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*Comparing Verdi and Wagner*

Italy, in the late Romantic period (1850s, 1900): the time of the grand opera, expansive adventures, stunning narratives exhibited in the pinnacle of the artistic experience. Grand operas included huge casts, many acts, and stunning sets and special effects. Due to common political overthrow, grand operas were most notably funded by consumers through ticket sales rather than the gifts and preferences of nobility. This was a period of renewal and constant invention. There was a growing communication system, an increased ease of travel between countries, electric light, and even basic recording technology, as well as a strengthening sense of cultural nationalism (Class notes). It was in these circumstances that the great composers Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner provoked Europe with their great influences, including chromatic harmony, new compositional techniques, and an emergence of a new cultural style.

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) was the most prominent composer of Italian opera for almost 50 years. One of his most well known and performed operas is *Il Trovatore*. Alongside *Il Trovatore*, he composed 26 operas with mainly political themes which were so strongly felt within the culture of Italy that the chant “Viva Verdi” became a popular coded rallying cry (Class notes). *Il Trovatore* takes place in 15th century Spain. It begins with Ferrando, the captain of Count di Luna’s guard, as he recounts the story of a Gypsy woman who once placed a curse on di Luna’s brother as an infant boy. The “witch” is sought after and burned at the stake. In an act of

vengeance, her daughter kidnaps the cursed child and burns him at the very same stake. As seen at 3:09, Verdi employs musical techniques that help drive the narrative and signalize the characters. As Ferrando tells the story, a chorus of listeners respond by asking questions in sync, giving the effect of curiosity and intrigue in a crowd (Verdi).

As seen in the example above, Verdi was known for the clarity and simplicity of his compositions. Another example occurs later in the scene at 10:04: the chorus shouts, “the Midnight bell tolls!” and a bell can be heard from backstage (Verdi). This technique of diegetic music is representative of Verdi’s simplicity of characterization. At its most simple, when “the midnight bell tolls” is vocalized, a midnight bell shall indeed toll. On the other hand was Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who wrote in a broad, complex, and expansive style. Wagner was a German composer with an outspoken political voice, as well as an infamously racist ideology, who wrote immense works with a revolutionary level of production value. A clear contrast can be derived from the two composers’ perspectives on vocals. Verdi saw opera as a vocal art, while Wagner saw opera as a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a “total work of art” in which music, vocals, narrative, visual art, and poetry are infused into one magnificent exhibition, with none given greater preference or priority (Class notes).

Verdi was a great dramatist and melodist who had a keen ability to depict characters musically using motifs and style. To this end he made frequent use of exoticism, the portrayal of other cultures and traditions through shorthand cues and tropes (Class notes). One example of this is the introduction of the character Manrico. The character is introduced as a troubadour at 22:40 with plucked strings, demonstrating the medieval themes and style of the opera, and his troubadour lifestyle (Verdi). This is comparable to Wagner’s use of the *leitmotif*, an identifiable musical fragment which is conceptually tied to a narrative element, such as a character, place,

object, or idea (Class notes). Verdi experiments with motifs in his representation of Manrico and the Count, and in doing so signifies their rivalry. A dramatic example of this is when the two sing different themes simultaneously at 22:00, before entering into a duel, which Manrico wins, sparing di Luna.

Wagner invented the “endless melody” which prolongs tension, avoiding true resolution for as long as possible. Music is continuous from scene to scene (Class notes). The opposite can be seen in Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, in which, while scenes are fluid at times, the music very obviously changes in between acts, scenes, and even characters. This is seen in the introduction of Azucena, the Gypsy’s daughter and Manrico’s mother. As she relives the day of her own mother’s execution who screamed “avenge me!” before dying in the flames. An example of this fluidity can be seen at 40:43, when Azucena crescendos her speech when revealing that she accidentally tossed her own infant son into the flames, instead of the kidnapped infant. He questions who he is, and Azucena does not tell him that he is the Count’s brother that she had meant to burn. As Azucena reaches a conclusion, and Manrico screams, “what horror!”, the music stops entirely until all that can be heard is Manrico continuing to mutter, “what horror...” as he clutches a pillow. The scene instantly shifts into Manrico crying in bed in a fetal position. A new somber, softer tune is introduced, and Azucena tricks Manrico by comforting him and promising him her motherly love if he swears to avenge her (Verdi).

The opera enters its second half with a dramatic struggle between Manrico and the Count. Manrico once again escapes with Leonora. Meanwhile, Azucena is recognized by the captain Ferrando, and the Count orders her burned at the stake. Manrico rushes to save her but is also imprisoned by the Count’s men. Leonora, in her passionate despair, consumes poison. She dies, and the Count sends Manrico to the executioner’s block. Witnessing his death, Azucena cries out

that her mother has finally been avenged: Count di Luna has unknowingly killed his own brother. In the dramatic story of *Il Trovatore*, Giuseppe Verdi proves himself to be a timeless master of his art, and his expertise is only rivaled by Richard Wagner. Both composers' compositional style, musical characterization, and techniques were definitive of the late Romantic period.

Works Cited

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