

# *Nineteenth-Century Richard Wagner: Unconventional Female Roles and Emerging Feminist Discourse*

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**Abstract:** Operas of the 19th century adhered to realism, often drawing inspiration from real-life situations. In the social context of the era, women were often relegated to positions of weakness and lacked societal status, rendering them subject to the scrutiny of male perspectives. However, Richard Wagner's operas distinguished themselves by endowing female characters with prominence and authority. This article seeks to investigate Wagner's effective empowerment of women, focusing on the plot and role analysis of Brünnhilde, the female character from "Die Walküre." Subsequently, a combination of document analysis and literature review are synthesized, showing the diverse perspectives of scholars who have examined Wagner's individualism and his portrayal of female characters in his operas. Ultimately, it is apparent that the formidable female figures in Wagner's operas boldly challenge prevailing social norms, embodying the essence of love and redemption. While scholars hold varying interpretations regarding Wagner's approach to feminism, it is irrefutable that these non-traditional female characters occupy central positions in his works, infused with profound emotions and at the core of dramatic storytelling.

**Keywords:** Feminist Study, Gender Dynamics, Richard Wagner, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century opera

## 1. Introduction

The 19th century in Europe was marked by stringent societal expectations and the establishment of distinct gender roles, where women were expected to adhere to specific ideals of femininity. These ideals encompassed traits such as modesty, virtue, and obedience. LeGates asserted that throughout history, the dual virtues of chastity and obedience have consistently defined the ideal woman [1]. Within the realm of opera, female characters were often portrayed as conforming to these societal norms, and their susceptibility to vulnerability and discontent could be attributed to the pressures of conformity.

During this historical period, women had limited autonomy and often relied on male figures in the family, such as fathers or husbands, for their economic stability and social well-being. This dependence on men rendered them susceptible to the decisions and actions of these male figures, thereby heightening their vulnerability. In numerous societies of that era, women were afforded fewer legal and social rights compared to men, resulting in inherent inequalities. This systemic disparity exposed women to various forms of exploitation, mistreatment, and precarious circumstances, all of which served as recurring themes within opera narratives. Saiki pointed out that during the late 18th

and early 19th centuries, women were systematically denied their legal rights and economic privileges, with society primarily regarding their proper sphere as the domestic realm. This prevailing social injustice was widespread during that era [2].

The prominence of Romanticism as a cultural movement exerted a significant influence on opera. Saiki further noted that apart from societal norms, the Romantic movement significantly contributed to the dominance of men. Romanticism, with its emphasis on celebrating male genius, often depicted women as muses in the service of men [2].

Often served as a reflective mirror, opera in the 19th century tended to echo the prevailing cultural and societal preoccupations of its era. Parakilas asserts that 19th-century opera also serves as a reflection of the political ideology prevalent during that period [3]. The 19th century bore witness to substantial societal transformations, including industrialization and urbanization, which generated narratives within opera that explored the repercussions of these changes on individuals, including women. Furthermore, opera relied on heightened emotions and dramatic tension to convey captivating stories. Salzman and Desi emphasized that the purpose of opera lies in its capacity for exaggeration, with opera's realism intended to transport the audience into realms beyond the ordinary confines of real life [4]. Consequently, this led to the creation of characters, including female ones, who confronted formidable challenges and often experienced misery and vulnerability. Moreover, over the course of development, opera possessed a well-established tradition of presenting tragic narratives, wherein characters grappled with adversity and suffering. Tragedy was a favoured genre in 19th-century opera, and female characters frequently occupied central roles in these narratives. This contributed to the depiction of women as unfortunate and in distress. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, in her sociological study, observed that women in the 19th century continued to be depicted as significantly restricted in all spheres of society, held under the influence of men [5]. In essence, the portrayal of women as discontented and susceptible to vulnerability in 19th-century opera mirrored the societal norms, gender roles, and cultural themes of the time.

## 2. Female Roles in 19th-Century Opera

It is crucial to acknowledge that while these social backgrounds provide a general framework for understanding the conventional female characters in 19th-century opera, individual operas and characters could subvert or defy these stereotypes. Also, the portrayal of women in opera evolved throughout the 19th century, reflecting shifting societal attitudes and the emergence of feminist perspectives. Therefore, certain operas from this period feature multifaceted female characters who transcend conventional roles and expectations, as exemplified in the works of composers like Wagner.

