

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\(^{61}\) Ibid., 13.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 15.
Calzabigi set an extra snare.

A comparison between Orfeo’s self-sacrifice and that of Abraham’s is not a conspicuous one, but the responses from both The God of Love and that of Genesis’ Angel of the Lord, in combination with Calzabigi’s personal objectives, readily uphold the suggestion. Calzabigi, whom we have come to know as a man with a reason behind every action, needed a way to make his version of an Ancient Greek myth resonate with Enlightenment audiences, whether they were aware of it or not. Rather than an obvious ploy for cultural adoption, the librettist instilled a deep-rooted sense of familiarity without giving away his methods. There is not one reference in the letters, reviews of the premier, or scholarly sources on the opera, which allude to the author’s attempts to woo his Christian audience’s allegiances via biblical similarities. An outcome that would have been in keeping with the poet’s intentions.

Neither the Virgil nor the Ovid portrayed Orpheus’ journey to the underworld as a test. He is merely seen as a wronged man who, due to his impressive artistic abilities, is given the opportunity to attempt the rescue of his wife. The addition of Calzabigi’s Angel of Love turns the story into a moral tale and likens the entire scenario to the test of Abraham’s devotion to God, which likewise proves unwavering. The Old Testament’s angel stayed Abraham’s hand just as he was to slay his son with a knife and bade him, “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.” 64 In an obvious bid for the audience’s psyche, Calzabigi intentionally mimicked this scene with

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the insistence that Orfeo was willing to give up his life for Love, just as Abraham was willing to forfeit his son for God. Similarly to the way in which Abraham’s Angel stops him in the nick of time, The God of Love also calls unto Orfeo “Desist, O mortal!” and proceeds to explain that he “withstood the test / Of devotion and love, / And [his] suffering and pain shall be ended.”\(^6^5\) Not only are the protagonists from both tales spared the sacrifice of their own flesh, but they are rewarded for their devotion: Abraham in the blessing of his seed and Orfeo in the reunion with his wife in the world of the living.

Ultimately, *Orfeo ed Euridice* closed the door on two centuries worth of maligned operatic tradition and pointed audiences, composers, and critics in a new musical direction. Though they shared nothing more than a birth year (1714) and a new vision for the opera stage, the unlikely pairing of Italy’s *enfant terrible* and Vienna’s most reliably staid composer-in-residence proved immensely successful. Their differences prompted a depth of simplicity that would have been impossible under disparate circumstances. The reform aspect of this pair’s series of operas does not necessarily refer to the techniques used to create the libretti and scores, as Wagner purports in *Opera und Drama*, but to the emphasis placed on instruction. In a period during which music was still not considered a legitimate art form, it would have been useless for Gluck to blatantly champion music as poetry’s equal. In leading his audiences by example, *Orfeo*’s impact reached infinitely further. This form of instructive operatic composition set the tone for the evolution of opera into the end of the 18th century and straight into the 19th.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 15.
II. COMEDY IS SIMPLY A FUNNY WAY OF BEING SERIOUS:

*Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) - Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart / Lorenzo Da Ponte

Reform differs from revolution in that it uses planning and time as its weapons of choice over deconstruction and upheaval. *Orfeo*, amidst its obvious intentions of structural rehabilitation, was indeed a “reform” opera, hinting gently at the kinds of artistic control of which 18th century composers could only dream. In spite of its pivotal position within the Classical music repertoire Gluck’s opera is typically categorized as the “bookend” of an era and not as the threshold. *Orfeo* laid the groundwork for progress and exemplified the seemingly innocuous fact that when an artist is given ultimate control, he can deliver a better product and what ruling parties overlooked, in their slight relaxations of authority, was the magnitude for influence they had unwittingly released into the hands of composers.

There was much more to the early rejection of opera in the late 17th and 18th centuries than simply a marked difference in tastes. Powerfully influential men, who could count the likes of Boileau (1636-1711), Fontenelle (1657-1757), and Voltaire (1694-1778) amongst their ranks, unanimously considered the genre of opera “a corrupt product of modern times . . . that misguides the spirit and betrays reason.” This strong-minded aversion developed from a thorough comprehension of the unruly power of persuasion and consequence that lay dormant beneath early 18th century’s insipid musical facade. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), the prominent theologian and court preacher to Louis XIV of France, wrote, “music . . . produces a secret inclination to

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that intimate disposition that enfeebles the soul and inclines the heart toward all that is perceived through the senses. One no longer knows what it is that one wants." A staunch believer in the divinity of royalty, Bossuet was quick to recognize the persuasive qualities inherent to music and rightly believed that complete control of artistic output was necessary to protect the station of the monarchy. Despite the sincerest efforts of Bossuet and the like, the entire system was no match for a single child prodigy from Salzburg.

A large percentage of Europe’s great composers were historically recognized as “child-prodigies,” but none can lay claim to the sort of international recognition of performance and serious composition attributed to the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Early accolades were distributed on account of his live performances and precociously endearing behavior as a child, however, the boy’s initial compositions endured as worthwhile etudes for piano study. More than one hundred years after the childhood antics and unrecorded live performances faded into memory, the 20th century music critic Georg Schunemann (1884-1945) sought the complete publication of Mozart als achtjähriger Komponist (1909). Schunemann was not interested in preserving Mozart-the-child in a suspended state of posterity. The genuine significance of the etudes and their potential contribution to the fortepiano oeuvre served as sufficient motivation of issuance. Mozart first debuted as a performer, but he had always been a composer first.

It is easy to dwell on the impressive and story-laden years of Mozart's youth and rigorous touring schedule, but for the purposes of this paper, any historical context

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regarding Mozart’s past will commence in 1769 when he was thirteen years old. In December of that year, Leopold Mozart, Wolfgang’s father and acting manager, decided the young boy’s compositional skills had reached a level of maturity as to be applied to the genre of opera and he scheduled a visit to Italy in coincidence with the start of Carnival season. During the 18th century, opera served as the central form of entertainment for Carnival. As it exists today, Carnival can be written off as a citywide party. During the 1700’s, this celebration held a far greater significance: it was an acknowledgement and deconstruction of the varying sets of life’s crossroads — birth, life, adolescence, religion, death — each list ebbed and flowed respectively. Carnival season erased all sense of societal perimeters and recalibrated the individual. In its European element, Carnival, from the Italian carnevale, meaning ‘removal of meat,’ celebrated this breaking of boundaries during the pre-Lenten period from Christmas until Ash Wednesday.

Not only did Carnival’s purpose serve to destratify the masses, but it encouraged a set of behavioral expectations that were the photo negative of the “good Christian’s” Lenten role. Just as the period of Lent was meant to restrict observers’ behaviors to only the purest of intentions, Carnival proffered a licentious anonymity, encouraging the populace to indulge in any and every carnal and debauched activity they deemed fit. This celebration of the senses existed throughout Europe, but no region’s identity was so entwined with the party as that of Venice. Though it is commonly regarded as a cathartic human convention (an idea popularized by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bahktin

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musicologist Wendy Heller defined the Carnival experience by its provision of “social cohesion for an otherwise disenfranchised populace.”

Professor Heller’s book, *Emblems of Eloquence* (2013), resolutely asserts that the city of Venice and the role of opera in that metropolis had a unique relationship with the season of Carnival beyond the traditional sullying-expurgation of the human experience: “it was a necessary feature of Venetian existence, built in to the system.”

Like a set of Russian nesting dolls, opera belonged to Carnival just as Carnival belonged to the Republic of Venice. The three were inextricable and their transitive properties, erected in the mid-1600’s, carried far into the 18th century and the psyche of Enlightenment era composers. Venice was a city on the wan, but with opera as its Carnival masque, the metropolis captivated the whole of Europe’s artistic sensibilities.

Mozart’s and his father’s 1769 trip to Italy served a dual purpose. Leopold Mozart had scheduled the visit in the managerial hopes of securing an opera commission for his son and for the instructional purpose of completing Mozart’s induction into the better-paid world of opera.

According to a 1766 correspondence of Melchior Grimm (1723-1807), a friend of Mozart’s father, the young boy was destined for a place in the realm of Italian opera. “I have little doubt that before he has reached the age of twelve, he will already have had an opera performed in some Italian theater,” wrote Melchior. In

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71 Ibid., 7.


fact, it took Mozart until he was almost twelve and a half before *La Finta Semplice* (1769), an Italian *opera buffa* in three acts, premiered at the Palace of the Archbishop of Salzburg, on May 1, 1769.

Over two hundred years after his death, even the most apathetic individual will not hesitate to label Mozart “the most absolute of all Musicians.” According to Richard Wagner, though he is clearly the historically nominated symbol of classical music, Mozart’s impact resonated with as comparable of force outside the music world as within. As was emphasized earlier, composers existed within Enlightenment society as the property of local governments.

The penalty for going against these kinds of social arrangements were often career killing or, in the case of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), incarcerating. Bach made the decision to terminate his tenure prematurely at the court of Weimar after he was passed over for the position of Kapellmeister in 1717. It was a disappointing blow which was exacerbated by an ongoing family feud between Bach’s employer, the Duke of Weimar (1662-1728) and his nephew, Ernst August (1688-1748). The disenfranchised composer preemptively accepted an offer to act as Kapellmeister from the Court of Anhalt-Köthen, but his subsequent resignation infuriated his current master. According to the court secretary, Theodor Benedikt Bormann, on the “Sixth of November, the Konzertmeister and Organist Bach, until now in office, was sent to jail because of his obstinacy in trying to obtain his dismissal by force. He was freed on the second of December after being notified of his disgrace.”

Bach did eventually make his way to Court Anhalt-Cothen, but it followed a

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month long stint in a local prison and burned any connection he established during his tenure at Weimar. The frequency with which composers suffered persecution highlights Mozart’s singularly brave decision to stand up to the Archbishop of Salzburg in 1781. After his return from a 1773 tour of Italy, the seventeen-year-old Mozart (and his father) were passed down from the previous Prince-Archbishopric of Salzburg, a “pleasant old body” who permitted the duo egregious amounts of freedom, into the hands of Hieronymus von Colloredo (1732-1812).

Though the American Silver Screen suggests Mozart found the makings of an arch nemesis in his compatriot Antonio Salieri (1750-1825), Mozart’s real combatant was his employer, the newly elected Archbishop Colloredo. Aside from the intermittent skirmishes over various freedoms, Mozart particularly disliked Colloredo as he disregarded opera as a frivolous drain on archiepiscopal revenues.

In a disciplinary power move, the Archbishop disallowed his upstart employee from performing anywhere else excepting his palace during the spring of 1781. This incendiary restriction pushed Mozart over the edge. In a letter to his father, Mozart details his last moments in the employ of the Archbishopric:

called me (a scoundrel, a rascal, a vagabond.) Oh, I really cannot tell you all he said. At last my blood began to boil, I could no longer contain myself and I said, "So Your Grace is not satisfied with me?" "What, you dare to threaten me you (scoundrel?) There is the (door!) Look out, for I

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78 Ibid., 250.
will have nothing more to do with such (a miserable wretch.)" At last I said: "Nor I with you!" "Well, be off!" When leaving the room, I said "This is final. You shall have it to­morrow in writing."\textsuperscript{79}

After a month’s wait for a response to his resignation, Mozart marched round the palace in search of the man he hated “to madness.”\textsuperscript{80} Upon meeting Count Arco, the Archbishop’s Chamberlain, the young man ended up requesting a raise instead of doling out the self-righteous sermon he had prepared.\textsuperscript{81} This indignant maneuver was rewarded, according to Mozart, with an expulsion from the palace and a “Tritt in den Arsch,”\textsuperscript{82} which the composer rightly considered an acceptance of resignation. By standing up for his rights as an artist, Mozart unwittingly became the first self-appointed freelance musician. By the age of 25, he was free of his father’s influence, free of Salzburg, and free to compose opera in Vienna, the richest German-speaking city in Europe.

Even before his various emancipations, Mozart firmly believed that opera composers deserved a role in the development of libretti. In his first Viennese opera, \textit{Die Entfuhrung aus dem Serail} (1782), Mozart took the reins from his mild mannered librettist, Johann Gottlieb Stephanie (1741-1800), and arranged the dramaturgy to suit his musical needs. Whereas Gluck wrote that opera music should be patterned on the words and vice-versa, Mozart had an entirely revolutionary take on the relationships within opera:

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 1084.
\textsuperscript{82} Heartz, 65.
I should say that in an opera the poetry must be altogether the obedient daughter of the music. Why do Italian comic operas please everywhere in spite of their miserable libretti even in Paris, where I myself witnessed their success? Just because there the music reigns supreme and when one listens, to it all else is forgotten. Why, an opera is sure of success when the plot is well worked out, the words written solely for the music and not shoved in here and there to suit some miserable rhyme.

Mozart’s first librettist, Stephanie, was a bit of a pushover and afforded Mozart creative control, but this was not the kind of partnership for which the young composer was searching. Mozart desired a partner, a colleague, a collaborative associate to enhance his ideas and vice-versa. “The best thing of all,” Mozart wrote to his father in October 1781, “is when a good composer, who understands the stage and is talented enough to make sound suggestions, meets an able poet, that true phoenix; in that case, no fears need be entertained as to the applause—even of the ignorant.”84 Two years after this letter, Mozart’s phoenix made his way to Vienna in the form of Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749-1838), an Italian librettist traveling with the new opera troupe requested by Emperor Joseph the Second (1741-1790).85

In contradiction with the popular opinion of western civilization, the 19th century German composer Richard Wagner argued in his essay Opera und Drama (1851) that Mozart never met the poet who “would have helped to pen the truest, fairest and

84 Ibid., 1151
85 Rice, Mozart on the Stage, 85.
Wagner divided Mozart’s collaborators into the “pedantically wearisome” or the “frivolously spritely,” the latter adjective clearly angled at Da Ponte. Given his perennially doting attitude and complete reverence for Mozart’s compositional skills, Wagner’s disdain for Mozart’s operatic collaborations appears unusual. What Wagner had yet to realize at the time of *Opera und Drama*’s publication was that in criticizing Da Ponte, he was unintentionally criticizing Mozart. If Ludwig Nohl’s (1831-1885) *The Letters of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (1863) had been published a decade earlier, Wagner surely would have reversed his position.

As with Calzabigi and Gluck, Da Ponte and Mozart worked so closely that it is impossible to pinpoint exactly who influenced whom. Da Ponte’s preface to the libretto of *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) references Mozart as an equal partner in creativity: “despite the labor and diligence that the maestro di cappella and I expended in the interest of brevity, the opera will not be among the shortest.” If the written confession of Da Ponte himself was not enough to satisfy Wagner’s apprehensions, a mere glance at the librettist’s oeuvre should have sufficed. During his ten years in Vienna, Da Ponte wrote libretti for the two most popular operatic composers in Austria: the Spanish-born Martin Y Soler (1754-1856) and the aforementioned Antonio Salieri. In a letter sent from New York to an unknown recipient, 38 years after working with Mozart on *Figaro*, Da Ponte listed the following operas as his most important, successful, and influential libretti: “*Una Cosa Rara* (1786), *L’arbore di Diana* (1787), *La Capricciosa*

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86 Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 38.
87 Ibid., 38.
Corretta (1759), Le Nozze di Figaro, and Don Giovanni (1787).  

Despite collaboration on no fewer than six operas with Salieri, none of them, in the author’s opinion, made the cut. The other three unfamiliar operas on his list were composed by the equally unfamiliar Martin Y Soler. If we use performance history to filter Da Ponte’s top five, we are left with Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni, two of the most frequently performed operas of the genre. What made these two libretti, according to Da Ponte and western performance practice, so different from the others? The answer is obvious. Mozart’s renowned wit, impeccable sense of comedic timing, and architectural intelligence were the stringent guidelines by which Da Ponte was forced to adhere.

Lorenzo Da Ponte was born Emanuele Conegliano into a Jewish family from the Republic of Venice in 1749. The name change occurred after his father, following the 1754 death of his spouse, remarried a Christian woman and had his three sons baptized as Roman Catholics. The newly minted Lorenzo Da Ponte excelled academically and graduated from Ceneda to the Seminary at Portogruaro, a town between Ceneda and Venice, where he accepted the posts of Professor Literature in 1770 and Assistant Director in 1772. The following year, Da Ponte was ordained to the priesthood and he moved into Venice on a full-time basis as the professor of Humanities at the Treviso seminary. The move to Venice was the end for this dissolute priest, as his initial embarkment was spurned by his desire to be nearer his married lover, Angiola Teipolo.

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90 Ibid., no. 81 (2006)
Upon the addition of another married woman, Angioletta Bellaudi, to his list of attentions, Da Ponte was finally fired from the seminary for his “egalitarian ideas”\textsuperscript{92} and eventually banished from Venice for adultery on December 17, 1779 for the duration of fifteen years.\textsuperscript{93}

Da Ponte was an unwitting poster child for the cross-cultural implications the glittering, gilded city of Venice promoted with its intense blurring of social constructs. A Jewish born, Catholic priest with a bevy of married girlfriends, an elopement, an illegitimate child (some sources say children), and various sundry accusations to his name, was the ultimate personification of the spirit of carnival. As if to cement his reputation of “libertine-priest,” the 28-year-old Da Ponte acquired the friendship of the venerable 52 year old Casanova, who also resided in Venice during the late 1770’s. Casanova’s and Da Ponte’s memoirs reference their twenty year friendship, with evidence of their closeness inspiring Mrs. FitzLyon, “a biographer given to creative leaps in logic,” to suggest Casanova might have been responsible for some of the finishing touches to Don Giovanni (1787).\textsuperscript{94} All conjecture aside, the two men, who were indeed close friends, led uncannily similar lives. Both men initially impressed authorities with their intellect and then provoked them with unconventional ideas and behavior. It was a pattern that generated several identical circumstances including both Casanova’s and Da Ponte’s banishment from Venice and relocation to Vienna.

\textsuperscript{92} Rodney Bolt, \textit{The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart’s Poet, Casanova’s Friend, and Italian Opera’s Impresario in America}, (USA: Bloomsberry, 2006), 61.

\textsuperscript{93} Zweifel and Zweifel, 2006.

The method by which Da Ponte gained entry to the court of Vienna was nothing short of extraordinary. Da Ponte, who spoke no German, first set up residence in the Austrian border-town of Gorizia. Fortunately for the young poet, Italian was the primary language of the aristocracy’s leisurely pursuits in Gorizia. Da Ponte quickly found himself composing odes and poems for the innermost circles of society.\(^95\) As expressly as he ascended into a position of worth, Da Ponte soon found himself embroiled in a one-sided lyrical feud with Giuseppe Colletti (1744-1815), the leading poet and proponent of Italian literature in the arcadian colony of Gorizia. Many sources touch upon Da Ponte’s oft-referenced, supreme dislike of Colletti, however, few fail to cite the reasons behind his unquenchable malice and Colletti’s unlimited indifference.

Sheila Hodges’ biography *Lorenzo Da Ponte: The Life and Times of Mozart’s Librettist* (2002) quotes Da Ponte’s descriptions of Colletti (“mad, fanatical, licentious, a liar, flatterer, hypocrite, and totally devoid of true poetic taste”),\(^96\) but gives little thought as to why he felt as he did. In order to make sense of the situation, Hodges and other biographers accredited Colletti with “the most Christian of cheeks.”\(^97\)

An intense, well-documented, self-generated hatred of a man he did not know intimately was, as Hodges writes, “a mystery.”\(^98\) What is not a mystery was that Da Ponte had taken up residence with the publisher Valerio de’ Valeri, a vindictive man whose only directed competitor in the publishing business was Tommasini Press, a

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\(^95\) Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart’s Poet, Casanova’s Friend, and Italian Opera’s Impresario in America*, 91.


\(^97\) Ibid., 39.

\(^98\) Ibid., 40.
once struggling a printing house, revived in 1778 by Colletti. Though Colletti is most famous for establishing Gorizia’s *Colonia Arcadia Romano-Sonziaca*, a town ideal meant to uphold the use of Italian as a literary language, he also molded the Tommasini Press into so successful an operation, that the publishing house received imperial authorization to print schoolbooks and all official publications.  

Da Ponte knew too little of the politics and personages of his new town to initiate so bold a dislike of an imminently respected man as Colletti. The feud was undoubtedly started and stoked by Valeri, Da Ponte’s publisher and proprietor, in a thinly veiled attempt to lash out against Colletti’s flourishing Tommasini press. Needled by Colletti’s successes as a publisher, Valeri convinced Da Ponte that Colletti was the source of any rumors proliferated behind the young Italian’s back.  

Coerced into retaliation, Da Ponte composed a satirical piece on Colletti, which Valeri promptly and cheerfully published. With financial and political success on his side, Colletti had little reason to participate in low-level squabbling, but quietly planned what he had intended to be a harmless, if not embarrassing, fool’s errand for his assailant.

At some point in September of 1780, Da Ponte’s friend and colleague from Venice (who had recently been appointed court poet to Frederick Augustus III (1750-1827) of Saxony), Caterino Mazzolà (1745-1806), passed through Gorizia on route to Dresden with unfortunate tidings for the Venetian expatriate. Mazzolà brought

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100 Ibid., 95.
word of Pisani’s, the Procurator of San Marco’s,\(^\text{101}\) Georgia Pisani, plans for social revolution and his subsequent indictment by the Inquisitors of the State. On May 31, 1780, Pisani was arrested and deported to the castle of San Felice, at Verona, along with any chances of reversing Da Ponte’s exile.\(^\text{102}\) Upon hearing the news, Da Ponte refocused his sights on Dresden and openly boasted of his potential relocation after Mazzolà’s visit.\(^\text{103}\) The young poet purposefully sought out Colletti and recorded in his memoirs that he “confided to him, among other things, that I might be leaving for Dresden; that Mazzolà, whom he had seen with me, had held out good hopes of that, and that, in short, I considered the matter a foregone conclusion.”\(^\text{104}\)

In November of 1780, Da Ponte wrote that he received a letter from Dresden “that was not written by Mazzolà,” but his signature, which Da Ponte “knew very well” had been affixed at the conclusion.\(^\text{105}\) The notice bade him to relocate to the city of Dresden immediately in order to fill a distinguished post at the Court of the Elector. After much fanfare, Da Ponte weighed his options and the opinions of his friends in Gorizia, and decided to move his life to Dresden. Upon arriving in the city, the young man immediately sought out his friend, Mazzolà. According to his memoirs (1823), which scholars describe as deliberately selective,\(^\text{106}\) the presence of a grave misunderstanding


\(^{102}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{103}\) Bolt, *The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart’s Poet, Casanova’s Friend, and Italian Opera’s Impresario in America*, 95.


\(^{105}\) Da Ponte, *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 110.

was apparent from the very start. Mazzolà greeted his friend with a “well, well, Da Ponte at Dresden!”
which was followed by an awkward silence and then “Can it be that you have been called to the theater at St. Petersburg?” After a few more meetings, Da Ponte gathered that Mazzolà had indeed addressed him a letter in Gorizia, but that it had been replaced with a counterfeit:

“Mazzolà,” I said to myself, “wrote me a letter from Dresden which I never received. I did receive another, written in an unknown hand, with the signature of Mazzolà. May not that signature have been forged? But who could do such a thing? Who? Colletti! . . . I came then and there to the conclusion that Colletti had played me that ugly trick, and down to the present day, I have had no occasion to change my mind.”

Mazzolà was unable to secure Da Ponte a court position, but kept him on as a boarder and assistant. Though he was grateful for his friend’s patience and graciousness, about a year after his arrival in Dresden, Da Ponte found himself embroiled in a familiar position that required a hasty departure. Always the serial romantic, the young Da Ponte fell in love with both daughters of a colleague and could not bring himself to choose between the two. News of his younger brother’s death further compounded his emotional turmoil and he abruptly decided to leave for Vienna at the conclusion of 1781. Throughout his stay in Dresden, Da Ponte

107 Da Ponte, Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte, 112.
108 Ibid., 113.
110 Ibid., 103.
had specifically avoided composing opera libretti in order not to encroach upon
the artistic domain of his friend and host. On the day of his departure, a choice
that was partially spurned by the aptly named Camerata sisters, Mazzolà pressed a
letter of introduction and the business of opera into Da Ponte’s palm: “My Dear
Salieri, My beloved Da Ponte will hand you these few lines . . . do for him
everything that you would do for me. His heart and his talents deserve
everything.”\textsuperscript{111}

Joseph Louis Russo (1884-1971) suggests in his study \textit{Lorenzo Da Ponte: Poet
and Adventurer} (1922), that Mazzolà’s heart-felt recommendation was emotionally aided
in part by his desire to see his friend out of Dresden.\textsuperscript{112} As future successes and accolades
would cement, Da Ponte was a refreshing breath of “unusual skill and inspiration” at a
time during which the profession of librettist had been devalued by innumerable
impoverished adaptations of popular dramas.\textsuperscript{113} Mazzolà recognized the young poet’s
potential and knew it was only a matter of time before Da Ponte’s talents would become
apparent to the whole of Dresden. As fate would have it, Mazzolà’s attempts to escape
creative comparison with his Italian compatriot were in vain. In the summer of 1791,
Mazzolà, who was in Vienna as the Italian troupe’s house poet, was contracted to provide
a revision of Pietro Metastasio’s (1698-1782) \textit{La Clemenza di Tito} (1734) for Mozart’s
1791 opera of the same name. Both men worked with Mozart, but it was Da Ponte who

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{112} Joseph Louis Russo, \textit{Lorenzo Da Ponte: Poet and Adventurer}, (New York: Columbia University
Press, 1922), 45.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., xi.
came out on top with three original adaptations to his credit.

Scholars place Da Ponte’s arrival in Vienna sometime in very early 1782, as his memoirs recount a meeting with the imminently esteemed Metastasio, who died on April 12, 1782. Even though Da Ponte wrote that he had “delivered Mazzolà’s letter on [his] arrival” to Salieri, it was not until 1783, upon hearing a rumor that Joseph II was reinstating an Italian Opera, that the young man decided to apply for the post of the Kaiser’s Poet. In 1776, Emperor Joseph II replaced the entire Burgtheater Company with the German company from the Karntnertortheater. The disillusioned monarch hoped that these “all-German and only German-language restrictions” would result in a glorious and long lasting nationalistic tradition. Joseph’s dictate proved limiting and unsuccessful. In 1783, the emperor recruited an Italian Opera Company through his Venetian Ambassador Count Giacomo Durazzo, the same director who staged Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice, in 1762. Fully aware of Salieri’s relationship with Durazzo, Da Ponte appealed to the busy composer yet again, and this time, “he not only encouraged [him] to apply for the post, but volunteered to speak himself to the Director of Spectacles and to the Sovereign personally, of whom he was particularly beloved.” Salieri’s eventual help proved to be worth the year’s savings Da Ponte drained during his stay in Vienna.

A testament to his revered position within the monarchy, Salieri secured Da Ponte a meeting with the Kaiser for his first audience. Da Ponte reflected on his abject nervousness in a description of one of the most famous and oft-recounted interactions.

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114 Da Ponte, *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 129.
116 Da Ponte, *The Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 129.
between artist and aristocracy since the young Mozart’s confrontation with the
Archbishop of Salzburg two years prior. Despite his “great awe and perturbation,” the
monarch’s affable manner “not only restored [his] self-possession, but left [him] scarcely
aware that [he] was standing before an Emperor.”117 By the end of the audience, Da Ponte
recorded that the ruler demanded to know how many plays he had written, to which the
young man replied:

”None, Sire.”

“Fine! Fine!” [the emperor] rejoined smiling. “We shall have a virgin Muse!”118

As he would write over twenty years later, Da Ponte’s surprisingly successful first
meeting with the Kaiser was “beyond any doubt, the sweetest and most delicious moment
of [his] life.”119 Not even the high of this initial triumph was enough to trump the trials
ahead. The novice librettist soon discovered “how much more difficult in any
undertaking is the execution than the conception.”120 For his first project, Da Ponte was
requested to create a libretto to be set to music by none other than Salieri. The task
proved a daunting one for the novice and he found the entirety of the experience
disheartening. In a charming and comical excerpt from his memoires, Da Ponte relates
how he “wangled” through the first act of Il Ricco d’un Giorno (1784) until he came flat
up against the finale or *stretta* of the first act. He explains to the reader how the finale,
“through a dogma of the theatre,” must be the culmination of all the previous scenes,
display every single singer of the cast, and create the grandest of dramatic effects. In Da Ponte’s own words: “If the plot of the drama does not permit, the poet must find a way to make it permit, in the face of reason, good sense, Aristotle, and all the powers of heaven or earth; and if then the finale happens to go badly, so much the worse for him!”

Not only did Da Ponte eke out his first *stretta*, but he finished the entirety of his first libretto and locked it away to read after his head had cleared. Upon second inspection the following day, Da Ponte found his work to be “colder and worse” than it had appeared during composition. Salieri had already called for more text to set to music, so the young poet had no time for revisions. As the story goes, the composer read the libretto in Da Ponte’s presence, said it was well written, and that he would “need to have some little changes made here and there.” The pleasant reception of his poetry sent the author into throes of joy, at least until the opera went into rehearsal. Salieri had the original text and setting changed so dramatically, that Da Ponte doubted “whether there remained a hundred verses of [his] original.” As good fortune would have it, the emperor’s new lyricist had plenty of time to learn from his mistakes. *Il Ricco d’un Giorno* did not see production until 1784 due to the sudden arrival of the renowned poet Abbe Casti (1724-1803) and the celebrated composer Giovanni Paisiello (1740-1816). This powerful duo’s new opera, *La Casti-Rosembergica Famiglia* (1783), was so successful that it “frightened Salieri, that he no longer dared propose “Rich for a Day” to the directors for that season.” With luck on his side, Da Ponte wrote and circulated his

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121 Ibid., 133.
122 Ibid., 134.
123 Ibid., 134.
124 Ibid., 137.
second effort, *Il burbero di buon cuore* (1786), ahead of the delayed (and disastrous) premiere of *Il Ricco d’un Giorno*. His translation and setting of the French comedic play by Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) was hailed as a great success by both his peers and the Emperor. He made it; Daponte was Vienna’s librettist du jour.

The successful readings of Da Ponte’s second libretto resounded throughout Vienna like a call to worship. Composers of varying societal positions commenced what was soon to be a steady flow of requests for libretti authored by the Kaiser’s new poet. According to Da Ponte’s reflections on his new found desirability, there were only two resident composers with whom he was interested in working: Martini, “the composer most favored by Joseph II”, and “Wolfgang Mozart.”

Though the Da Ponte autobiography often uses hindsight as reality’s filter, Da Ponte’s desire to work specifically with Mozart was mostly likely true from the outset. A few short months after Da Ponte arrived in Vienna, Mozart’s *Burgtheater* premiere, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782), took the city by storm. The literary celebrity and great proponent of Mozartian opera, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), wrote in his *Italienische Reise:* ““Die Entführung aus dem Serail” conquered all, and our own carefully written piece has never been so much as mentioned in theater circles.”

Given Da Ponte’s unwavering and ceaseless desire to be at the center of popularity, his timely interest in Mozart, the artist “gifted with talents superior . . . to those of any other composer in the world, past, present, or future,” was an accurate recollection on behalf of the Italian poet.

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125 Ibid., 148.
126 Goethe quoted in *Mozart: A Documentary Biography*, ed. Deutsch, 305. The work of his own to which Goethe refers is his *Scherz, List und Rache* which was used for an opera by Max Bruch in 1858.
We are not granted much insight into the relationship between Mozart and Da Ponte. Excepting Da Ponte’s Memoirs, which leaves much to be desired on the topic of Mozart, and letters exchanged by Mozart and his father, information on the pair’s working methods is scant. Due to the constricting influence of both the Archbishop of Salzburg and his father, Mozart’s early interactions with librettists were limited. Mozart’s father was omnipresent throughout his son’s musical development and he alone defined the relationship between composer and librettist. Leopold Mozart was of the opinion that a libretto should, as a work of literature, be able to exist independently of the music. Though it seems harmless enough, Leopold’s sentiment enforced the divide between music and text; one existed solely to ornament the other. Mozart asserted that he had “not the slightest doubt about the success of [an] opera, as long as the libretto is good,” but he did not conceive of text and music as mutually exclusive entities. After leaving his father and moving to Vienna, Mozart’s first opera working in close communication with his librettist produced the overwhelmingly successful Die Entführung aus dem Serail. It was a testament to Mozart’s theories and a reaffirmation of Orfeo’s principal reformation: the greater an artist’s control, the better the result.

Gluck’s and Calzabigi’s Orfeo ed Euridice was one of the first, if not the very first opera Mozart saw staged and performed during his family’s touring visit to Vienna in October 1762. From their early connaissance in Vienna, the two composer were personally, professionally, and artistically linked. The premier of Die Entführung was substantially delayed by a production of Gluck’s La rencontre imprévue (1764) because it

127 Rice, Mozart on the Stage, 78.
128 Heartz, From Garrick to Gluck: Essays on Opera in the Age of Enlightenment, 61
used many of Mozart’s contracted performers. Mining his luck from the same vein as Da Ponte, this unplanned delay permitted the composer to make some “very necessary alterations” much to the benefit of the final product. When *Die Entführung* finally did premiere, the production was met with resistance over thematic similarities shared with Gluck’s *La recontre*. Gluck himself requested a performance of Mozart’s opera and then publicly complimented the young man on a job well done, silencing any negative murmurs.

According to the 1852 memoirs of physician Joseph Frank (1771-1842), Mozart was “always busy studying the scores of French operas,” during the 1780’s. In a conversation with the composer, Dr. Frank asked if, given the acknowledged preeminence of Italian opera, he would “do better to devote his attention to Italian scores.” Mozart supposedly responded, “In respect to melody yes, but in respect to dramatic effectiveness, no. Moreover, the scores you see here . . . are by Gluck, Piccini, and Salieri; they have nothing French about them but the words.” What we can gather from this insightful recollection, if it is indeed accurate, supports the gradual inversion of Mozart’s earlier text-dependent operas into the mid-body musical masterpieces he crafted alongside Da Ponte. Most importantly, a statement of this fashion suggests a reduction of what Mozart’s operas broadcast; a message conveyed through comedy (*opera buffa*) is no less poignant than one made by so-called serious opera (*opera seria*).

Though it was typical of non-musical plays throughout history to load comedic

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130 Ibid., 22.
storylines with worthy morals and pertinent criticisms, the business of 18th century opera was strictly divided between “the serious” (opera seria) and the “entertaining” (opera buffa). Comedic situations and characters were featured in operas from the genre’s inception, but the idea of an opera devoted entirely to comedy did not segment into its own branch until the start of the 1700’s. The term opera buffa emerged as a catchphrase designed to encompass all the varying degrees of musical comedy (commedia in musica, commedia per musica, dramma bernesco, dramma comico, divertimento gioioso, etc . . .) differing in spirit from the pastoral French opera comique and Singspiel, the German derivative. Not only was opera buffa different from opera seria by means of content, but they were also divided by their intended audiences. Opera Seria was considered high-level material for the educated upper classes. Opera Buffa, though enjoyed by all, embraced less formal language and content. Through its use of local dialects and stock characters, this style of production appealed to greater swaths of the common classes.

This parallel was further reinforced and sustained by the inherent belief that operatic music should be subservient to its accompanying text. As demonstrated by the likes of Leopold Mozart and his contemporaries, this idea was not so much an opinion as it was an accepted truth. To challenge an opinion was, in most Enlightenment societies, the right of man. To challenge a belief system, on the other hand, encroached upon sacrilege. This is precisely why Gluck’s Orfeo, which called for a more balanced relationship between that of the composer and the librettist, was such a seminal motion.

During Mozart’s first viewing of *Orfeo* (and his likely first viewing of an opera), a proverbial baton was handed off to the six-year-old child prodigy. The assignment was clear: elevate music to its rightful position of equality by challenging and complementing the accompanying libretto. The only way to commence this boundary dissection in the most effective of manners was with opera, and it had to start with the divides separating the serious from the comedic. This monumental feat was accomplished with Mozart’s first complete *opera buffa* as an emancipated composer, *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

Once again, researchers and Mozart enthusiasts alike are forced to rely solely on the words of Lorenzo Da Ponte when in search of the *Le Nozze di Figaro’s* origins. In what initially appears to be another thinly veiled attempt at promoting his keen insight, Da Ponte introduces the literary selection process with a nod to Mozart’s genius. The subject would have to be something of “great scope, something multiform, and sublime,” he wrote. Surprisingly, Da Ponte breaks from his typical self-congratulatory form and continues to write that Mozart approached him directly and asked “whether [he] could easily make an opera from a comedy by Beaumarchais (1732-1799) — Le Mariage de Figaro.” Though he heartily approved of the young composer’s selection, the choice of the 2nd part of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais’ *Figaro Trilogy* proved a delicate matter. Just a few days previous, the Emperor had forbidden the company at the German theatre to perform that comedy, “which was too licentiously written . . . for a

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132 Da Ponte, *Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte*, 149.
133 Ibid., 150.
self-respecting audience.’”

Beaumarchais’ Figaro first entered Vienna when Emperor Joseph commissioned Paisiello to stage *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1782) as an opera. The rendition was a hit, premiering on August 13th, 1783 and continuing to run for five consecutive seasons. Instead of paving the way for the sequel, the success of Paisiello’s opera further hampered a future production of *Le Nozze*. Beaumarchais was very clear in his preface to *Le Barbiere* that he conceived of the first and second plays as a set. In order to fit the entirety of the necessary action into his *Le Mariage*, the play relies entirely on the audience having already become familiarized with the characters and their individual personas as instituted in the first play. Unlike *Le Barbiere*, the second play caused a scandal in Paris when Louis XVI finally permitted its staging in 1784. Its appeal catered to all social castes and, as one of Beaumarchais’ contemporaries remarked, it offered consolation “in laughing at the foolishness of those who are the cause of all their miseries.” Daniel Heartz (1926-), in his academic essay “Setting the Stage for Figaro,” *Le Mariage de Figaro* “was so shocking that it offended not only conservatives but every faction in the spectrum of French politics, including the radical left.” Far the more conservative city, there was no way Vienna would accept salacious run-off from Paris, no matter how popular. The Habsburg’s already had a Figaro that they knew and loved — The Figaro of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* — and there was no reason to replace him with the

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134 Ibid., 150.
obscene caricature of the sequel. Any attempt at a staged version of *Le Mariage* in
Vienna was squashed in 1785 after the emperor ordered the chief of censorship, Count
Pergen, to ban the play entirely due to its offensive nature.138

Staging the operatic version of *Le Mariage*, even as recounted by Da Ponte,
points more towards Mozart’s recognition of Da Ponte’s usefulness than Da Ponte’s
self-proclaimed ability to recognize genius. The librettist subscribed to the flattering
theory of “it takes one to know one.” After the success of *Burbero*, Da Ponte garnered
immense exposure as the Emperor’s new poet and the commotion undoubtedly piqued
Mozart’s interest. The composer knew that if he wanted to stage a play banned
throughout the Habsburg Empire, he would have to find a way to get close to the
monarch. In all likelihood, Mozart initially sought out Da Ponte’s help, not because of his
talents as a librettist, but because of his influential position. In 1783, Mozart wrote his
father that he was waiting on “a certain Abate da Ponte” who had promised to write him
some new text:

> but who knows whether he will keep his word — or even wants to! You
> know, these Italian gentlemen, they are very nice to your face — enough,
> we know all about them! — and if he is in league with Salieri, I’ll never
> get a text from him — and I would love to show here what I can really do
> with an Italian opera.139

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The mere suggestion that Da Ponte may have been used as an instrument by the very instrument he had proposed to use himself would surely turn the poet in his grave. We will never truly know who imposed on whom, as both parties were sufficiently satisfied by the results teased out of one and other.