Wagner's exploration of powerful female roles is centred on the period from 1840 to 1880. During this era, many composers predominantly depicted women in traditional and submissive roles, with individual characters occasionally experiencing a sense of female empowerment but ultimately succumbing to societal norms and male dominance, such as prioritizing family, upholding male honour, and embodying gentleness and obedience. These characters were caricatured, depicting them as subservient, powerless, or even as objects of ridicule. One example is Carmen from Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875). She embodies themes of female agency, desire, and the consequences of defying social expectations. However, her refusal to be controlled by men and pursuit of freedom led to her death - murder by her former lover. Another example is Violetta from Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853). This character is a courtesan who defies societal judgment and expectations to pursue love and happiness on her terms. "Fallen" women often endure societal condemnation and encounter tragic outcomes as a consequence. In this case, Violetta died due to sickness.

However, Wagner's female characters embody power instead of being female roles. Unlike the female roles of other operas, they ultimately overturn their fates and accomplish their objectives. Poster argued that Wagner's compositions delved into the confines of traditional patriarchal themes

through a male character and gradually transitioned towards the emerging feminist perspective [6]. The themes of love and the concept of redemption among the women in Wagner's operas are widely recognized. According to Gottfried Wagner, the concept of redemption occupies a central place in the majority of Wagner's operas. Typically, it involves the sacrifice of virtuous, noble, and influential women to guide men toward their moral and personal growth [7].

### 3. Wagner's Female Characters Exemplified by Brünnhilde

In Wagner's operas, particularly in works like "Tristan und Isolde" and "Die Walküre" from the *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, some female characters are portrayed as strong, complex, and influential figures.

Brünnhilde, a multifaceted protagonist from "Die Walküre", undergoes a profound transformation across the four-opera cycle. As a central role in the narrative, embodying feminine power and ultimately finding redemption. Brünnhilde's development is characterized by the following distinct phases.

Initially, Brünnhilde is a valkyrie, symbolizing divine obedience and loyalty to Wotan's will. Her first movement occurs when she defies Wotan's orders to protect Siegmund, a mortal hero. This act of rebellion marks her transformation from a valkyrie to a rebel. Following her defiance, Brünnhilde is exiled from her divine status and placed in a deep sleep, surrounded by a ring of fire. This movement signifies her isolation and vulnerability but also sets the stage for her awakening and potential redemption. Then, Brünnhilde's interaction with Siegfried, who awakens her, is pivotal. Her love for him challenges her previous existence as a valkyrie, prompting her to question her role and the gods' authority. Her love drives her actions, ultimately leading to redemption.

Brünnhilde's choices and movements significantly drive the storyline. Her defiance of Wotan's orders initiates a chain of events, including Siegmund's death and Siegfried's reforging of the broken sword. These events have far-reaching consequences for the fate of the ring and the gods. Her influence on Siegfried is profound, shaping his character and decisions. She imparts knowledge and wisdom, empowering him on his heroic journey. Brünnhilde's guidance and love contribute significantly to Siegfried's development.

Furthermore, Brünnhilde embodies feminine power through her independence and agency. Her willingness to make choices based on her convictions challenges traditional gender roles. Additionally, her compassion and empathy, particularly toward Siegmund and Siegfried, highlight the importance of emotional intelligence in her character. She prioritizes love over loyalty to the gods, championing values of love, compassion, and human connection in contrast to the authoritarian agendas of male gods. Brünnhilde's redemption results from personal growth and transformation, evolving from a loyal valkyrie into a character who questions and challenges the gods. Her ultimate act of self-sacrifice by riding into Siegfried's funeral pyre cleanses the ring's curse and contributes to the renewal of the world.

In conclusion, Brünnhilde's character is a complex representation of feminine power, independence, and redemption. Her transformation and ultimate sacrifice contribute to the opera's broader themes of love, power, and the cyclical nature of creation and destruction. The other female characters in Wagner's operas, such as Kundry from *Parsifal*, who is cursed and saves herself from healing a man's wound, and Senta from *The Flying Dutchman*, who liberated the cursed Dutchman, are also characterized by their robust spiritual strength, elevated social standing, and authority within the opera. Thus, many of Wagner's female characters often exhibit unwavering convictions, a resolute pursuit of self-fulfilment, a keen moral discernment, and the capacity for redemption.

#### 4. Wagner's Female Characters and Feminist Discourse

Wagner's operas have both challenged and engaged with feminist ideas. Wagner himself held views that were at odds with feminist principles. His personal writings, such as the essay "Judaism in Music," contain derogatory remarks about women. Wagner portrays women as beings driven more by emotion than reason and insinuates that their impact on the realm of music has had negative consequences. He contends that women have played a role in the deterioration of authentic German art and culture [8].