As no other accounts of the composition of Mozart’s and Da Ponte’s Le Nozze de Figaro exist, it is best to restate Da Ponte’s summary of the initial steps he took against censorship. In the latter half of 1785, both men worked on their shares of the new opera. As quickly as Da Ponte “wrote the words, Mozart set them to music.”140 Following six weeks of work, which resulted in a completed opera, Da Ponte went off on his own to speak with the Emperor. As expected, Emperor Joseph initially admonished the poet for dragging up a forbidden topic. In protest, Da Ponte agreed:

“Yes, Sire,” I rejoined, “but I was writing an opera, and not a comedy. I had to omit many scenes and to cut others quite considerably. I have omitted or cut anything that might offend good taste or public decency at a performance over which the Sovereign Majesty might preside. The music, I may add, as far as I may judge of it, seems to me marvelously beautiful.”

“Good! If that be the case, I will rely on your good taste as to the music and on your wisdom as to the morality. Send the score to the copyist.”141

The rest, according to Da Ponte, was history. His memoirs cease to recount any events surrounding Le Nozze di Figaro excepting its positive reception by the courts and his

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140 Da Ponte, The Memoirs of Lorenzo Da Ponte, 150.
141 Ibid., 151.
accurate prediction of its long lasting global resonance with audiences. *Le Nozze di Figaro* is the earliest opera still found in the repertoire of every one of today’s operating opera houses.¹⁴²

*La Folle Journée ou Le Mariage de Figaro* (1778) is the second installment in Beaumarchais’ trilogy for the stage. The Frenchman’s plays are constructed similarly to the way in which one views an artistic triptych. The center panel is always the most important, as it is not only traditionally larger than the two flanking illusions, but its importance is exacerbated by the responsibility of linking both the first and the third section. Beaumarchais’ *Barbier de Séville ou la Précaution inutile* (1775) introduces and sets up the majority of the character relationships that are featured throughout the series. *La Folle Journée, ou Le Mariage de Figaro* is the grand spectacle and the real meat of Beaumarchais’ message. The third play, *La Mère coupable* (1791), is a depoliticized diffusion of a conclusion. *La Mère* premiered at the *Théâtre du Marais* on June 26th, 1792 over one year after the Austrian composer’s death and though he never had the opportunity to consider Beaumarchais’ plays as a full set, Mozart would have had much use for the sombre third installment.

The overwhelming success of Pasiello’s 1782 rendition of *Le Barbier* did not drive Mozart to set his sights on an operatic adaptation of Beaumarchais’ second play, *Le Mariage*. His reasoning for passing over the first play as a subject was very specific. *Le Barbier*, an ingenious reversal of the dull-witted servant and the all-knowing master,

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introduced the youthful and exuberant Figaro character; jack-of-all-trades from the servanthood class whose intelligence and penchant for scheming garners his master a series of romantic successes in exchange for coinage. Although Figaro’s wit and cunning are on full display throughout the entirety of the fast-paced and entertaining *Le Barbier*, Mozart was not as interested in showmanship as he was in results. You see, although he was an intellectually active member of the Enlightenment era community and in no way immune to the appeal of the politically subversive aspects with which *Le Barbier* was rife, Mozart’s primary concerns existed on a parallel, esoteric plane.

The term esoteric works as a descriptor when held up against the prototypical concerns of the Enlightenment’s intelligentsia. In spite of his previous brushes with totalitarian authority, Mozart was never so interested in championing the rights of man as he was in championing the rights of music. His first language and his first love, music existed for the composer as an entire discourse. It is imperative to understand that, even during the 18th century when a musical education was considered *de rigueur*, Mozart’s conception of music was practically impossible for the layman to comprehend. All Mozartian biographers mention immediately that Wolfgang was very good with mathematics and spoke seven languages by a very early age. Any child learning one of the world’s “natural languages” acquires the majority of their linguistic competence in their native language by the age of three.\(^{143}\) It just so happens that music was one of the “natural languages” of the Mozart household.

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Mozart the elder was a court musician and composer in Salzburg whose most distinguished talents rested in pedagogy. His *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, published the year of Mozart’s birth, is a comprehensive instruction guide to violin playing which is still consulted today in regard to 18th century phrasing and technique. Just as Mozart picked up Italian, English, and French from exposure to his family’s conversations, he too was exposed to and acquired his first introduction to music in the same fashion. The desire to communicate through composition was so natural an urge that Mozart the younger did not ask permission to use his surprised father’s composition desk for his first ink-stained attempt at a violin concerto at age four. The child had difficulties with his penmanship, but when his father studied the notes and music he exclaimed to his friend Andre Schachtner, “Look, Herr Schachtner . . . see how correctly and properly it is all written, only it can’t be used, for it is so very difficult that no one could play it.” The young Mozart retorted, “That’s why it’s a concerto, you must practise it till you can get it right, look, that’s how it goes.” For all his preternatural mastery, even Mozart needed the occasional reminder as to the communicative powers of music. Mozart was a student and friend of Franz Joseph Haydn, affectionately known by his pupils and colleagues as “Pa Pa Haydn” for his fatherly and benevolent demeanor. When Haydn informed Mozart of his decision to journey to England in 1790 at the age of 58, Mozart supposedly exclaimed, “Oh Papa, you have no education for the wide world, and you speak so few languages.” Haydn’s legendary reply was: “But my language is

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146 Ibid., 452.
understood all over the world.”

The question of whether or not music is a language has occupied minds across academic fields to this day. Charles Limb, an otolaryngological surgeon at Johns Hopkins University became so intrigued with the idea of the acquisition of music as a language, he decided to use MRI to map what happens to musicians’ brains while performing. The Atlantic Magazine (2014) chronicled Limb’s experiment which revealed that the brains of the musicians engaged with other musicians showed “robust activation” in the same brain areas associated with spoken language and syntax. Mozart’s use of musical communication was also a hot topic in the scientific communities of the mid-18th century. While on tour with his father in London, the eight-year-old was permitted to be examined by several men of science including the English magistrate and scholar Daines Barrington (1727-1800). Having studied the young boy, he published his findings in the Royal Society of London’s Philosophical Transactions of 1770. In an attempt to clarify Mozart’s musical virtuosity in a fashion his colleagues and readers could comprehend, Barrington translated Mozart’s abilities into an example of linguistic performance. Barrington wrote that the boy’s sight-reading skills were comparable to:

a capital speech in Shakespeare never seen before, and yet read by a child of eight years old, with all the pathetic energy of a Garrick. Let it be conceived likewise, that the same child is reading, with a glance of his

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147 Karl Geiringer, Haydn: A Creative Life in Music (New York: W.W. Norton, 1946), 89
150 Ibid., 3.
eye, three different comments on this speech tending to its illustration; and that one comment is written in Greek, the second in Hebrew, and the third in Etruscan characters . . . When all this is conceived, it will convey some idea of what this boy is capable of.\textsuperscript{151}

Even during Mozart’s lifetime, it was firmly recognized that his relationship to music was best parsed as a comprehensive linguistic analysis.

There are many problems that can arise from the dismissal of music as a language. Each individual has his own unique relationship with music and for the nonprofessional, music is generally interpreted as an “emotional experience.” When asked to describe aural excerpts of music, the average listener will most likely define the music using emotional attributes. This process is virtually the same as if an English-only speaker was to give his opinions of phrases spoken in French or Russian. The tone of the voice might imply some emotional characterization, but the aural recipient cannot actually understand the nuances and the exact meaning behind the sounds uttered. The misconception of music as an “emotional language” is so firmly ingrained in the western mentality that if one person accuses another of the inability to understand music, the recipient will digest the criticism as a direct insult to his emotional capacity. In his 1950 lecture entitled “Music as the Language of Emotion,” Princeton University Professor of Psychology, Carroll C. Pratt (1894-1979), stated bluntly that,

nonsense. [Emotions] do not lie around outside the living organism, in spite of the curious introspection of the invalid who, in reply to the question as to whether she was in pain, said that there was certainly a pain somewhere in the room, but she was not sure whether it was hers or not.\textsuperscript{152}

One of the first steps towards the full appreciation and understanding of Mozart’s aptitude for and use of music is to understand music as it pertains to empathy and language rather than emotion.

Robert Vischer’s (1847-1933) theory of \textit{Einfühlung} or empathy, dictates that objects of art do not contain emotion, but instead seem to embody qualities of emotions because of the projection into them of moods and emotions, which originated inside the individual.\textsuperscript{153} When taken to a definition, this theory postulates that the greatness of a work is directly proportional to the amount of greatness a person is capable of projecting onto said work. Fortunately for the artists of this world, a work of art’s emotional influence is not so strictly regulated to such a balanced equation. How then, do many listeners of varying musical backgrounds manage to assign similar emotional attributes to a piece of music? For instance, why does nearly every critic of \textit{Le Nozze di Figaro} label the overture as “cheerful,” “precocious,” and “light hearted”? If music does not contain actual emotions, how is that listeners designate the same choices of emotional adjectives with astounding uniformity to certain musical passages? Dr. Pratt gives the explanation:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{music presents to the ear an array of auditory patterns which at the purely}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 11.
formal level are very similar to if not identical with the bodily patterns which are the basis of real emotion. The two kinds of patterns are with respect to their form practically the same, but the auditory patterns make music, whereas the organic and visceral patterns make emotion. Just there lies the source of all the confusion, for the same words are used for both kinds of experience, as for example in the case of a word like “agitation.”

It is practically impossible to discuss Mozart’s relationship to the adaptations of his libretti unless we can agree that aside from purely trimming and fitting Beaumarchais’ original to suit the format of an opera, he translated the content of the plot into music, his native tongue. Fortunately for the rest of us, his language is as beautiful and empathetically relatable as the songs of nature and we had Da Ponte composing alongside him in subtitles that we can comprehend. Such was Mozart’s cause: to demonstrate to the world that music and words should coexist as complementing equals.

Everyone from the church to his father dictated that words and scripture carried more meaning than music and Mozart made it his life’s mission to prove the world wrong by way of opera. The Figaro of Mozart’s opera is not the defender of the people, but of music. The perennially duped nobility of the Beaumarchais plays does not represent the aristocracy, but the texts that had traditionally been music’s burden to carry. However entertaining, Mozart had no business with the cat-and-mouse antics of Le Barbier. It was absolutely necessary to utilize the outright success of the Figaro character in Le Marriage

\footnote{Ibid., 17.}
and not just the axiomatic muscle flexing of Figaro’s intellect in Le Barbier. None of this conjecture is out to devalue the message of Le Barbier, but Mozart had a point to prove, and when one is forced into dealings with censorship, subversive political messages, and two venerable competitors for the same source material (Salieri and Righini both had their eyes on Beaumarchais’ second text) opportunity might only knock once; he had to go straight for the jugular.155

Mozart’s Le Nozze di Figaro and Beaumarchais’ Le Mariage de Figaro are popular subjects for countless comparisons and analyses. For the most part, Da Ponte’s adaptation stays quite true to the original and it even features a few direct translations preserved inside recitatives. In his lengthy and oft-quoted preface to the opera, Da Ponte refers to his project as an “extract” of an “excellent comedy.”156 His choice of words could not have been more accurate. Da Ponte is commonly accused of removing any politically controversial material and omitting integral parts of Beaumarchais’ script intended to satirize French society, but these types of opinions are criticisms of the text alone and not the text in addition to the music.157 This style of analysis, separating the text form the music in a Mozartean opera, is a necessary technical exercise that, when used inappropriately, is capable of yielding inaccurate results. Mozart intended for his operas’ music and text to exist in their correct form as complementing halves, not as

156 Lorenzo Da Ponte, Preface to Le Nozze di Figaro, quoted in Rodney Bolt, The Librettist of Venice: The Remarkable Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart’s Poet, Casanova's Friend, and Italian Opera’s Impresario in America, 168.
mutually exclusive parts.

Some of the smaller alterations made to the play in its diminishment from 5 to 4 acts includes the Italianization of some of the names (Fanchette becomes Barbarino, Bazile becomes Don Bazilio, and Marceline becomes Marcellina), the conflation of officials (Don Gusman Brid’Oison and Double-Main are combined into Don Curzio the lawyer), the omission of minor characters (Pedrillo the messenger’s tasks are assumed by Basilio in Acts 2 and 4), and the exclusion of some extemporaneous plot elucidations and comedic ornamentation (Act 1 scene 11 and Bazile’s infatuation with Marceline). The changes listed above can only be interpreted to have been made in the interest of brevity, as all opera librettos are inevitably shorter than spoken dramatic texts. There also exists what appears to be an accidental omission of a somewhat important clarification in Act 3 of the opera. During the ‘recognition’ scene, Susanna rushes to the aid of Figaro in an attempt to reverse an agreement wherein Figaro would be forced to marry Marcellina if he is unable to repay her for a loan previously borrowed. Susanna sings out:

Stop, stop, my lord, a thousand pistols are at the ready here.

I have come to pay for Figaro,

and to restore his liberty.\footnote{Da Ponte, \textit{Le Nozze di Figaro}, Act 3.}

As the situation was already resolved upon her arrival, Susanna relinquishes the purse of money to Figaro as a wedding present. In the opera, there is no mention of how Susanna
obtained this money, which begets the question: If she had the money, why didn’t she pay for Figaro’s freedom before the trial? In Act 3, scene 17 of *Le Mariage*, the situation is presented clearly by Beaumarchais’ Suzanne: “My Lord stop! Don’t make them marry. I’ve come to pay Marceline with the dowry her Ladyship has given me!”

This omission is recognized as mistake by some and is rarely commented upon by most, but it would be out of character for a man as stringent as Da Ponte in combination with Mozart’s keen eye for dramatic continuity to succumb to a clerical error. Given the Countess’ motherly camaraderie with Susanna throughout the opera, her donation of the one thousand pistols may have been implied. If we are offered no alternative, who else could be suspected of furnishing Susanna with such a large sum of money? Perhaps, in their attempts to avoid pressure from censors, the duo found so explicit a mother-daughter bond between master and servant, as exemplified with the letter duet from Act 3, *Che soave zeffiretto*, to be on dangerous footing. Dowries were most commonly provided by the family of the bride, but it was also customary for a wealthy individual to betroth a young woman to himself or to a son in his household. This tradition is traceable to Exodus chapter 21, verses 7-11, and earlier. Similarly to how the count promises Susanna a dowry with which to pay off Marcellina if “[she] would agree to [his] intentions,” it can be assumed that the countess would take equal interest in paying Susanna’s dowry in order to end her husband’s infatuation (with Susanna) and promote the continuation of the count’s fidelity. The countess is either assuming a position of a motherly figure towards Susanna or, by way of attempting to purchase

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Susanna as a wife for Figaro, acting as a mother-figure towards the protagonist.

Along with the above mentioned scene, the bulk of Da Ponte’s and Mozart’s structural changes occur throughout Act 3. The Act 3, scene 5 verbal duel between the Count and Figaro, the Act 3, scenes 12-15 court proceedings, and Marceline’s feminist rant during Act 3, scene 16 are all textually edited out of the opera. It bears mentioning that Marceline’s speech was also omitted from the premiere of Beaumarchais’ *Le Mariage* by the actors of the *Comedie Francaise*. The unperformed segment consists of a passionate outcry in the defense of women’s lot in society and the plight of the unwed mother in particular. “It’s you who should be punished for the mistakes we make in our youth,” Marceline yells in response to Bartholo’s dismissal of his forgotten promise of marriage. “If we have property, the law treats us like children; if we stray, it punishes us as responsible adults. Ah! in all your dealings with us, your attitudes deserve nothing but disgust or pity.” *Le Nozze di Figaro* appears to avoid conflict with censorship through the purposeful omission of the dowry-giver’s identity and Beaumarchais’ treatise on feminism, but the opera makes musical remunerations for both. Mozart distributes eight individual arias (eleven if you include the arias given to the mezzo-soprano trouser-role of the androgynous Cherubino) among the four female roles in *Le Nozze di Figaro* versus the six male roles and their seven arias, three of which are sung by Figaro, the opera’s protagonist. Musically, the opera belongs to its sopranos and mezzos, exerting a feminine spirit of control that the original play’s abortive efforts were unable to capture without

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163 Ibid., 165.
Marceline’s speech.

Yes, the most controversial and subversive scenes were edited out of the opera’s text, but that does not mean they were edited out of the music. Mozart clearly stated that he viewed music as an equally important part of an opera’s perceptible elements. It makes little to no sense to disregard the musical score in respect to the plot and character development in a Mozartean opera. After all, it is with Mozart that the predecessor of the leitmotiv, now known as the Reminiszenzmotiv, began its formation. Later incarnations were developed by the hands of Richard Wagner and furthered throughout the 20th century by Richard Strauss (1864-1949). The leitmotiv or ‘leading motive,’ is primarily a theme or other coherent musical idea which is clearly defined so “as to retain its identity if modified on subsequent appearances, whose purpose is to represent or symbolize a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force or any other ingredient in a dramatic work.”  

Each character, from Count Almaviva down to Cherubino, is described musically as well as personified visually on stage. Mozart assigned specific musical characteristics to each role, and the individual personages are constructed to be both seen and heard by the audience. In his book The Signifier and the Signified: Studies in the Operas of Mozart and Verdi, Frits Noske (1920-1993) highlights Count Almaviva’s “hot-tempered anapestic motifs and dotted rhythms,” Figaro’s “march-like outbursts,” and Susanna’s “descending leaps of large intervals and her coquettish triplets” as evidence of Mozart’s deliberate leitmotivic compositional methods. The repetition

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of excerpts from Figaro’s aria *Se vuol ballare* (If you want to dance) linked the cheerful and cunning melody of the aria to Figaro’s character and simultaneously acts as a continuous reminder of his intent to foil Count Almaviva’s plans. Da Ponte wrote the words and Mozart composed their meaning.

Even the choice of key — “D Major for military pomp, G minor for pathos, D minor for the typical ‘rage’ area, and so on” — are meant to be read as a barometer. If one knew the key in which a particular aria was written, an informed listener could accurately gauge the underlying emotional atmosphere the composer hoped to evoke without even hearing a note. The ambiguity of the musical language created a censorial safe haven within an opera’s score. Sure, Beaumarchais’ original was more blatantly antagonistic, but it was also banned from the stage after three performances. Mozart, in his infinite musical wisdom, successfully staged a version of *Le Mariage*, complete with all its anarchist trappings, that was not only hailed as a success by the Emperor, but drew successful repeat performances across central Europe in its original form. In a January 15, 1787 letter to his student, Mason Gottfried von Jacquin (1727-1817), Mozart captured some of the fervor surrounding his opera’s reception in Prague, “Here they talk about nothing but Figaro. Nothing is played, sung, or whistled but Figaro. No opera is drawing like Figaro. Nothing, nothing but Figaro.”

As Da Ponte attests in his writings, Mozart deliberately selected *Le Mariage de Figaro* as the subject for his first comedic opera. The composer had found the perfect

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166 Orrey, *Opera, a Concise History*, 109.
parallel between his desires for musical emancipation and Beaumarchais’ blatant accusations of class and gender inequalities in Restoration Europe. The true accomplishment of this seminal work rests in how Mozart was able to choose, against all odds, so perfect a representation of music’s plight and then utilize music as the tool with which he was able to preserve and stage the Beaumarchais original in all of its reformatted subversiveness, to the thunderous applause of the censors and Europe’s elite classes. *Le Nozze di Figaro* was a live, working example of music’s capabilities: the dramatic subtlety, the sweeping character illustrations, and the beautiful exemplification of the dual triumphs of both human and musical equality on display for all to see.

Without Mozart, and specifically without *Le Nozze di Figaro*, there is no saying as to whether opera would reach its final complex incarnations at the hands of late 19th century composers — or if the genre’s maturation would have continued at all. As triumphant an advance as *Le Nozze di Figaro* made for the ways in which opera was accepted and conceived, it was by no means the end of the road. As his impeccable sense of timing would suggest, Mozart was aware of his role as the father of the musical revolution. He composed as if every note was one step closer to freedom of expression and established a clear path for the next generation of revolutionaries.
III. THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH ONE’S SELF

*Rigoletto* (1851) - Giuseppe Verdi / Francesco Maria Piave

A nearly unperceivable, but extraordinarily influential change took place between the operatic textual adaptations of the 18th and 19th centuries. The nature of this change might best be described as the shape of an hourglass turned on its side. From left to right, the wide funnel narrows down into a passageway so small that only a single grain of sand can pass through at one time. After this narrow channel, the tunnel broadens again until it reaches full capacity. This small change represents the difference in how and why composer-librettist teams selected, used, and adapted texts for the basis of their operas between the two centuries. As discussed in the previous sections of this paper, 18th century composers were drawn towards distinct legends and works of literature because of their particular interest in the original’s messages. Gluck and Calzabigi reached back to the Ancient Greeks, specifically towards a myth about a musician and the power of music. The story of Orpheus and Euridice echoed their twin desires to free opera of ornamentation and allowed them to concurrently craft a more important role for musical accompaniment. Mozart’s interest in *Le Mariage de Figaro* focused on the appropriation of the text’s Restoration principles by creating a living example of the innate powers of music and using it to justify and preserve the messages of Beaumarchais’ original work which had been censored in its own time. In the 1800’s, as music and text converge, each crucial but equal, the original source becomes important not for what it had said itself but for how it can be used by the composer and librettist to convey their own ideas. In one sense, this development can be seen as a direct result of the shift in importance of the
music in opera. When Mozart succeeded in hoisting music onto an equal footing with the operatic libretto, the fears of the 17th century royalists were actualized; censors, though most were unaware of it at the time, were suddenly forced to reckon with a language that appeared ambiguous, but was capable of preserving the subversive, salacious, or incendiary properties that it was their job to police.

In her book *Tales of Love* (1987), Julie Kristeva (1941) noted this change and remarked “it was not until Mozart came along with the 1787 Prague production of his opera buffa, [that] Don Giovanni . . . found within music the direct language of amoral eroticism.”\(^{168}\) Don Giovanni is the obvious example of blatant, musically-infused “amoral eroticism,” yet it is misleading to give it the title of the first Mozartean opera to highlight this particular attribute. Perhaps Kristeva passed over *Le Nozze di Figaro* as the harbinger of musical sexuality because the opera’s strongest examples, *Non so piu cosa son, cosa faccio* and *Voi, che sapete*, exist as unconsummated lament-arias written for Cherubino, the adolescent male page sung by a woman. The latency of the Cherubino role should not be taken as a developmental roadblock but, as Soren Kierkagard (1813-1855) points out, a real-time actualization of “the early stages of the conflict between one’s eroticism, and moral and social norms.”\(^{169}\) Regardless of which of the three Mozart and Da Ponte operas was really the precursor to musical eroticism, the important thing to take away from these deliberations is that early critics up through contemporary scholars and musicologists

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agree that the blatant use of musical language in opera started specifically with Mozart’s early musical comedies.

Just as the divinity of Mozart’s musical capabilities was divulged in his infancy, his operas were also heralded as a turning point in musical history from the outset. Mozart’s influence saturated the conscience of central Europe and these new musical ideals proceeded to gain momentum after his death. The success of a Mozartean opera in England was a profound marker of influence given England’s long and tumultuous relationship with the genre as a whole. The most popular English “opera” to grace stages in London prior to the 20th century was the anti-opera The Beggar’s Opera (1728) by John Gay (1685-1732), which mercilessly mocked the genre as insipid and foreign. Although Gay’s ballad musical was intended to deride the quintessentially Italian art form, The Beggar’s Opera was England’s answer to the early 18th century’s grossly over-ornamented state of opera. Gay’s masterpiece called out many of opera's shortcomings 35 years before Gluck and Calzabigi denounced the status quo with their reform opera Orfeo. England’s answer, however, approached opera as a foreign entity that was deserving of defiance, not as a cherished structure in need of refurbishment. Foregoing early hostilities, England made room for the proliferation of this alien genre, though most viewed opera similarly to the emblematic Englishman Samuel Johnson as “an exotick and irrational entertainment, which has been always combated, and always has prevailed.”

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Musicologist Leslie Orrey (1908-1981) mapped the spread of opera in a “clear, linear sequence” from Italy to France and then over to England.\(^{171}\) Even though music was an important part of Elizabethan era stage productions, barely any musical notation survived. We were left with naught but the text of music dramas and the occasional lone lute transcription.\(^{172}\) Only after the restoration of King Charles the Second (1630-1685), who had decamped to mainland Europe following his defeat by Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), that opera was given a formal welcome on the island. “The Merry Monarch,” who had spent the last nine years exiled in France, returned to the throne on his 30th birthday (May 29th, 1660) intent on disseminating the art and culture of Paris throughout his previously Puritanical lands. The first entirely sung, English-born music drama to take the London stage was John Blow’s (1649-1708) *Venus and Adonis* (1683), which was composed for the King. Blow’s name is is often forgotten, but his artistic successor, Henry Purcell (1659-1695), made music history with the composition of his only completely-sung dramatic work, *Dido and Aeneas* (1688). It is one of Purcell’s best known works and yet it had its humble beginnings as a school play at Mr. Josias Priest’s school for young ladies in Chelsea. He never set one word of Italian to music, but Purcell’s operatic efforts prepared the ears of the Britons for mainstream opera when he adapted the “new ‘recitative’” style to his native English.\(^{173}\)

Though he was no native, George Frederick Handel’s (1685-1759) name is practically synonymous with English 18th century music. The celebrated composer of

\(^{171}\) Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History*, 7.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 51.
\(^{173}\) Ibid., 59.
oratorio and opera was born in Halle, Germany and moved to London in 1712. Handel maintained permanent residence in his adopted country until and after his death, whereupon he was buried in Westminster Abbey. Handel’s decision to live in London, which was to all intents and purposes an “operatic backwater,” stifled the effects of his significant musical achievements on the development of opera. In direct contrast to the rest of Europe’s opera composers, this musical giant, who stood “head and shoulders above all the others working in the opera seria tradition,” was not backed financially by the English courts, but by a handful of wealthy amateurs. In the event of a production’s success, it was in the monarchy’s best interest to show-off its new and most enviable possession, which was the best publicity for which an artist could ask. In the case of Handel, not only was he geographically isolated, but his thirty-five full opera seria generated little reaction from the diffident and contentious English public. England’s general lack of enthusiasm for fanciful plots and foreign libretti in combination with the lack of financial support from a court, left Handel’s operas all but virtually unknown in central Europe’s operatic hubs.

Given England’s culturally conscious roadblock, the first fully staged production of a Mozartean opera was a posthumous historical milestone for the Austrian composer. Even though many of his arias (in particular Le Nozze’s Non più andrai) had become “the delight of ever amateur circle” by the close of the 18th century, the full staging of one of his operas did not take place in London until 1806, fifteen years after his death. One of

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174 Ibid., 59.
175 Ibid., 59.
the reasons cited for this delay was the fault of late 17th century English singers who made it difficult for directors to stage Mozart. In keeping with the standards of Gluck’s Orfeo, Mozart’s operas did not lend themselves well to ornamentation, therein hindering primae donnae’s opportunities to demonstrate vocal virtuosity. The first 1806 performance of La Clemenza di Tito in London was a sold-out success. By its revival in 1812, Mozart had conquered the hearts and minds of the British. The Chronical’s review of the first performance paid the Austrian composer the highest artistic complement an Englishman can give:

Mozart is without comparison, as we think, the Shakespeare of the lyric drama, the man above others who gives the passion of poetry to music, and quickens by its influence all best emotions of the soul. It is not the man of science only, but the man of nature also, who is moved and gratified by the eloquence of Mozart.

The cross cultural acceptance of foreign born operas through the period of the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) was one of the genre's especially telling traits. It is important to understand that although Mozart unquestionably considered himself culturally Germanic and his patron and monarch, Emperor Joseph II, wholeheartedly believed in the importance of an all-German theater, neither man’s mentality was prepared to envision a future German State. Cultural preservation, though important, was not necessarily tied to nationalism the way it would

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177 Ibid., 133.
178 Ibid., 134.
be during the 19th century. Following the abovementioned period of political upheaval, the burgeoning notion of political nationalism began to work its way into the arts. In spite of opera’s previously existing and continually increasing geographic, cultural, and linguistic ties, instead of alienating audiences from abroad (excluding England), the country in which an opera originated had little to no effect on its international success. If 19th century Europe was soaked with the emerging ideals of political nationalism, a characteristic for which audiences began to study in their countrymen’s operas, why did the genre become less culturally restrictive and more widely accepted across national and linguistic borders? The answer to this question has to do with that tiny change that occurred between the 18th and 19th centuries. With artists pouring more of themselves into operatic productions, opera became more human than ever, embodying the emotions, the concerns, the desires, and the messages put forth by their creator.

It was not an opera’s degree of nationalism that drew audiences from across various European regions, but the greater empathetic appeal generated by composers of the 19th century. The American Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) ranked “love and belongingness needs” just below food, hunger, safety, and other basic needs, but still higher than “esteem and self-actualization.”\(^\text{180}\) If we apply Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to the idea of nationalism, it is easier to reduce nationalism to the desires of the individual. Nationalism is the large scale projection of a geographically similar group’s innate desire to satisfy a sense of belonging. Though it is oftentimes seen as the ultimate human affiliation, even transcending religion, social constructs harbor massive potential

for harm. The Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) succinctly summarized this point when he said “nationalism only allows for affirmations, and every doctrine that discards doubt, negation, is a form of fanaticism and stupidity.” ¹⁸¹ It is a hard stance, but the underlying sentiment is true; there is no bond (or should exist no bond) that transcends the brotherhood of man. The realm of human emotion, the well into which the arts dip, goes beyond any synthetic affiliation in its ability to unify. The capacity to capture and exemplify human emotion, a quality so much stronger than the 19th century aspiration of belonging to a unified culture, was epitomized somewhat ironically by Giuseppe Verdi. He was a man for whom emotion was the pinnacle of life and a man whose society wrongly tried to enshrine him as national monument.

Much of Verdi’s personal history is littered with untruths and confusing conflations. Many of these enhancements, such as the completely untrue portrayal of his parents as illiterate peasants, were crafted and popularized by Verdi himself. Noted Verdi biographer Mary Jane Philips-Matz (1926-2013) forgives the mistakes of early biographers as “honest enough,” because “the ‘poor boy Verdi’ idea” was an image the composer worked hard to cultivate throughout his life as a celebrity. ¹⁸² In actuality, Verdi was not raised by poor country folk, but by a modest businessman who ran an inn and a shop alongside Verdi’s mother. British-Italian musicologist John Rosselli (1927-2001), the author of *The Life of Verdi* (2000), reminds us the Verdis came from a land of ninety percent illiteracy, yet kept accounts and purchased their son a spinet after recognizing his

promising musical talents. Aside from his perpetual attempts to downplay his comparably privileged upbringing, Verdi also stands accused of heightening the drama of his own personal tragedies. During a rare and extensive interview he granted in 1880 at the age of 67, Verdi mysteriously maintained that his wife and two children died within “the space of three weeks” during which he was contractually obligated to complete a comic opera. In truth, his children and his wife Margherita died in 1383, 1839, and 1840 respectively. Why did Verdi feel the need to amplify his already impressive and tragic biography? Any answer would be pure speculation, but it is important to keep Verdi’s propensity for elaboration in mind when discussing his political sentiments and affiliations.

By the mid 1800’s, the operas of Verdi symbolized one of the few “Italian experiences” that could be shared by Italians from Venice to Milan to Rome. Musical historian Daniel Snowman asserts that this link was a vital step between “Italy being merely . . . a ‘geographical expression’ and its eventual unity and statehood.” In spite of his vocal support of an Italian nation, history bestowed a somewhat egregious degree of nationalism upon Verdi and his works. Snowman’s The Gilded Stage (2009) also confirms this assessment and asserts that it is “simply anachronistic” to ascribe the Verdi of the 1840’s the political fervor of the near future. Snowman is primarily interested in

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185 Grier, F. "Thoughts on Rigoletto." International Journal Of Psychoanalysis 92, no. 6 (December 1, 2011): 1541-1559.
187 Ibid., 115.
188 Ibid., 116.
separating “fact from mythology” and ensuring that his readers understand that Verdi’s most publicized altercations with Austrian censorship had more to do with the religious rather than the political content of his operas.  

Verdi’s occasionally expressed an interest in a unified Italy as a young man, but his political leanings were never fully formed. However, were by no means lukewarm. Despite Verdi’s success with religious composition, which included his massively popular and enduring setting of the Roman Catholic funeral mass (his only large-scale work not written for the stage), the composer’s personal views of religious authority were damning. A fiercely private individual, Verdi condemned any person or authority with “the bad habit of prying into other people’s affairs.” The church, with its fingers in both his personal and professional lives, was the worst culprit of all. Though censors sought to regulate subject matter that conflicted with Christian morals, composers and librettists could make nationalist allusions (whether they urged a Lombard League, a unification, or a Republic) as long as they were expressed pleasantly and allegorically.

Verdi’s tactile artistic connection to Italian unification was tenuous as best. Professor Rosselli claims that Verdi’s ties to the state of Italy were a product of “reading back” or how a triumphant nationalist movement translates history. Italy’s national resurgence was not a single-minded movement, but a fragmented and disjointed march

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189 Ibid., 119.
190 John Rosselli, The Life of Verdi, 73.
192 Snowman, The Gilded Stage, 119.
193 John Rosselli, The Life of Verdi, 73.
towards a change without definite perimeters. In order to give structure to the past, the technique of reading back attempts to piece together a collective social narrative to explain, in a biased fashion, what exactly transpired. A perfect example of this, as all 21st century Verdi historians point out, is the elevation of ‘Va, pesiero,’ the Hebrew slave chorus from the *Nabucco* (1842), to the quasi-status of national anthem. British musicologist Roger Parker (1951- ) wrote that the chorus was popular among choral societies from its premiere, but it was not viewed as a particularly nationalistic or inflammatory at its debut. Verdi did complete an overtly nationalistic opera, *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849), but his three masterpieces following the Italian upheavals of 1848-9 were completely devoid of nationalistic spirit. The international and sustained success of *Rigoletto* (1851), *La Traviata* (1853), and *Il Trovatore* (1853) hinged primarily on their celebration of human qualities (ambition, greed, envy, love, jealousy, loyalty, heroism, and sacrifice). Verdi’s unique appeal to human emotion not only complemented the tides of Italian nationalism, but swept up support and accolades across countries and castes in the wake of the metamorphosed philosophical landscape of the mid 1800’s.

From today’s vantage point, the discussion of opera’s ties to revolution and politics probably comes off as strange or far-fetched, but during the 19th century’s periodic upheavals, gatherings of any sort were taken very seriously by authorities, with opera performances ranked among the most dreaded. Opera gained a reputation for riots

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and opera houses were promptly placed on equal footing with taverns and brothels. Ultimately, operatic performances were social events of the grandest scale and created a microcosm in which social strata functioned by its own rules. The opera was a gathering place where class lines could blur and emotions ran high: a censorial official’s nightmare. Not only did opera encourage large-scale gatherings from a cross-section of society during a time when national tensions were stretched to the breaking point, but this combustible melange gathered for the sole purpose of interacting with a catalyst. Opera’s powerful combination of drama and music oftentimes proved just the emotional spark needed to ignite an already frenzied audience. Though censors had been employed in both court and impresario-led theaters since the 17th century, the thematic ambiguity brought about by music’s increased importance in the emotional interpretations of operas had authorities scrambling for solutions. Before Mozart, a region’s censor would receive and review a new libretto for political subversity or moral depravity and then either approve or request alterations to the text. After Mozart, the duties of censorship became nearly as amorphous as the materials up for review. In one particularly telling example, Mozart’s and Da Ponte’s Don Giovanni incited a political response at its premiere even after it passed the censors. During the final scene of the first act, the opera's protagonist bellows out “Viva la liberta!” which is then seconded by a trio of masked guests, desperate to remain undiscovered. When the censors came across Don Giovanni’s cry of “Viva la liberta!” during their review of the libretto, the context of

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196 Ibid., 209.
197 The original part of Don Giovanni was sung by Luigi Bassi (1766-1825).
the libertine exclamation unquestionably pertained to sexual freedom. In the heat of the
performance, “Viva la liberta!” transformed into a cry for all freedoms, and the raucous
audience continued to chant the slogan long after the baritone stopped singing. Whether it
was the dramatic tension of a doomed seduction, the threat of exposure for the three
masked guests, or Mozart’s gloriously climatic score, the audience response left
authorities wondering exactly what kind of ‘freedom’ was implied.198 In this particular
instance, the censors did not leave room for interpretation. By 1795, Austrian rulers
forbade the words ‘liberty,’ ‘equality,’ and ‘Enlightenment’ from appearing on stage.199

A far cry from the oppressive and artistically damning view of censorship that
exists today, regular interaction with censors was simply an unavoidable part of the
creative process in the age of Mozart and Gluck. When an opera production matured to
the point of printing tickets for the opening performances, it was the time for the librettist
to send a copy of his work to the theater’s allotted regional or municipal censor for
review. The censor would list any changes he deemed necessary, sometimes even
offering suggestions on how to work in his requirements, and return the copy to the
composer and librettist for last-minute updates.200 Up until the mid-19th century, censors
were a major contributing factor to the final shape of many creative endeavors. It was not
until the early 1800’s that artists began to form a view of censorship more akin to our
21st century sensibilities. During the Romantic Era, the intellectual and artistic response
to the ancient regime couched in the early 19th century, that censorship developed the

198 Ibid., 208.
199 Ibid., 209.
200 Ibid., 209.
reputation for oppressive regulation of expression. The Romantics viewed the censorial process as counterproductive and offensive to the moral integrity of artist and project. This shift from the acceptance of censorship as commonplace to the rejection of censorship as a creative inhibitor prompted composers to dive deeper into the previously unexplored musical expanse. By the time Verdi began work on *Rigoletto* in 1849,\(^{201}\) the newly hostile views of censorship had proliferated the notion of opera as a code for political subversion.\(^{202}\) The genre of opera itself was incapable of acting as a code by which to transfer ideas unseen by the state, but the music of opera, by virtue of its perceived ambiguity and newfound importance, had elevated the genre to new heights of socio-political influence.