Despite his opinion on women, his works contain powerful female characters and themes that continue to be analyzed through feminist lenses. The influence of Wagner and feminism on the rise of women's ideas is not a direct or causative relationship, but they played a role in the broader context of cultural exchange and artistic exploration. Otto, a German feminist, holds an appreciation for Wagner's music. She contended that opera had the greatest appeal to the "masses" and believed in the importance of national opera as a key driver of societal musical transformation. Wagner's Nibelungen narratives, in particular, offered women role models and imaginative realms that exceeded societal expectations, leaving a significant imprint on the German feminist movement [9].

Cultural works like Wagner's can serve as a backdrop for discussions around gender and women's issues, and they have been interpreted and reinterpreted in various ways by feminists and artists in other countries. For example, British scholar Fuller's article highlights that in the 21st-century Western context, there is a renewed examination of complex concepts like female redemption in Wagner's operas, and this reevaluation is exerting an influence on contemporary society [10].

However, the following critics argue that Wagner's operas still adhere to certain stereotypical female roles, with women often being defined by their relationships with male characters. In 1979, Bovenschen has demonstrated that the portrayal of women in literature, music, philosophy, and aesthetics adhered to male-defined standards [9]. Fuller's perspective suggests that while Wagner's operas explore diverse forms of female redemption, a recurring motif is that women consistently make sacrifices for men and are persistently depicted from the male viewpoint [10]. This aligns with Auden's evaluation of Wagner's works, wherein he characterized women's redemption as passive, akin to a dream [10]. On the other hand, Wagner contended that the female characters he portrayed were characterized by their deep love, strength, and proactivity, as Wagner was particularly captivated by such qualities in women. Regardless, it is important to clarify that this does not necessarily imply that Wagner himself identified as a feminist or held women in higher regard than his contemporaneous composers did [11]. Wagner's own views on women and relationships, as expressed in his writings, can be contradictory and, at times, reflect traditional gender norms. Critics highlight these contradictions as problematic in assessing his works from a feminist standpoint. However, many voices exist to support either side, whether Wagner is related to feminism. Wagner's soprano friend, Schröder-Devrient, participated in a significant feminist movement in 1849. It is possible that the feminist themes within Wagner's operas influenced her decision to join the movement, underscoring the role of sexism in music and its influence on the feminist revolution of that era [9].

Wagner's work had a profound impact on the development of music and the arts in the 19th century. As his ideas about individualism and artistic expression influenced subsequent generations of artists, they indirectly contributed to broader discussions about individual rights, including women's rights. The concept of female redemption, as exemplified by Brünnhilde's journey in the Ring Cycle, is viewed positively by many scholars. According to Rieger's musical analysis, Brünnhilde is characterized with a positive connotation [11]. She further posits that female roles in Wagner's works may have a more radical role and purpose, and women depicted in Wagner's works have been shown to challenge the existing system, which subjects women to the logic of capitalist exchange [12]. Therefore, Rieger sees Wagner's female characters embody powerful narratives of personal growth

and transformation.

## 5. Conclusion

In brief, 19th-century opera typically portrayed women as hapless and fragile individuals. These women were categorized into distinct social classes, be nobility, commoners, or prostitutes, and were invariably subject to male control and influence, mirroring the broader gender inequalities of the era. Simultaneously, the operatic tradition itself often culminated in tragic outcomes for female characters. Wagner, however, departed from this norm and illuminated the brilliance of women. His unconventional female figures exuded a profound essence of love and redemption, demonstrating courage and independence. Using Brünnhilde as an example, these female characters challenge societal norms, embodying themes of love, sacrifice, and redemption, and are successful with their deeds. Because of this innovation, Wagner's treatment of these characters has been interpreted in various ways, with some feminist readings seeing them as strong and independent figures, while others critique the ways in which they are controlled or shaped by male characters or societal expectations. Regardless of interpretation, these characters remain central to the dramatic and musical richness of Wagner's operas.

It is possible that Wagner's inclination toward innovation led him to avoid depicting the conventional female characters found in the works of others. Additionally, one could consider whether Wagner's critique of capitalism, coupled with his nationalist sentiments, influenced his motivation to reform gender relations within his compositions.

In present times, certain directors and female singers contribute to the evolution of Wagner's operas, infusing them with feminist perspectives that conform to contemporary aesthetics and sensibilities. These interpretations not only breathe new life into these classic works but also encourage discussions on gender, power, and societal norms in today's world. Whether Wagner would like their interpretation is yet to be explored. Regardless, Wagner's intricate departures from convention warrant further scholarly examination. They continue to serve as invaluable source material for musicologists of the time and future generations, offering insights into the studies of Wagner and gender.

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