“Art is the enemy of nature,” wrote the author and poet Jean-Laurent Lecerf de la Vieville (1674-1707). For Lecerf and his contemporaries, music and musicality “represent[ed] something of which one can neither explain the function nor the necessity.”\(^{203}\) Writers and Philosophers in the early half of the 18th century regarded opera as a corrupt product of modern times with an unlimited and dangerous potential for influence. Lecerf and his compatriots were genuinely frightened by the prospect that music, an “irrational” and “evil” concept of art, could usurp and cloud the rational and clear semiotics inherent to text. Warn as they might against music’s capacity for corruption and chaos, the great Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers (Saint-Evremond, Boileau, Lecerf, Voltaire, Bossuet, Fontenelle . . .) amounted to no

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more than a chorus of Cassandras in the face of European musical development.

By 1849, just around the time Verdi began to consider Victor Hugo’s *Le roi s’amuse* as a potential subject for an opera,\(^{204}\) the integrity of operatic libretti was on the decline. An increasing number of audience goers attended operas purely for the music and considered words as secondary, filler syllables.\(^{205}\) In the preface of his biography (1823) on Giacomo Rossini (1792-1868), Stendhal (1792-1868), who wrote much on the subject of the arts and penned the popular biography *Vies de Haydn, de Mozart et de Métastase* (1814), lamented the dire lows to which operatic text had sunk. He goes so far as to advise the amateur “merely to attend to the situation the poet has described - just to take the first word as a kind of clue to the sentiment, and then fill up the rest from music.”\(^{206}\) Where could one find a more damning assessment of the current state libretti, and by a great man of letters no less? Stendhal did not, however, denounce libretti as an unnecessary part of opera, but merely laments its current state:

Not that if we could have a libretto from the pen of a Goldoni or a Beaumarchais; it would give an additional charm to the music, and we might peruse it without destroying the charm of the scene before us. But, as Goldoni’s are rare now a-days, it is a lucky circumstance that the charming art which engages our attention can make us so readily pardon the absence of good poetry.\(^{207}\)

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\(^{204}\) Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography*, 263.

\(^{205}\) Caruso, "Three cases of censorship in opera theatre: Mozart, Rossini, Verdi," 220.


\(^{207}\) Ibid., 33.
The above passage is practically a 19th century reiteration of Mozart’s famous opinion regarding the popularity of Italian comic operas. Stendhal’s observation is an important indicator of just how far music had graduated in the European psyche, a mere fifty years after Mozart’s mindset.

As Stendhal’s critique makes abundantly clear, by mid-1800, music advanced to the point where a good score could support the weight of a bad libretto. It is hard to believe that just a century prior, opera was considered the subspecies of tragedy and the accompanying music was held solely responsible for the active corruption of poetry. This shuffling of superiority did not come as a complete surprise, as there were always proponents of music throughout opera’s tumultuous evolution. Pier Jacopo Martello’s (1665-1727) 1715 *Della tragedia antica e moderna* predicted this end in his imaginary dialogue with Aristotle: “Musical composition is the essence of opera; all other components are incidental, even including poetry.” If 19th century listeners were satisfied with vocal parts filled by incongruent syllables, why were composers so desperate for a text that was neither “dull” nor “vapid”? Mozart complained about this very issue to this father: “If we composers were always to stick so faithfully to our rules [as musical dramatists], we should be concocting music as unpalatable as their libretti.” And it is said that the composer Franz Schubert (1797-1828), in spite of his unequivocal dominance over German word-song or lieder, had tried many times to write an opera, but

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208 See page 29.
was perennially blocked by the dearth of decent libretti. The endangered libretti is a misconception. 19th century composers were not for want of decent libretti insomuch as they were of decent librettists. Subject matter is crucial, but the relationship between the composer and the poet was the rare and mercurial union, which was required to be “so close that the poetry has to appear to have been patterned on the music no less than the music on the poetry.” As both Gluck and Mozart demonstrated during the previous century, in order for an opera to succeed artistically as well as popularly, it was imperative for the words and the music to form an equal partnership. By the mid 1800’s music had caught up with the importance of libretti, but the impersonal matchmaking between composers and librettists was still in need of recognition and development.

Audiences did not have long to wait before a young man from Busseto and a Venetian poet formed a union which showcased the achievements made possible by way of creative teamwork.

Verdi completed his tutelage at the music school of Maestro di Cappella Ferdinando Provesi, a top rank music school, and continued to mature alongside the burgeoning musical organizations of his hometown Busseto, Italy. Much of Verdi’s career as a teenage composer and arranger was influenced by Busseto’s greatest amateur supporter of the arts, Antonio Baretti (1887-1867). As Phillips-Matz wrote in her comprehensive 1992 biography on Verdi, “the relationship between Antonio Baretti and Verdi was virtually like that of father and son,” with the older man assuming musical and

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financial responsibility for his fifteen-year-old protégé. By 1830, Verdi, who was practically a genuine Barezzi, had fallen in love with Antonio Barezzi’s eldest daughter Margherita (1814-1840). The young woman was to become Verdi’s short-lived first wife in May of 1836. The Barezzi family held a tremendous influence over many of Verdi’s early musical and life decisions, including the formations of his first opera, *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio* (1839).

For a composer, tackling the genre of opera was an entirely different practical and financial undertaking: monetary rewards were higher, but so were the risks. An inexperienced operatic composer was capable of ruining his reputation (and those of others) with a poorly planned premiere. Composers had very little influence over many of the technical aspects of an opera (libretto, performers, artistic directors . . . ), so the guarantee of a successful production had more to do with foresight and creative positioning than hands-on influence and decision making. In order to determine exactly when an inexperienced composer should tackle this new art form required the utmost care and Verdi was opposed to compromise. Verdi was convinced that it would serve him better if he left his work at home unpublished rather than have it ruined by an impoverished production. In November 1834, Barezzi decided to send Verdi back to Milan as part of his creative and musically administrative growth. This move dangled the temptation of *La Scala*, one of Italy’s premier opera houses, in the young man’s face. Whether or not it was in Barezzi’s plans for Verdi to break into the opera-world, Barezzi’s daughter indicated that her fiancée’s mind was committed to the stage. In a

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letter to the new mayor of Buesseto, Margherita wrote, “Never absolutely never would
[Verdi] settle in Busseto . . . because having dedicated himself to theatre music, he will succeed in that and not in music for the Church.”

Margherita Bareazzi’s pronouncement was accurate, and by the time they were married in 1836, Verdi had started the search for his first libretto. According to Verdi’s 1881 interview, Pietro Massini (1796-1841), the director of the Milanese Societa Filarmonica and one of Verdi’s closest influences, was the man responsible for connecting Verdi with his first text. The author was Antonio Piazza, a writer for the Gazzetta Privilegiata di Milano, the most important newspaper in Milan.

Verdi was connected with his first libretto, but not his first librettist. There is no indication that Antonio Piazza and Verdi ever jointly deliberated over the text of Oberto. In fact, Oberto is widely believed to be a conflation of two earlier efforts entitled Rocester and Lord Hamilton, both settings of texts by Antonio Piazza and filtered through the hand of Temistocle Solera (1815-1878). This presupposition is supported by an 1871 letter written to Emilio Seletti, the son of one of Verdi’s early landlords, claiming Oberto “was adapted and expanded by Solera on the basis of a libretto entitled Lord Hamilton by Antonio Piazza.”

By September, Verdi had finished setting the

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217 Ibid., 62.
218 Ibid., 67.
220 Verdi, letter to Emilio Seletti, May 14, 1871, from Kimbell, Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism, 92.
Piazza/Solera, *Lord Hamilton/Rocester* libretto to music.\(^{221}\) It was difficult for Verdi to find an impresario who would take a gamble on a new opera by an unknown composer. Rejected by the impresario for the *Teatro Regio* in Turino in 1836 and unable to secure a production in Milan by late 1836 or 1837, Verdi sat on his completed *Oberto* in his “wretched hometown” for three more years before permanently relocating his family to Milan on February 6th, 1839. When Verdi reached Milan, he discovered that his friend Massini was no longer the director of the *Teatro Filodrammatico* and he could no longer take responsibility for producing his new opera. As Verdi recounted in that fruitful 1881 interview, “either because Massini really had confidence in me, or because he wanted to show his gratitude to me in some way,” he promised Verdi “he would do all he could to have [his] opera performed at La Scala, and the benefit performance for the *Pio Istituto Filarmonico*.\(^{222}\)"

Within the same interview, the composer recalled how Bartolomeo Merelli (1794-1879), the impresario of the *Teatro alla Scala*, approached him in 1839 and told him “he wanted to produce [*Oberto*] next season.\(^{223}\) Merelli, a librettist himself, personally recommended that Verdi adjust his Piazza libretto and sent the young composer to Temistocle Solera, a librettist and composer two years Verdi’s junior. A new musical number was added to the second act at the behest of Merelli and the words to this new quartet were provided by Solera.\(^{224}\) Verdi later admitted that this new addition was

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\(^{221}\) Phillips-Matz suggests that this particular libretto may have been based on a work by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) about James Hamilton, the Earl of Arran (1532-1609).

\(^{222}\) Ibid., 91.

\(^{223}\) Ibid., 93.

\(^{224}\) Ibid., 93.
the most successful number in the opera and Phillips-Matz points out that “the collaboration of librettist - impresario and poet - librettist - composer” helped Oberto toward the success it achieved at its premiere on November 17 1839. Perhaps Verdi’s early experience with the successful results of a close working relationship between composer and librettist helped him to recognize the rare gifts he was about to find in a novice Venetian.

Francesco Maria Piave (1810-1876), though most famous for collaborating on over ten libretti with Verdi, is also remembered for his long and enduring friendship with the notoriously difficult composer. A long-standing Venetian family, the Piaves were a living testament to the troubles plaguing 19th century Venice. Piave’s father had owned a glass factory in Murano, where Piave was born “by chance,” which, along with the rest of the single-industry island, was forced into bankruptcy with the fall of the Venetian Republic. After his father’s death in 1838, Piave returned to Venice from Rome. The young man continued to write Venetian dialect poetry and was finally granted the opportunity to tackle his first libretto for Giovanni Pacini’s (1796-1867) Il duca d’Alba (1842). Piave’s desire to write for an opera was only matched by his desire to write an opera specifically for Giuseppe Verdi. In June 1843, Piave went to the secretary of La Fenice (the Piave Family lived on bridge away from the theater) to announce that he “wanted to write the libretto for whatever new opera Verdi decided to compose for that theater.”

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226 Ibid., 16.
Temistocle Solera, Domenico Bancalari (1809-1879), and Felice Romani (1788-1865) were approached to write the text, Piave was the theater’s final choice.

*La Fenice*’s secretary, Guglielmo Brenna, drew up the following contact between the new librettist and the composer on August 17, 1843:

1st. Signor Francesco Piave undertakes to write for Maestro Verdi a new lyric drama for music.

2nd. The subject of the drama will be Allan Cameron, or The Flight of Charles II, King of Scotland, from the persecutions of Cromwell, based on the sketch already approved by the presidency of *La Fenice* and by the police authorities.

3rd. Signor Piave undertakes to deliver his work complete by 20 September next without fail.

4th. He undertakes whenever requested by Signor Verdi to change any passages of verse in the libretto which are not fully to his satisfaction.

5th. In payment for Signor Piave’s poetry, Maestro Verdi undertakes to pay the said Signor Piave six hundred (600) Austrian Lire in two equal parts: this is, 300 lire on delivery of the libretto, and the other 300 after the first performance.\(^{227}\)

Compared to the operatic contracts of the previous century, which addressed

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\(^{227}\) Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, 120.
musical composition as a mere afterthought, mid-19th century theater impresarios placed near-complete creative control in the hands of the composer. In this instance, section two of this particular contact was eventually negated by section four. Piave quickly started work on the libretto for what Verdi titled *Cromvello* and sent the completed first act to the composer. Verdi responded with kind words of encouragement and told the librettist

[I have] locked away this first act because I don’t want to start work on it until I have the complete libretto. That is what I usually do and I find it works better, because when I have a general conception of the whole poem the music always comes of its own accord.

Verdi received the second act of *Cromvello* warmly, but he was not inspired to invest further in the subject. A gripping obsession with Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* had caused Verdi to forget all about Oliver Cromwell and King Charles. He sent an immediate request to the disgruntled Piave instructing him to abandon *Cromvello* for the new subject at hand.229

Phillips-Matz was not the only historian to emphasize that Piave “served his master with one revision after another, opera after opera.”230 The words “subservient,” “slave,” and “master” are used quite often to describe Verdi’s and Piave’s relationship, but according to Verdi, working with Piave was his “first opportunity to work with

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228 Phillips-Matz, "The Venetian Goth and the 'adorable bear' of Sant-Agata,” 16.
229 Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, 122.
230 Phillip-Matz, "The Venetian Goth and the 'adorable bear' of Sant-Agata,” 17.
himself. If the quote is indeed accurate, the master and bondsman-like terms used to describe the Venetian’s subservient behavior are best seen as adjectives to describe how Verdi interacted with everyone. The composer’s extremely volatile irritability was legendary, so much so that there are documented incidences where the predictability of Verdi’s explosive temper was used against him. In actuality, it was as if Verdi and Piave were two halves of one demeanor. Verdi was as irritable, bombastic, and resolute as Piave was good-natured, friendly, and warm. The caustic wit and biting tongue of a Da Ponte or a Calzabigi would not have lasted more than five minutes let alone ten operas with the hostile and impatient Verdi. Piave, or “Dear Lion-Cat Piave” as Verdi would address him in correspondence, was the shape of Verdi’s phoenix. Phillips-Matz succinctly illustrated the duo’s relationship with the observation, “only Piave could have addressed Verdi as “Adorable Bear” and gotten away with it.” The two men remained intimates and colleagues until Piave’s death in 1867.

The runaway success of Verdi’s third opera, Nabucco, which premiered in 1842 at La Scala under its original name Nabucodonosor, ran for seventy-five performances and cemented the composer’s fame. With fame came the loathsome pains of unwanted attention and gossip, but these detriments also increased the scope of his artistic control. By the 1850’s, Verdi could (and did) menace theaters’ management with the threat of withdrawal from performance if he did not get his way:

I have complete authority to suspend the rehearsals and prevent the

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231 Verdi, quoted in John Rosselli, The Life of Verdi, 46.
232 Kimbell, Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism, 163.
234 Rosselli, The Life of Verdi, 39.
performance, even after the dress rehearsal, if either the execution of the
mise-en-scene or anything else in the way the theater is run should not be
to my liking.

All of Italy wanted Verdi, and Verdi used his celebrity as a platform to give all of Italy an
unwelcome gift: Shakespeare. A lifetime behind the rest of central Europe, the first
Italian translation of the Bard’s works did not appear until 1838 and the first fully staged
performance (Othello) was “hissed off the stage in Milan in 1842.”

Unlike the majority of his fellow citizens, Verdi fell hard for Shakespeare. A
devotee from the moment he read the 1838 translations, Verdi questioned how he could
turn his favorite dramas into successful and, more importantly, dramatically faithful
adaptations. Verdi could not read English and he was forced to employ the help of his
English-speaking friends and colleagues (including Andrea Maffei (1798-1885), an
expert translator and Verdi’s one-time librettist for I Masnadieri (1847)) to filter out the
very best and accurate available Italian translations. As soon as 1843, the composer
began tossing around the idea of turning his favorite Shakespearean drama into an opera.

During contract negotiations with La Fenice in the earlier half of 1843, Verdi wrote to
the president of the theater, Count Mocenigo (1799-1844), if he had everything his way,
he “would choose either Re Lear or Il Corsaro” as the subject for his next opera.

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235 Ibid., 54.
237 Ibid., 1.
Verdi and Piave adapted Lord Byron’s (1788-1824) *The Corsair* for the stage in 1848, but the music for King Lear was never composed. The composer’s lifelong preoccupation with this specific play is supported by personal correspondence up until the end of his life. In 1850, the same year Verdi decided on *Le roi s’amuse*, the composer wrote a letter to the librettist Salvatore Cammarano, his collaborator on *Alzira* (1845), *La battaglia di Legnano* (1849), and *Luisa Miller* (1849), and reiterated his hesitation regarding *Re Lear*: “*Re Lear* appears so vast, so intricate, that it seems impossible to get an opera out of it.” Following the immense success of *Falstaff* (1893) over forty years later, Verdi’s then-librettist Arrigo Boito (1842-1918) goaded the octogenarian to follow up his adaptation of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602) with a *King Lear*. By this time, the composer was, in the words of his second wife Giuseppina Strepponi (1815-1897), “too old, too tired.” *Falstaff* was the bookend of Verdi’s operatic oeuvre.

Even if he had been twenty years younger, Verdi would not have tackled *King Lear*, enticing as it was. The story had too many plots and characters, all of which he perceived as integral to the dramatic line of the text. Verdi did not want his *Lear* to be one of the nearly three hundred operatic Shakespeare adaptations of which many caused him to lament: “Poor Shakespeare! How they have mistreated him!” Verdi’s seemingly exaggerated fear of failing Shakespeare hinged on the fact that he always took full, personal responsibility for any injustices his operas might potentially commit. No matter

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the librettist, Verdi considered himself fully culpable when it came to the subject of liability. Upon his selection of *Macbeth* in 1846, Verdi himself cut the play down into a prose synopsis before presenting it to Piave for versification. The opera’s premiere was a success, however, when Verdi was asked by the *Théâtre Impérial du Châtelet* to revise his Macbeth in French translation in 1864, he jumped at the chance. Not only did this request provide Verdi with an opportunity to revamp one of his favorite works after twenty years of musical growth as a composer, this was also an added opportunity to work again with Piave on their previous textual adaptation. Most of the changes were made throughout Acts 3 and 4, but the most significant alteration was the addition of Lady Macbeth’s aria *La luce Langue* in Act 2. Verdi and his wife wrote the actual verses to this aria which they passed onto their librettist, who rendered very few changes. The new version was premiered in Paris on April 21st, 1865 to mediocre reviews. In spite of its slow start, Verdi’s second Macbeth, with its Shakespearean-minded amendments, triumphed in the end. The Italian translation of this second rendition has remained the preferred edition for opera performances since the 1960’s.

In his essay “The hot and the cold: Verdi writes to Antonio Somma about *Re Lear*,” American musicologist and historian Philip Gossett (1941-) analyzes a series of letters between the composer and the librettist Antonio Somma (1809-1864), who is best known for collaborating with Verdi on *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1859). Gossett breaks the
letters into two distinct chronological periods, with the first ranging from April 1853 until May 1854. During this time, Somma sent Verdi a completed libretto for *King Lear*. As was his trademark complaint, Verdi found the four acts too long (especially the 1st and 2nd) and he wrote back that he would articulate more formal criticisms, “but I will only be able to tell you about them as I am writing the music.” The second set of communications took place between January 1855 and April 1856. In response to Verdi’s continual demands for brevity, Somma removed the entire plot involving the Duke of Gloucester and his two sons and created a new backstory to maintain the indispensable role of Edmund. Gosset points out how Verdi initially accepted this revision happily, but that his discontentment with the compositional mechanisms to which he would have had to resort outweighed his desire to score a *Lear*. On April 7, 1856, he told Somma it would be “impossible to make the public swallow so many consecutive recitatives . . . the public admits everything in the theater except boredom.” The *Lear* project was pushed aside for good and Verdi began work with Somma on the Neapolitan commission of *Un Ballo in maschera*.

We are fortunate that this “most business-like” of composers was in the strict habit of maintaining and filing his correspondence, providing biographers and scholars a strong base on which to build precise intimations regarding Verdi’s thought processes. One such personal opinion which spurned dozens of analyses was Verdi’s absolute

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245 Ibid., 208.
246 Verdi, a letter to Antonio Somma, February 6, 1854, quoted in Gossett, "The hot and the cold: Verdi writes to Antonio Somma about Re Lear," 221.
247 Gossett, "The hot and the cold: Verdi writes to Antonio Somma about Re Lear," 209.
248 Verdi, a letter to Antonio Somma, April 7, 1856, quoted in Gossett, "The hot and the cold: Verdi writes to Antonio Somma about Re Lear," 209.
249 Rosselli, *The Life of Verdi*, 4-5.
conviction of Shakespeare’s superiority over any other literary sources he adapted for the stage (which included the likes of Victor Hugo and Frederich Schiller (1759-1805)). He preferred “Shakespeare to all other dramatists, not excepting the Greeks” because the poet’s works “analyse the human mind so acutely and penetrate it so profoundly.” 250 A quick glance over Verdi’s selections for opera topics makes obvious his preference for heady, psychological dramas over the action-driven narratives, comedies, and period pieces preferred by his contemporaries. It is with good reason that there are nearly as many Verdian research papers written for psychoanalytical journals as there are for journals on musicology.

On April 28, 1850, Verdi wrote to Piave, “I have in mind a subject that would be one of the greatest creations of the modern theater if the police will only allow it.” 251 The police? If Verdi was worried about the police instead of the censors, who were primarily concerned with sacrilegious infractions, this subject must have been highly critical of monarchical positions and the abuses of authoritative power. In the same letter, the composer teased on, “the subject is grand, immense and there’s a character in it who is one of the greatest creations that the theatre of all countries and times can boast . . . it’s a subject that can’t fail.” 252 He could have easily been describing William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Tragic to the fullest extent of the term, the character of Lear not only fulfills any ancient requirements of the genre, but created a new gold standard of criticism on the tragedy of politics, gerontology, and humanity on the grandest of scales. One would be

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251 Verdi, letter to Piave, April 28, 1850, from Budden, *The Operas of Verdi; Volume 1*, 477.
252 Ibid.
hard pressed to find another text with so strong an influence over the course of western 
drama and literature.

The title in question was not *King Lear*, but Victor Hugo’s 1832 play *Le roi 
s’amuse*. Verdian scholar and musicologist Julian Budden (1924-2007) wrote in his comprehensive collection on Verdi’s operas that it was not until Shakespeare “had dropped temporarily out of sight [did] *Le roi s’amuse* seem to have been envisaged.”\textsuperscript{253}

The French play had actually usurped *King Lear* as the final choice. The two plays, along with a number of other potential subjects, had been shortlisted for the 1851 carnival season at the *Teatro La Fenice*.\textsuperscript{254} There have been dozens of papers written on the topic from the 1990’s onward, but Julian Budden was the first to publish the opinion “*Rigoletto* I suspect is one of the *King Lear* s that might have been.”\textsuperscript{255}

There is no debate regarding the link between Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and *King Lear*, but there is a bit of pull and tug as to whether or not it was a conscious or unconscious linkage. In Barbara Barry’s article “‘Where’s my Fool?’: Lear Motifs in *Rigoletto*” (2012), she argues that the personal pressure of turning *King Lear* into an opera prompted Verdi to create *Rigoletto* as a product of transference or the “retelling” of stress-producing elements as a coping mechanism. Francis Grier’s entry in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, “Thoughts on *Rigoletto*” (2011) offered a Kleinian (1882-1960) reading of Verdi’s personal life throughout the 1840s and postulates that the composition of *Rigoletto* suggested “a personality still in flux,

\textsuperscript{253} Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, (London: Cassell Ltd.1984), Volume 1, 478. 
\textsuperscript{254} Barbara Barry, “Where’s My Fool: Lear motifs in *Rigoletto*,” *Comparative Drama no. 1*, 2012, \textsuperscript{57}. 
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 484.
struggling to gain a depressive grasp of his life-situation.” These works along with a slew of others contend that the adaptation of dramatic literary works into operas “may suggest particular unconscious conflicts in the librettist and/or composer.” As interesting and situationally plausible as these perspectives are, it appears more likely that Verdi consciously chose *Le roi s’amuse* as the topic of his carnival opera for the exact reasons he was interested in *King Lear*. The likenesses between the works are so blatantly obvious, that to discuss Verdi’s interest in Hugo’s play as a subconscious alternative to *Lear* borders on insulting. Verdi was many things, but superfluous he was not — there was only room for two fools between *Lear* and *Le roi*.

In 1850, Verdi was working on both a *King Lear* and a *Le roi s’amuse*. According to his correspondence, this was Verdi’s fourth serious consideration of *Re Lear* (1843, 1845, & 1846) and the second or third time Hugo’s play had been nominated as the final choice since 1849. Just three months before Verdi became fixated with the French play, the composer wrote to Cammarano that *Re Lear*, like *Macbeth* (1847), could be made into an opera, but it would require “an entirely new style” of dramatic adaptation. There is no concrete admission as to why Verdi pushed aside *Lear* in favor of *Le roi*, but it appears that at this stage in his life, he saw the latter as a kind of modern adaptation. Many of the essential relationships in *King Lear* are mimicked in *Le roi s’amuse*, and Verdi knew he could use music to flesh out the emotional Shakespearean

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256 Francis Grier, “Thoughts on Rigoletto,” 1541-1559.
259 Ibid., 263.
undertones in Hugo’s play. On May 8th, 1850, Verdi wrote to Piave, “Le rois’amuse is the greatest plot, and perhaps the greatest drama of modern times. Tribolet is a creation worthy of Shakespeare!! . . . It is a subject that cannot fail.” Not only did the composer accredit the protagonist of Hugo’s play with the complexity he admired in Shakespeare’s creations, but he openly admitted to one of the most important qualities in an operatic subject: the prediction of success.

Definitions of success are malleable, but in Verdi’s mind, commercial, personal, and artistic successes were all one in the same. The commercial success of an opera was the public’s confirmation of the dramatic impact of a performance, which in turn was the direct result of the successful setting of a sufficiently dramatic subject. The popular success of one of Verdi’s operas was the embodiment of success at all other levels. Ultimately, he decided to go forward with Le Roi instead of Lear because he could not bear to be the source of a Shakespearean failure. As was mentioned earlier, Verdi lamented the myriad poor adaptations of Shakespeare’s works, and could not bear to stand accused of contributing to that steadily increasing cannon. A review of Macbeth’s French premiere which claimed the composer “did not know his Shakespeare” threw Verdi into a rage:  

It may be that I have not done justice to Macbeth: but to say that I do not know, understand and feel Shachespeare (sic) - no, by God, no! He is one of my favourite poets. I have had him in my hands

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262 The first version initially premiered at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence on March 14th, 1847.
from my earliest youth, and I read and reread him continually. He never committed to a consistent spelling of the Bard’s surname, but Verdi’s commitment to Shakespeare’s artistic integrity was unmatched.

The similarities between *The Tragedy of King Lear* and *Le roi s’amuse* mount up before the drama even begins. Both plays are billed as “A Tragedy, In Five Acts” and the primary relationships within the *dramatis personae* are that of the Monarch and his Fool and a father and his daughter or set of daughters. Not only are the characters similar, but both *Lear* and *Le roi* culminate with a storm scene during which the leads are forced to reveal truths about themselves and those they love. The two plays’ thematic centers combine monarchical abuses of power, real or interpreted filial betrayal, and the deterioration of the mind and body—either from age, grief, or, in the case of the hunchback Tribolet, his cruel ironic fate as a crippled jester. Both tragedies appealed to Verdi, for at the center of each lies an elaborate commentary on human suffering, parts of which anyone can recognize as his own. In Verdi’s hands, the plays work as companion pieces. *Le roi s’amuse* provides a simplified framework into which the Shakespearean dramatic experience fits like a puzzle piece.

The first act of *King Lear* opens in Lear’s court as he announces his division of the kingdom into three shares with the intent of “conferring them on younger strengths.” As the audience is soon to discover, the King’s mind is corrupted by a combination of

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power and age. Lear exposes the first hint of his deranged mental condition when he decrees that the daughter who claims to love him most will receive the largest portion of his kingdom. The two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, spout manipulative oaths of devotion as they competitively angle to secure the largest portion of their father’s estate. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, “cannot heave [her] heart into [her] mouth” and, when it is her turn to proffer false platitudes of adoration, she refrains. She only loves her father “according to [her] bond.” She even goes as far as to say that she intends never to marry, unlike her sisters, in order to “love [her] father all.” In spite of her obvious devotion, Lear reacts poorly to Cordelia’s refusals at pacification and he proceeds to disinherit her, insult her, and banish her from England. Blind to the injustices he committed, the King also curses and banishes Kent, his most loyal servant, for his attempts to open Lear’s eyes to his egregious offenses against Cordelia. As Kent’s unwarranted punishment emphasizes, no dissenting opinion is safe in Lear’s court, excepting that of the fool, who provides a running commentary of critical and edifying observations. King Lear pays his fool’s insistences no heed, and by the time Lear realizes he was betrayed by the two daughters who claimed to love him the most and that he had wronged the daughter who loved him selflessly, his anguish drives him further into madness, which forsakes the hope of reversal or redemption for the King and his Kingdom.

Francis I, the King of France, is the primary source of action in Le roi s’amuse, but the drama centers around the King’s mentally and physically deformed jester,

265 Ibid., 6.
266 Ibid., 7.
Triboulet. Hugo portrays King Francis as a conscienceless, womanizing libertine who leaves a stream of damage in the wake of his romantic conquests. Unbeknownst to the King and court, the sour and malicious Tribolet has a daughter whom he loves as much as he “hates all else beside” and who he keeps locked away (similarly to Shylock?) from the “poisonous . . . Paris air.” Tribolet’s love for his daughter Blanche is as self-serving as King Lear’s love for his daughters: Both men expect sacrifice in the name of a love that they do not deserve. In Lear, two daughters betray the King and one of them remains true. In Le roi, Tribolet’s daughter Blanche is a conflation of all three. She serves as both the one who betrays and the one who loves honestly. Blanche’s physical betrayal is the act of falling in love with a poor student (King Francis in disguise). The betrayal for which she is punished is for directing her attentions anywhere else besides her father. The same selfish demand that King Lear requested of Cordelia is reiterated by Triboulet: “. . . I could bear my sad, sad life no longer; I yearned for thee - I wanted one to love me.” Notice the use of the word “one.” Tribolet does not care who loves him as long as he could exist, in some respect, as an object of unadulterated affection. The jester only values his daughter in relationship to himself, and that is not love. Any attempt on her part to pursue a happiness of her own outside that of her father’s would invariably be regarded as a transgression. The fact that Blanche falls in love with the very man to whom Tribolet fills the vile role of instigator and accomplice is the dramatic cherry on top of the jester’s retributive sunday.

268 Ibid., 35.
Even Triboulet’s plans to avenge his daughter’s lost honor are visibly self-serving in origin. Blanche serves as the King’s mistress for one month (Piave increases both Rigoletto’s residence in Mantua and Gilda’s involvement with the King by one month) yet she remains hopelessly in love with her seducer despite of her shameful position. “Thou lov’st him still?” Triboulet demands of his daughter in Act IV. She replies with utter clarity:

In truth, I know,

All he hath brought me are but wrongs and shame,

And yet I love him, tho’ I know not why.

Whate’er is linked with him ne’er quits my mind.

‘Tis madness, father! Can’st thou pardon still?

Though he hath wronged, and thou art ever kind;

For him I’d die as surely as for thee.\(^{270}\)

Only the warped mind of Triboulet can ignore Blanche’s articulation of her persistent love for the King and her commitment to die in his stead. Triboulet, being the sociopathic narcissist that he is, pays his daughter’s feelings and protestations no heed as he proceeds with his plans to murder her lover. The jester refuses to acknowledge that his revenge will cause his daughter further damage because, in actuality, he is only seeking to avenge

\(^{269}\) Ibid., 75.

\(^{270}\) Ibid., 76.
himself.

In addition to successfully supporting the emotional weight of a much larger play, the structure of *Le roi s’amuse* exposes one of *King Lear*’s behind-the-scenes performance relationships. The three shared links in both plays are connected to each other as depicted in diagram 1.1:

1.1

*Le roi*’s relationships are obvious: The King employs the jester, who fathered Blanche, who is the King’s lover. In *King Lear*, the relationship between the King’s fool and the King’s daughter is absent (represented by the dotted line). The closest the two characters even come to sharing the stage is between Cordelia’s line 285 in Act 1, scene 1 and the fool’s entrance at line 97 in Act 1, scene 4. Just as Verdi was forced to compose for the voices he had available, Shakespeare too formed his dramas around the available players. Women were not permitted to act on the stage until the restoration of King Charles II in 1660, which left roles of a feminine or a sexually ambiguous nature to be filled most convincingly by young men. Unfortunately, adolescent boys with sufficient acting capabilities and good heads for line memorization were few and far between. This dearth of feminine performers led to the oft practiced tradition of using one talented boy to fill
multiple roles.\textsuperscript{271} The parts of Cordelia and the Fool were regularly played by the same actor, a casting maneuver that forced Shakespeare to keep their personages far enough apart to enable successful costume changes between stage entrances.\textsuperscript{272}

This practical artistic decision was not lost on Verdi. As a master dramatist who dealt with many of the same staging issues as the playwrights of the Elizabethan era, Verdi surely recognized the invisible link between Shakespeare’s Cordelia and the Fool. Perhaps his recognition of this very relationship was the reason behind his plans to write the part of the Fool as a \textit{contralto musico} (trouser role) in his preparations for an operatic adaptation of \textit{King Lear}.\textsuperscript{273} Verdi’s awareness of the same relationship-triangle shared by the two works formed the basis of his decision to use \textit{Le roi s’amuse} as the vehicle for his \textit{King Lear}. Perhaps he was even intrigued by the notion of what may have transpired had Shakespeare been granted as many actors as he needed to fulfil his artistic visions.

Victor Hugo’s \textit{Le roi s’amuse} premiered in 1832 and was banned in Paris after its first performance. Immediately following the censorial uproar in France, performances of \textit{Le roi} were subsequently forbidden in all Austrian-controlled parts of Italy on the grounds it prompted insurgency.\textsuperscript{274} Hugo immediately released a printed version of his play with a preface arguing against the ban which was then translated, published, and read extensively throughout Europe. Verdi decided on the subject nearly two decades after its debut, and was still wary of the censorial challenges an adaptation would face. In

\textsuperscript{271} Willis, \textit{Verdi’s Shakespeare: Men of the Theater}, 11.
\textsuperscript{273} Budden, \textit{The Operas of Verdi: Volume 1}, 7.
some of his earliest correspondence with Piave regarding their project he wrote, “Use four legs, run through the town and find me an influential person who can obtain the permission for making *Le roi s’amuse*.” Unfortunately, the Venetian-Austrian censors immediately intervened and forced Piave and Verdi to relocate the plot. All of the characters were given an Italian makeover (excepting Sparafucile, who maintains his origin is “Borgognone”), the action was moved to the extinct Duchy of Mantua, and King Francis was turned into the non-royal Duke of Mantua, modeled on Vincenzo Gonzaga (1562-1612). Mantua was a city in Lombardy which was absorbed by the Habsburg Empire at the beginning of the 18th century. The Habsburgs’ acquisition left no local aristocracy to be offended by 19th century Venetian operas. In the face of the notoriously well-documented censorial difficulties which mounted before the librettist and the composer, Verdi was completely wedded to interpreting Hugo’s play. He wrote again to Piave, “Turn Venice upside down to make the censors permit this subject.”

The libretto did eventually make it past the censors with the amputation of a few scenes here and there, but the opera’s important adaptive alterations were not the ones used to satisfy the authorities. Though Verdi was undoubtedly interested in *Le roi*’s merits alone, *Rigoletto* emerged as an entirely different story without changing the essential plot or characters of the original. Verdi used Hugo’s play as a framework or outline and colored it in musically with the salient emotional qualities of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Frederick L. Slous’ preface to the 1843 English translation of *Le roi*, perfectly sums up the emotional atmosphere of Hugo’s play in a single sentence:

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there is not one really good or noble character—that in scanning the actions of the entire dramatis personae, the eye of the reader, like that of poor Triboulet in the text, becomes a-weighy with the sight of crime, and that the heart has no single spot of virtue or magnanimity where it may repose awhile, from the shocks which the perceptual aspect of vice has inflicted.²⁷⁸

Verdi was no supporter of monarchical authority, but his opera does not depict its characters as archetypes to advance a proletarian ideal. Whereas Victor Hugo used his play as a mirror held up to the faces of the corrupt French aristocracy, Verdi, by steeping Le roi in the emotional qualities he so admired in King Lear, turned and enlarged that mirror to reflect the face of humanity. Verdi used Hugo’s play as a vehicle to present the emotions he burned to compose for a Lear.

In mid-December in 1850, Verdi wrote that he “chose this very subject” because he found it a “really very, very beautiful thing to portray this character who is deformed and ridiculous on the outside, and passionate and full of love on the inside.”²⁷⁹ The primary challenge in changing Hugo’s play to suit a Shakespearean ideal was to mold the character of Tribolet into a sympathetic creature and yet maintain his cruelty. In the preface to the printed edition of his play, Hugo wrote that Tribolet’s “greatest fear is that [Blanche] may fall into evil, since being evil himself he knows what suffering it causes.”

It would take a peculiar type of audience to empathize with the plight of an “evil” character and Verdi recognized this immediately. In order to create emotional space for hearts “to repose a while,” the composer demanded of his librettist to shift some of the evil ownness away from the jester and onto the Duke of Mantua. Verdi’s goal was to expose the existence of the jester’s twisted and hardened, yet beating heart. This very attempt at increased dramatic effectiveness tore open the core of Hugo’s play and instilled a glimmer of humanity, visible behind the tattered shrouds of immorality.

Verdi’s Tribolet, or Rigoletto, as he will be referred to from this point on, was not the only character in need of an empathetic adjustment. In Hugo’s play, the character of the jester’s daughter, “a little French Juliet, without the intensity of feeling of Shakespere [sic],” works as an empty-headed foil with which to smite her father retroactively for his sins. Even though Blanch is innocent in her love of both her father and the King and dealt the most severe punishment out of any of the play’s characters, it is hard to muster sympathy for such a shell of a girl. In his article “The Tonality of Rigoletto” (1974), Martin Chusid (1925-2013) shows that most scholarly work on Rigoletto tends to accept Rigoletto’s daughter Gilda’s dependence on “divine intervention” without recognizing there is no counterpart in Le roi s’amuse. In Verdi’s adaptation, not only is Gilda bestowed with newfound religiosity, but her dearly departed mother’s soul is “raised to Heaven” and she entreats God’s mercy in each of her three duets with her father.

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282 Ibid., viii.
Changes in the libretto from Verdi’s draft of *Si, vendetta* suggest that Piave proposed these amendments and the results coincided perfectly with Verdi’s intended direction. All of a sudden, the insipid character of Blanche is transformed into the sympathetic and religious Gilda, a young woman whose moral and physical destruction is spurned by her unwavering belief in the goodness of God’s mercy. *Rigoletto’s* Gilda is no longer just the silly teenager from *Le roi’amuse* with a penchant for bad decision-making, she is a young woman betrayed by both the man she loves and her fathers on earth and in heaven. This moral three-front offensive was accomplished with such subtlety and deftness of hand that it moves beneath the radar of popular analytical discussion Verdis and Piave’s decision to imbue Gilda with a religious backstory turned a previously unsympathetic character into a tragic casualty.

Just as Mozart was able to preserve the acerbic essence of *Le Mariage de Figaro* by way of music, Verdi’s score added a unifying dimension to Hugo’s play which compounded the emotional impact yet confounded the censors. There are several integral parts in the play which Verdi brought to new dramatic heights through the use of music. First and foremost, Verdi held the curse hurled at both the Duke and Rigoletto to be absolutely central to the plot’s motion. In order to make his point abundantly clear, the composer opens the overture in D-flat minor, has Monterone, a wronged father, perform the curse in the key of D-flat, reprises Monterone’s bone-chilling walk to the executioner in D-flat, and closes the opera on Rigoletto’s cries of agony in D-flat. Whether or not you agree with the curse as a central theme, Verdi’s music made sure that neither

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Rigoletto or the audience could escape its consequences. In another genius compositional move, Verdi again uses the key in which the music is set to implicitly draw attention to the shared guilt of the Duke, his courtiers, and Rigoletto.\footnote{286} The entire opera is littered with these shared relationships or “tonal dramatic threads” (whether it is between the Duke and Rigoletto or Rigoletto and Gilda or Gilda and the Duke) which are capable of implying a vast array of characteristics, from irony to collusion, without provoking the censor’s ire.\footnote{287}

Following in reformative footsteps of Gluck and Mozart, Verdi’s \textit{Rigoletto} took care of whatever barriers remained between formal melody and recitative. Julian Budden goes so far as to compare \textit{Rigoletto}, in the context of Verdi’s output, to Beethoven’s \textit{Third Symphony}.\footnote{288} A comment of this kind from one of the most eminent Verdian scholars places about as much cultural and historical significance on \textit{Rigoletto} as a single work of art can support, considering the “Eroica” is considered the turning point between the Classical and Romantic eras in European music.\footnote{289} With its cast of three principals, two comprimarii, and five secondary roles, only one conventional double-aria, and no act finales, Verdi’s opera took on an entirely new and, in Verdi’s own words, “revolutionary” form. It appears as though Verdi treated \textit{Le roi s’amuse} with exactly the same approach delineated in his letter to Antonio Cammarano regarding King Lear: “There is no need to make \textit{King Lear} into the usual kind of drama we have had up until now; rather, we must

\footnote{286} Ibid., 251.  
\footnote{287} Ibid., 251.  
\footnote{288} Budden, \textit{The Operas of Verdi; Volume 1}, 483.  
treat it in a completely new manner, on a large scale, and without regard for mere convenience.”

IV. MUSIC AS LANGUAGE:
*Tristan und Isolde* (1865) - Richard Wagner

Gluck’s, Mozart’s, and Verdi’s music, all of which we lump into the unfortunately titled category of classical music nowadays, has taken on a peculiar role in the 21st century. Just the output of these three men alone could each fill their own individually titled genres several times over and yet they have been bunched together (along with every other ‘classical composer’) under a title as intellectually appropriate as it would be to uniformly refer to all Spanish speaking nations collectively as “Hispanic.” Proper use of the term “Classical music” specifically references music composed during the Classical period in Western music from 1750-1820. Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) addressed this categorical infraction during an episode of his Young People’s Concerts series aptly entitled “What is Classical Music?.” Speaking to an Isaac Stern Auditorium full of kids at Carnegie Hall in January of 1959, The New York Philharmonic conductor explained the difference between what we call “classical music” and every other type of music:

The real difference is that when a composer writes a piece of what’s usually called classical music, he puts down the exact notes that he wants, the exact instruments or voices that he wants to play or sing those notes - even the exact number of instruments or voices; and he also write down as many directions as he can think of, to tell the players or singers as carefully as he can everything they need to know about how fast or slow it should go, how loud or soft it should be, and millions of things to help the
performers to give an exact performance of those notes he thought up . . .

This means that what people call classical music can’t be changed, except by the personality of the performer. This music is permanent, unchangeable, exact. Now, there’s a good word - exact - maybe that’s what we should call this kind of music instead of classical, we could call it exact music. Because there’s only one way it can be played, and that way has been told us by the composer himself.²⁹¹

As creative restrictions of style and harmonic modulation originally stipulated by the early European Catholic church progressively loosened from the Classical era and beyond, composers’ control over the ways in which they wrote music and implied personal style tightened so that Bernstein’s suggestion of exact music was conversely exemplified. What we commonly refer to as “classical music” was initially exact because of the compositional rules to which composers were forced to adhere. In the 19th century, that exactness evolved, alongside musical development, to define the increased creative control composers exercised over the construction and performance of their works. Composers, not musical form, obtained the upper hand in dictating precisely how music should be expressed.

As we have seen, no faction of classical music better exemplified the impending evolutionary changes within composition than the genre of opera. The uphill battle for control or exactness of performance in accordance with the wishes of the creator correlated directly with the transformation of the composer’s role from servant to artisan

and, finally, into the 19th century specific conception of artist. After Mozart took the initial steps towards the emancipation of his guild, the quest for artistic control grew more frenzied with each passing decade. Though few possessed enough celebrity clout to get their way, by the 1850’s the Romantic glimmer of absolute authority had become a reality. Verdi’s popularity attained unthinkable heights after the cementing success of *La Traviata* (1853) and he was further afforded the opportunity to pull away from one of the most tenacious of compositional proscriptions: “the tyranny of good voices.” Since its birth, operatic composition, with the hazard of fully visible dramatic lines, forcibly catered to frequent external factors (ruling parties, opera managers, religious and secular censorship, etc . . . ), but the demands of contracted performers was one of the most influential and difficult to avoid. Composers were nearly always forced to oblige the wishes of particular singers if they wanted to make use of their talents for the run of their new work. Such obligations included tailoring arias to suit a specific performer’s vocal range, granting more stage time to a demanding diva by working in a few extra numbers, or even promising future roles in yet-to-be-composed operas, which jeopardized the creator’s conception of character development, in order to entice uncooperative performers to share a scene. At complete odds with popular opinion, a position in which he often found himself, Wagner addressed this issue in part one of *Opera and Drama*:

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293 Gary Willis, *Verdi’s Shakespeare: Men of the Theater*, 2.
The so famous revolution of Gluck, which has come to the ears of many ignoramuses as a complete reversal of the views previously current as to Opera’s essence, in truth consisted merely in this: that the musical composer revolted against the willfulness of the singer. Wagner was so revolted by the performer’s influence over art, that he interpreted Gluck’s reform trilogy as a dismissal of extraneous external influences. For the time being, only the power of celebrity was influential enough to shake off the majority of compositional fetters. Despite its superficiality, wresting influence from the hands of performers was one giant step towards the 19th century ideal of art for the sake of art.

Surely the essence of “art for art’s sake” was always part of the drive spurring great creative minds prior to the 19th century, but the pragmatic environment into which pre-Romantic artists delivered their work was too inhospitable to foster such a high-minded and frivolous-seeming ideology openly. The original source of the sentiment “l’art pour l’art” or one of its varying forms is oft disputed, with accreditation handed out to Theophile Gautier (1811-1872), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), and Victor Cousin (1792-1867) to name a few. That there is no precise origin for the divorce of art from didacticism is worth far more than a proven discovery of the first proponent. From Central Europe to England to North America, there was a sweeping development in cultural consciousness that signified a mass change in the way art, the artist, and the purpose of art was valued within society. The lack of boundaries surrounding this worldwide artistic liberation only served to lend more credence to the movement in question. It
was no longer mandatory to, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), “prefer the useful to the beautiful, and . . . require that the beautiful should be useful.”

In a strange turn of events and in the face of compositional evolution, the 20th century saw a near complete reversal of this idea. Following the First and Second World Wars, classical music began a steady descent back into the utilitarian trenches from which it had, along with other fine arts, fought tooth and nail to escape throughout the 1800’s. What uses does classical music serve today? The broader 21st century populace appraises classical music’s value by its ability to relax. It is difficult to imagine that any observer present at the premiere of *Rigoletto* left the theater feeling relaxed. Conflicted, scintillated, provoked, ashamed, overcome, over wrought, depressed, angry, exalted, expiated, maybe, but relaxed . . . how? To the informed listener, the notion is completely implausible. Adding insult to injury, 21st century government institutions, despite aggressive budget cuts to classical music programs, endorse the use of classical music in public spaces to ward off unsavory loiterers. In 2011, an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, disclosed, “whether it’s Handel piped into New York’s Port Authority or Tchaikovsky at a public library in London, the sound of classical music is apparently so repellent to teenagers that it sends them scurrying away like frightened mice.”

The use of “highbrow” music to discourage “low brow” activities should be kept, if it has to be kept at all, as a dirty secret. Unfortunately, its prescribed use is so well known that classical

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violinist Gil Shaham (1971-) released his 2014 album under the title “Music to Drive Away Loiterers.”

The world looks back fondly on post-Romantic Europe for its artistic prominence, revolutionary atmosphere, and increasingly liberal social values, however, as with any time period, there were strong-voiced dissenters dispersed throughout its ranks. In a complaint that is as relevant today as it was on May 10th, 1851, a 38-year-old Richard Wagner wrote to his then incarcerated former colleague and close companion August Roeckel (1814-1876), “How . . . absolutely contemptible - our “Art” of the present day is, has at last become apparent now that it has cast aside all sense of shame and openly acknowledges that its one concern is to be a paying business.”

During his lifetime, Wagner became Europe’s most discussed and debated icon: “an unheard-of phenomenon, impossible to classify” with “pamphlets and magazine articles innumerable” written on both him and his works. So then why, with this kind of extensive celebrity, was Wagner incapable of enjoying the same personal artistic freedom afforded to his contemporary in celebrity status, Verdi? It boils down to personality and viewpoints. Though Wagner and Verdi differ in the most important of ways, it is crucial to first establish the parallels that exist between these two leading figures of opera.

One would be hard pressed to find any general discussion of the genre that can avoid mentioning both of these men within the same breath. Born within a few months of one and other in the year 1813, each composer established himself as a figurehead of the genre and was embraced by his place of origin as an artistic representation of a collective

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297 Ibid., 70.
culture. Although Verdi’s cultural background featured the lineage of the finest pedigree—Ancient Rome, the Catholic church, and the birthplace of opera and the Renaissance—Wagner’s cultural heritage was far more pertinent in regard to their profession. The very seat of the Baroque (1600-1750) and Classical awakening in music which led to the Romantic school of composition from which both composers emerged, was rooted in the German speaking countries and experience of central Europe. A cultural home-advantage for Wagner, the Germanic influence of Mozart and Beethoven had a far greater impact on Verdi’s compositional headspace than any of his Italian predecessors. Wagner personally chronicled the specific influences of Mozart and, very specifically, Beethoven, on his creative processes in his formal writings, however the Bard of Bonn’s influence over Verdi is not nearly as well publicized. In his article “A Bridge for Two Bicentenary Rivals” (2013), New York Times music columnist Anthony Tommasini included this charming anecdote in the hopes of adding some Wagnerian certainty to the compositional link between Verdi and Beethoven:

“When asked in 1889 to add his name to the honors list for a festival at Beethoven’s birthplace in Bonn, Verdi replied, “I cannot refuse the honors that is offered to me.”

“We are talking about Beethoven!” he added. “Before such a name we all prostrate ourselves reverently.”

This description also serves as a confirmation of an enduring and somewhat strange preoccupation by the academic community to find solid musical influences upon which

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298 See Richard Wagner’s A Pilgrimage to Beethoven (1840).
both Wagner and Verdi drew inspiration. When Verdi and Wagner are discussed, it is
always their operatic output which is thrown up for comparison. If opera is the topic of
discussion, the blatant disregard of these men’s dramatic influences in favor of musical ones perpetuates the common problem of opera since the beginning of its history: the theoretical interrelation of drama and music. Audience members can float along on the beauty of musical composition without much knowledge of plot development, a testament to the musical genius of both Wagner and Verdi, but neither composer intended for his creation to be imbibed in such a manner. Why fish for musical linkages that may or may not be supported by epistolary evidence when we have a plethora of assurances from both men that they held the dramatic aptitude of William Shakespeare as the “topmost flower” of Drama. As discussed in the previous section, Verdi’s admiration of Shakespeare’s tragedies was so complete, he dared not attempt to stage a King Lear for fear of committing even the slightest of dramatic degradations. Just as openly devoted a disciple, the young Wagner wrote, though he was “never very thorough with [his] language studies,” he learned English “only to read Shakespeare and thoroughly master him.” Certain his career path would lead toward the stage, Wagner spent time vacillating between the roles of dramatist and composer before dedicating himself to opera, which he found an ideal conflation of the two. To ignore the shared dramatic

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300 Wagner, Opera and Drama, 124.
influences of opera composers, especially those of Verdi and Wagner, actively works against the very message they sought to propagate by their art.

Verdi, an astute businessman, viewed opera as a two-way street, an open dialectic between composer and audience. The theatergoer’s response to his artwork was an equally important determiner of the product’s worth. This is not to say that Verdi’s music pandered to audience opinion, but that compositionally and dramatically, he searched for the most resonant channel by which to establish an effective emotional dialogue. In Verdi’s case, the process is less of a commercial and more of a musical endeavor that happened to coincide with commercial enterprise. Just as instrumentalists isolate and then match the frequency of vibration by which their instruments reverberate in order to play in tune with one and other, Verdi carefully gauged his audience’s emotional sensibilities and composed according to what he felt would be the most dramatically effective and “in tune” with the public. Aside from the fact that success was a predetermination of his income, Verdi needed an emotional affirmation from the masses to guarantee his creations’ potency. You could say that the emotional timbre of Verdi’s works was directly influenced by the society and audience for which they were intended. Wagner, on the other hand, was far less concerned with audience response. This is not to imply that Wagner had any sort of disregard for artist-audience communication, but rather that he prized this relationship within the framework of dramatic context so highly, that his entire pursuit was driven by a desire to enhance this exchange by the revolutionary compositional means he envisioned so clearly. Verdi, starting specifically with Rigoletto, ventured outside the realm of standard operatic melodic formats, whereas Wagner elected
to disregard historically sanctioned structure altogether. Conceptually, Wagner found what had, up until the mid-19th century, been the expected framework of an opera to be melodically and thereby narratively restrictive. Your traditional opera usually had very demarcated beginnings and endings, which by today’s standards can be envisioned similarly to how musical selections are regularly divided up into tracks on an album. In his 1851 treatise on the arts, *Opera and Drama* (1851), Wagner established his stance on the guiding forces of creativity. Creative output should not be swayed by external influences, be them responsorial or regulatory. “Art,” he wrote, “by the very meaning of the term, is nothing but the fulfilment of a longing to know oneself in the likeness of an object of one’s love or adoration, to find oneself again in the things of the outer world, thus conquered by their representment.” This statement basically relegated the artist-audience relationship in favor of a solely personal form of expression or art for the sake of art.

Though it is frequently observed that *Tristan und Isolde* was a turning point in the history of opera and the history of music as a whole, not everyone saw Wagner’s disregard for common compositional practices as substantiated. Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), whom the American composer Philip Glass (1937-) labeled the “most influential composer of the 20th century” and a “theater composer par excellence,” is the most renowned and venerable of Wagner haters. Contrary to the average Wagnerian

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304 Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 155.
dissenter, Stravinsky’s ire was not provoked as in most cases by “ignorance or malevolence,” but by the interpretation that Wagner labored beneath a “spirit of systemization which, under the guise of doing away with conventions, establishes a new set, quite as arbitrary and much more cumbersome than the old.” 307 Now, given the importance of Stravinsky’s creative work in conjunction with his depth and breadth of knowledge on the arts as a whole, his opinions on the subject of “the rubbish and racket that is the music drama” are worth touching upon as an example of the prototypical argument against Wagnerian music drama. 308

Stravinsky’s first order of business was to insist, despite what you may have heard about the *Rite of Spring* (1913), that he personally was not a revolutionary. 309 He goes on to claim that one would be “hard pressed to cite a single . . . facet in the history of art that might be qualified as revolutionary,” as the purposes of art are inherently constructive while those of revolution “[imply] a disruption of equilibrium.” 310 Although he wrote that works of art could not be revolutionary, the Russian composer had no qualms labeling Wagner a “typical revolutionary” whose work was not necessarily a disorder, “but one which [tried] to compensate for a lack of order.” 311 One hesitates to contradict an esteemed mind, however, Stravinsky’s arguments against Gesamtkunstwerk and Wagner are antithetical. It is baffling that Stravinsky can at one time defend Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) as a composer “who adopted the musical system that suited his needs” and

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308 Ibid, 43.
309 Ibid, 10.
310 Ibid., 11.
311 Ibid., 62.
who is “perfectly consistent with himself,” yet criticize Wagner as a “nouveau riche” minded renegade whose system existed solely to dismantle the structures that once housed the rules of composition. 312 Given these opinions, it is obvious that Stravinsky chose the ‘symphonic’ or ‘melodic’ approach to Wagnerian criticism. This is the most common form of critique and its components require disparaging Wagner’s use of melodic logic, radicalizing his apparent disregard for musical form and tradition, and dragging Verdi into the argument as an example of the “antagonism” that exists between the two composers’ works. 313 This is a common line of thought, but it incorrectly analyzes Wagner’s later operas from a wholly musical standpoint. As the musicologist Joseph Kerman so aptly illustrates, “as purely musical forms, Wagner’s operas succeed as well as any romantic symphonic poems of their length might be expected to succeed; which is to say, not too well.” 314

Wagner is oftentimes labeled a “symphonic” composer for various reasons that really have no place in formal analysis. In Wagner’s mind, the term “symphonic” was a metaphorical descriptor that referred to the perpetuation of “interrelated thematic ideas” woven throughout a larger work. 315 It is ironic that this traditional strain of argument pits the ‘melodic’ operas of Verdi against the ‘symphonic operas’ of Wagner using the very segmentary mentality that both composers sought to eliminate with their compositions. To suggest that either Wagner or Verdi wrote his music independently of concern for the accompanying text is to tackle an abstract and essentially pointless path of reasoning. In

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312 Ibid., 13, 56.
313 Ibid., 62.
spite of Wagner’s conflicting publications on the subject of opera and symphonic music, which, due to their contradictory nature must be accredited with fueling their share of the confusion surrounding Wagnerian musical analysis, he never marketed himself singularly as a composer of music. “In me,” he said, “the accent lies on the conjunction of poet and musician; as a pure musician I would not be of much significance.”

In another complete break from operatic tradition, Wagner was responsible for writing not only the music, but the libretto for each one of his operas. The occurrence of which was rare enough to provoke every Wagnerian scholar to point out there was also a one Gustav Albert Lortzing (1801-1851) who provided his own librettos. Wagner too knew of Lortzing and admitted their similarities, but judged the other’s texts as “ready-made plays” which abandoned literary pretentions. Wagner, on the other hand, was chalk-full of literary pretension; each of his librettos was published independently of the opera music and released as a work of literature on its own merits. After the composition of Der fliegende Hollander (1843), Wagner personally asserted that he was no longer a writer of librettos, but a poet. His consistent insistence on his status as a poet and philosopher serves to exhibit how secure he was in his technical competence as a composer. After his completion of Lohengrin in 1847, Wagner took a six-year compositional hiatus to write Art and Revolution (1849), Artwork of the Future (1850), Opera and Drama (1851), A Communication to My Friends (1851), and Judaism in Music (1852).

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316 Richard Wagner, quoted in Cosima Wagner’s Diary, August 16, 1869, quoted in Abbate, “‘Opera as Symphony, a Wagnerian Myth,’” 137.
317 Richard Wagner, quoted in Garten, Wagner the Dramatist, 34.
319 Ibid.
Though the composer himself might disagree, the libretti of Wagner, regardless of their quality, are of an entirely different order than that of poetry. A new category adjacent to that of poet should be constructed for minds that conceive of both concurrent text and music. Composers universally lauded the “opportunity to work with [oneself]” as the penultimate composer-librettist relationship, but it took over 200 years and particular hybrid of artist to finally straddle the divide. Wagner envisioned this procedure as a type of metamorphosis. The composer-librettist was a poet in the first instance, and transformed into a musician after the complete poetic realization of the text. Wagner published each of his libretti separately as works of poetry, but not as plays to be performed independently of the music. He never conceived of the music and text as mutually exclusive, but as part of his concept of drama, thereby disarming any motion to stage a Wagnerian libretto successfully. Wagner viewed all parts of a stage production as pieces of a greater artistic conceptual whole or Gersamtkunstwerk. As an art form, drama included music as a “means of expression,” the verbal drama, and also the choreography, decor, and every aspect of representation.

Perhaps Wagner’s choice of profession as a composer and dramatist had the most to do with the venerable reputation left in his wake. In all the ways that Wagner is unique, what is often considered truly extraordinary is the way in which he inspires both infinite loathing and devotion. Seeing as Wagner sought out a profession amidst the most sensitive of all the art forms, the contentiousness of his legacy should not come as a surprise. Of course this point is debatable, as is any opinion that deals with factions of an

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320 Verdi, quoted in John Rosselli, *The Life of Verdi*, 46.
321 Garten, *Wagner the Dramatist*, 34
322 Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 64.
astheticism, however, there is no question as to which facets of the art world engage the most senses. What appeals to the individual may differ, but the facts remain the same. As an art form, musical drama is designed to engage the greatest number of senses, therefore it is capable of soliciting the greatest emotional response. This renders musical drama the highest mean of personal communication between artist and audience. Even Arthur Schopenhauer's hierarchy of arts (ranging from architecture at the bottom to tragedy at the top) as delineated in *The World a Will and Representation* (1819 and 1844) exempts the music drama as a separate category from tragedy and the plastics.

Wagner, in his acute realization of how to maximize the potential of dramatic effectiveness, could not wait for the rest of the opera going world to evolve at its own pace. In any other profession his impatience and impetuosity would have faded into history, leaving only the memory of his compositional genius to be picked over by future generations. No one remembers Frank Lloyd Wright’s (1867-1959) self-admitted “honest arrogance” when admiring his futuristic structures, because architecture, by its very nature, does not engage its viewers on the same emotional plane as does drama. There is less of an insistence on remembering the personality of the architect who designed a structure, as audiences are less emotionally involved with our observation of said work. Wagner’s role in 20th century history is most commonly associated with the Nazi party’s appropriation of his works as the benchmark for German artistic superiority. The composer was unequivocally one of the most vocally supportive of a unified German culture and by far the most famous German speaking artist of the 19th century, but had he been anything other than a dramatist and still the most outstanding and prolific in his
field, someone else within the dramatic arts would have been nominated as the bastion of Germanic culture. The important takeaway is this: the more emotionally involved with an art we are as an audience, the greater our instinctual desire to be involved with the psyche of the artist. As Wagner’s chosen profession was that of the most provocative of all the arts, his decision to follow his vision of what drama should be, one hundred years before it might have naturally evolved to that point, magnified the emotional impact of his personal dramatic conquests.

**Tristan und Isolde**, Wagner’s and perhaps opera’s penultimate union of text, drama, and music, received a spat of academic attention and renewed dissection in the years leading up to the composer’s 2013 bicentennial. From Roger Scruton’s *Death Devoted Heart* (2004), to Eric Chafe’s *The Tragic and the Ecstatic* (2005), to Arthur Groo’s thoughtfully curated selections for Cambridge Opera Handbooks’ *Tristan und Isolde* (2011), and Terry Quinn’s *Richard Wagner: The Lighter Side* (2013), the genesis of this particular work has been retold, examined, and sifted through more times than warranted constructive. In fact, *Tristan und Isolde* is the most written about opera ever composed. Even by the turn of the century, nearly all aspects of Wagner’s “opus metaphysicum of all art” had been discussed, digested, and analyzed. A mere 29 years after Wagner’s death, George Ainslie Hight (1851-??), well aware of the sea of analytic information into which he was about to set another ship, prefaced his 1912 essay “Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde”: An Essay on the Wagnerian Drama” with the disclaimer: “The following pages contain little if anything that is new, or that would be

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likely to interest those who are already at home in Wagner’s work.” Despite the author’s precaution, a 1912 issue of The Spectator still found it necessary to deem sections of his submission as “something worse than irrelevant.” There are no holds barred when it comes to critiquing critiques of Wagner. The publication went on to scrape at Hight’s “deplorable inadequacy . . . at describing the love-duet” and asked if Mr. Hight would “be prepared to attempt a similar paraphrase of the third act of “King Lear”?"

The myriad prognoses regarding the provenance of Wagner’s Tristan range from the philosophical, to the financial, to the romantic, and with infinite speculations cropped up in between. Undoubtedly, most of these theories play a formidable role in the development, conception, and staging of the end product, however, Wagner’s final catalogue displays a glaringly obvious pattern. According to his writings, Wagner conceived of his The Ring of the Nibelung (1876) in 1852, Tristan und Isolde (1865) in 1854, and Parsifal (1878) in 1857. His last three works for the stage, all realized within five years of each other, covered three out of the four great medieval German narrative poems and all three authors of said works. Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg is excluded from this collective, as Wagner’s basis for the opera was written in 1845, a decade before the mindset which produced the above mentioned trio of dramas. We know that Wolfram

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327 Garten, Wagner the Dramatist, 104.
328 Wagner, My Life, 56.
Von Eschenbach’s (fl. c. 1195-1225) *Parzival* (c. 1210) was written before Gottfried von Strassburg’s (died c. 1210) *Tristan*, as Strassburg funs Wolfram’s narration in his “literary excursus,” which Wolfram then subsequently refuted in his *Willehalm*, which was begun after 1212.\(^{329}\) The epic *Nibelungenlied* is attributed to an unknown author with current scholarly theories placing its composition around the beginning of the 13th century.\(^{330}\) All four major works were composed within twenty years of each other and, from a purely superficial standpoint, it would appear that regardless of the intellectual minutiae surrounding the exact formation of *Tristan und Isolde*, its eventual composition was imminent. Wager had every intention of exhibiting and reinterpreting each of the three great medieval Germanic poets for a modern stage and a modern, unified Germanic culture.

*Tristan* was the central conceptual frame of Wagner’s Trinitarian cultural call to arms, but the end result was more a votive of personal expression than a purposefully unifying social project. The striking cultural significance of *Tristan* plays as important a role in Wagner’s treatment of the text as his audience does upon his operas as a whole. Therein lies the very genius of Wagner. Without straying from his personal, artistic, financial, and philosophical goals (all of which appeared to hold similar levels of importance) the composer created an opera that deliberately engaged with Germanic cultural history seemingly as an afterthought. It takes a work of truly exceptional artistry to convey its creator’s most deep-seated ideologies and yet simultaneously satisfy the desires of the individual audience member and the greater body of society. Wagner was


able to reach this end through his specific selection of the *Tristan* myth and his personal distillation of Gottfried von Strassburg’s text into the final refined stage adaptation.

As is tradition in Wagnerian scholarship, the researcher reaches an impasse at which he must decide which angle best sheds the most influence over the composition of *Tristan und Isolde*. Was it the “serious mood” into which the works of Schopenhauer plunged him in late 1854 that pulled the composer towards the tragedy of life and death as a possible redemption from that existence?\(^3\) Perhaps Wagner’s unrequited love for Mathilde Wesendonck (1828-1902), the wife of his Swiss patron, spurned his desire to draw an artistic parallel between himself and Tristan’s loyalty to King Marke. Or did Wagner’s personal discovery of the music of Bach, which is distinctly demarcated as having occurred around the time of the opera’s genesis, renew the composer’s preoccupation with his future place in the ancestry of the Germanic musical spirit?\(^2\) No one fragment of the composer’s personal life held unadulterated sway over his inspiration to write a new version of the *Tristan* myth. Wagner himself looked back at his work writing, “I moved at last with full freedom and with total disregard of any theoretical considerations, in such a way that I myself realised during the work how far I had outgrown my system.”\(^3\) In this case, the term “system” functions as a multi-use descriptor. Not only was Wagner initially working within the compositional confines of classical music’s idea of sonata form, from which the music of *Tristan* breaks forth, but

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\(^3\) Wagner, *My Life Volume II*, 47.
the composer used and, in his mind, improved upon the ideas of Schopenhauer by means of the exaltation of love. Gottfried’s text, when pared down to its most minimal plot, gave Wagner the open space in which to deconstruct any previous notions of musical form, mourn his personal lack of the “actual happiness of love,” and hash out his understandings of the Schopenhauerian denial of the will-to-life and the “road to salvation.”

In the second part of Wagner’s *Opera and Drama*, “The Theatre and the Essence of Dramatic Poetry,” the author asserts that mythical subjects harbor the best potential for pure drama and that the only way to properly exorcise this ideal was by music, “the most spontaneous expression of the inner Feeling.” In a fulfilment of his theories on the realization of mythical interpretation, Wagner confided in both Marie Wittgenstein (1829-1897) and Mathilde Wesendonck that he began the music for *Tristan und Isolde* without having written any of the words: an operatic first for the composer. Wagner quite often contradicted his theoretical writings, either in practice or in subsequent publication, so to imply that he broke his usual compositional habits in order to coincide with a treatise he wrote five years prior is highly unlikely. However, this seemingly unintentional inversion of his creative pattern is the most crucial and influential compositional realization in opera’s past and future histories. Though the order by which Wagner composed *Tristan und Isolde*’s music and libretto is significant in its novelty, the utter revolutionary factor, revolutionary in the repudiation and thorough replacement of

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335 Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 224.
the hitherto system of relations between libretti and music, is that Wagner’s text operates as a translation of his musical language. Finally! Music reached a place where the “Feeling” and “Understanding” of a storyline was conceived within the language of music and “Expressed,” in translation, by the accompanying text.\footnote{Wagner, \textit{Opera and Drama}, 234.}

Wagner’s seminal opera changed the face of contemporary music theory, however, \textit{Tristan und Isolde} was not composed as an exercise in modernity. The conductor Wilhelm Furtwangler (1886-1954), who is largely considered one of the greatest operatic interpreters of the 20th century, was convinced that the compositional evolution achieved by \textit{Tristan und Isolde} was “mere accident.”\footnote{William Furtwangler, quoted in John Ardoin, \textit{The Furtwangler Record}, (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 1994), 199.} In his opinion, “Wagner had no intention at all of creating something new, of expanding the laws of harmony, of forcing progress, but was solely and exclusively concerned with finding the most . . . impressive language for his poetic vision, for his \textit{Tristan} world.”\footnote{Ibid.} Wagner was clearly attracted to \textit{Tristan} for its cultural significance, artistry, and narrative purity, but he also realized that the sophistication of the original work offered him a structure with the capacity to support the volume of his multitudinous artistic, personal, and nationalistic aspirations.\footnote{Hatto, \textit{Tristan: With the Surviving Fragments of the “Tristan of Thomas,”} 9.} A narrative of lesser quality would have collapsed under the weight of Wagner’s ambitions like a tin can.

Wagner based his music, prose synopsis, and final libretto on Gottfried von Strassburg’s 13th century epic poem \textit{Tristan}, a descendant of previous French and Celtic versions of the tale. The composer’s restructuring process was strikingly similar to the
methods by which Calzabigi prepared *Orfeo* for the operatic stage. Like *Orfeo*, *Tristan und Isolde* is composed in three acts and he parred the primary characters down to three: Tristan, Isolde, and King Marke. Though Wagner intentionally reduced Gottfried’s tale into *Eine Handlung*, “an action,” for artistic reasons, this motion was also a byproduct of practicality. Allegedly prompted by a request from the Emperor of Brazil for a composition in 1857, Wagner set aside his Ring project in favor of composing the “less involved” *Tristan und Isolde*.³⁴¹ This request from Rio de Janeiro might have been the official catalyst for composition, but it conveniently coincided with Wagner’s wish to produce a work for provincial theaters which were unable to stage his typically grandiose creations.³⁴² In the end, the opera defied all of Wagner’s original performance intentions. His initial attempts to mount his representation of *Tristan* were rejected throughout Germany. The theater companies claimed a performance was impossible and that their musicians refused to play it.³⁴³ In the face of the growing size of the orchestra required for Wagner’s score and the goading of his most influential patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845-1886), *Tristan und Isolde* finally premiered in its entirety on June 10th, 1865 at the commodious *Hoftheater* in Munich.³⁴⁴

Whether or not Wagner planned to compose the story of *Tristan* before translating it into German, we will never know. Wagner’s writings and letters (the surviving collections total between ten and twelve thousand) touched on nearly every subject under

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the sun, however, he wrote very little on his actual compositional processes. According to Cosima Wagner (1837-1930), Wagner’s second wife, the composer saw Tristan as “the greatest of tragedies.” It is tale of such intense love-lost that the author seemingly sought to deter those who were “unable to endure sorrow” and offered to bring lovesick readers’ “keen sorrow halfway to alleviation and thus abate their anguish.” Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde is a pastiche of his various influences. The narrative does not retain the inherently tragic message originally prescribed by Gottfried in the prologue, the influence of Schopenhauer is only half realized, and the moral clarity of Shakespearean romantic love is inverted, thereby eschewing the possibility of a traditional Christian reading. In all respects, Wagner’s masterwork personally mirrored the dramatic intent he accomplished with his adaptation. The action, what little there is of it, grants the audience access to the inner workings of the protagonists’ minds, just as the total opera functions as an intimate portrayal of the inner processes of Wagner’s emotional mindset of the 1850’s.

In order to promote his impending opera in the face of staging difficulties, Wagner created a performable orchestral excerpt composed of the opening “Prelude” and the closing “Liebestod.” The union of the unstable and morose “Prelude” with a commonly instrumental version of Isolde’s euphoric “Liebestod” or transfiguration often provokes the ire of purists. The arrangement might appear diminutive to idealists, but this truncated composite lays bare the spinal cord of the full work. It is not the obvious juxtaposition of life and death / beginning and end, that “Prelude and Liebestod” makes

apparent, but rather the uncertain and depressive musical language used to describe the birth of the work and the explosively rapturous and celebratory nature of the “Love-Death” finale. The concepts of a mournful birth and a joyful death were not new, but Wagner’s modern musical explanation of the Schopenhauerian “denial of the will-to-life” and death as the “road to salvation” lent these ideologies, formerly unnatural to European audiences, a previously inconceivable credence. Again, as with the rest of *Tristan und Isolde*, we can read this aspect of his creation as a combination and a representation of the composer’s personal influences. Though he had attempted to immerse himself in the works of Schelling (1775-1854) and Hegel (1770-1831) earlier in his life, Wagner gravitated towards the philosophies of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), whose works exhibited deities as the externalizations of human love and emotions. This theme, combined with Feuerbach’s palatable insistence that the “complementing of the . . . figural representation with the musical gives the total image [of feeling] its fullest scope,” supplies an answer as to why the music of *Tristan und Isolde* is renowned for its power. Not only was the music intended to demonstrate a narrative, but it simultaneously injected and presented this narrative with the emotions and the intents of the philosophies by which Wagner was influenced. Though Feuerbach highlighted music’s potential for emotional illustration, its capabilities could never be fully realized until its emancipation as a language from its formerly ubiquitous ties to text. As the following excerpt from a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck makes clear, Wagner was aware

350 Ibid., 30.
of music’s acute emotional capacity and that he had achieved this final manifestation with his latest work:

Child! This Tristan is turning into something dreadful

[fruchtbares]!

That last act !!! - - - - - -

I’m afraid the opera will be forbidden—unless the whole thing is turned into a parody by bad production—: only mediocre performances can save me! Completely good ones are bound to drive people crazy, —I can’t imagine what else could happen. To such a state have things come!!! Alas!351

The poem responsible for Wagner’s magnum opus was discovered in the 17th century and published in 1775. Right from the onset, the work was hailed as an unmatched accomplishment of linguistic artistry and was hastened to the forefront of Germanic literary achievements.352 Scholars and critics were quick to sing the praises of the German language’s newfound jewel, but the pervasive theme of romantic love’s preeminence over religious morals initiated a long standing controversy. Gottfried’s Tristan did not adhere to a set of Christian morals, but rather a system of principles the author personally deemed superior to all others. As a formally recognized serious interpreter of the Tristan legend, Wagner was most assuredly aware of Gottfried’s self-styled moral hierarchy.353 In fact, it seems probable that Wagner immediately

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perceived and was attracted to this very quality of the poem. The Tristan myth simultaneously exemplified aspects of Wagner’s own ideologies and demonstrated that the narrative could conceivably uphold the insertion of any number of tenets, provided the foundation maintained its roots in the primary theme of romantic love.

For reasons akin to why Verdi chose Hugo’s *Le Roi* as the narrative basis for his *Rigoletto*, Wagner’s final selection for his current state of mind and purpose could be none other than Gottfried’s *Tristan*. Not only was this medieval legend myth-like in its universality, a fact that aligned it with his philosophical musings on the essence of drama, but it was a narrative of personal and cultural significance. Physically, *Tristan* suited Wagner’s commercial requirements and allowed for his perceptive intuition to select and refine the egregious amount of the original’s action into three central episodes without dismantling the essential theme of the text. Most importantly, *Tristan’s* uncertain and therefore malleable moral framework was the signal that bade Wagner to this most indomitable of musical vessels. Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* grew out of his desire to create an “Expression” of the basic features of Schopenhauerian theory, but his primary allegiance was to Gottfried’s exaltation of romantic love and the sexual expression of that love. Wagner’s winning three-dimensionalization of *Tristan* was the happy result of his initial musical realization of his and Gottfried’s combined emotional and theoretical representations.


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