

# **Heroic and Powerful Women in Opera**

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## **Heroic and Powerful Women in Opera Introduction**

### **Definition of a Hero or Heroine**

- **In Greek mythology they were often born of one mortal and one divine parent. They were endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for their bold exploits and favored by the gods.**
- **The modern definition would be a person who has special character strength that allows him/her to be successful in his/her endeavors. The hero or heroine has courage and nobility of character, giving the strength to sacrifice for goals that are sometimes impressive in scope and for which they have to risk their lives.**

## **Heroic and Powerful Women in Opera Introduction, continued**

- **Seeking power to achieve their goals has at times corrupted them and led to their downfall.**
- **There are heroes and heroines in opera who have a lust for power; others sacrifice for love of their families (husband and children), honor and justice, their faith, freedom for their countries and even to save the world.**
- **During the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the stories of the operas turned away from mythological heroes and heroines and, particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantic period, heroic women were increasingly the center of the plot. The stories came from historical events.**

## **Heroic and Powerful Women in Opera Introduction, continued**

- **I will present to you ten women from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century operatic repertoire, with examples of their strength, love and sacrifice, as well as some with a lust for power which caused their downfalls.**

## **The Lust for Power without a Noble, Unselfish Course (“The Anti-Heroine”)**

### **Abigaille in Verdi’s Nabucco**

- **Abigaille is considered the daughter of Nabucco, the King of Assyria, and she is hoping to be the successor to his throne.**
- **She finds, however, a document that identifies her as a child of slaves. This would be her ruin and she swears vengeance. Abigaille and Fenena (Nabucco’s daughter, whom he made his heir to the throne) are also rivals for the love of Ismaele, the leader of the Hebrews, who are enslaved by the Assyrians. Nabucco is struck down by lightning, presumably by Jehovah, the Hebrew god whom he blasphemes, and is temporarily insane. Abigaille uses Nabucco’s weakness to ascend the throne, with the help of the High Priest of Baal.**

## **Nabucco, continued**

**Part 2, chapter 15**

**"Salgo, gia de trono aurato"**

- **When Nabucco comes back to his senses, he orders the statue of Baal destroyed; Abigaille takes poison and dies, praying to the God of Israel to pardon her.**

## **The Lust for Power without a Noble, Unselfish Course**

**Marina in Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov**

- **At the beginning of the opera, the monk Pimen, who writes the history of Russia, reveals to the novice Grigori the murder of the Tsarewich Dimitri, who is the rightful heir to Boris's throne. Grigori lusts for glory in war and society. When he realizes he is the same age as the dead Dimitri, he leaves the monastery and pursues his luck pretending to be Dimitri, seeking help from the nobles of Poland. He courts the powerful Marina, who has the ambition to ascend the throne of Russia as Tsarina.**
- **Disc 2, Act 3, Scene 1, Chapter 2**  
**"Skuchno Marinye, Akh kak skuchuo"**

## **Boris Godunov, continued**

- **Boris falls into madness and dies; the false Dimitri and Marina and their Polish army march on to Moscow, but their quest for the throne is unsuccessful.**

## **The Lust for Power without a Noble, Unselfish Course**

### **Lady Macbeth in Verdi's Macbeth**

**Lady Macbeth, the powerful wife of a Scottish general, lusts for the crown of Scotland for her husband. When Duncan, the current King of Scotland, arrives at their castle, she tells her husband that this is his chance to kill him and fulfill the witches' prophecy that he will be king.**

**The scene in Act 2 shows her obsession with the crown.**

**Disc 1, Act 2, Scene 1, chapter 14 and 15**

**"Ai trap assati"**

**The crime drives her to insanity and death.**

## **Heroic Women: the Triumph of the Love of a loyal Wife Over Evil.**

### **Leonore/Fidelio of Beethoven's Fidelio**

- Leonore is the wife of the high-born Spanish state official Florestan, who has suddenly disappeared. She refuses to believe he has been murdered by his enemies, whose corruption he was about to reveal.
- Her love for her husband and her courage drives her to search for him, disguised as a young man Fidelio in the state prison in Seville.
- She gains the confidence of the warden Rocco, who chooses "him" as a bridegroom for his daughter.
- The prison governor, Don Pizarro, orders the death of a mysterious prisoner, who languishes deep down in the dungeon; when the governor learns that the state minister will come for an inspection.

### **Fidelio, continued**

- After refusing to kill the prisoner, Rocco is ordered to dig his grave and takes Fidelio/Leonore into the dungeon.
- When Pizarro comes to kill the prisoner, Leonore risks her life and fights to protect him. His life is saved by the courage of his wife and the appearance of the minister Don Ferando.
- The love of a loyal wife triumphs over evil.

**Act 2, chapter 30, 31 and 32**

**"alles ist bereit" "Quartet: Er sterbe" "O namenlose Freude"**

## **A Mother's Love Sacrifice with Honor**

### **Butterfly in Puccini's Madama Butterfly**

- **Butterfly, a 15 year old Japanese girl, believes that her mock marriage to the American captain Pinkerton is real; she even denounces the faith of her forefathers to be a good wife to him.**
- **After he leaves her to sail on, she bears their son and waits for him to return.**
- **She refuses all other marriage prospects, even when Pinkerton's money is running out and poverty will be her fate.**
- **Finally Pinkerton comes back with his American wife.**

### **Madama Butterfly, continued**

- **They request the American Consul to ask Butterfly to give up her son.**
- **When the American consul finally can ask her, Butterfly endures her immense grief with a gentle dignity, realizing that the child will have a better life with the father and his new wife.**
- **She gives up her child in a heart-breaking gesture and then, according to Japanese custom, in a scene of tragic power commits ritual suicide with her father's dagger, which bears the inscription: "To die with honor when one can no longer live with honor."**

**Act2, part 2,chapter 34 Finale:" Con onor muore".**

## **A Noble Lady Sacrifices Her Life for Honor**

### **Beatrice in Bellini's Beatrice di Tenda**

- The story is based on an historical incident in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.
- **Beatrice di Tenda, a noble lady and widow of the famous Commander Facino Cane, was given command of his army. With her support, Filippo Visconti was able to defeat the conspirators who murdered his brother.**
- **Filippo married Beatrice but after 6 years he tires of her and falls in love with Agnese.**
- **In order to get rid of his wife, he accuses Beatrice falsely of having an affair with a courtier. He has her tortured and finally beheaded.**

### **Beatrice di Tenda, continued**

- **In the finale of the opera, Beatrice, who has endured her torture with dignity, defends her honor and goes to her death, fighting for justice.**

**Disc 2, Act2, Chapters 15, 16 and 17**

**" Ah! Se un'urna e a me cessa"**

**"Oh! Infelice!"**

**" Ah! La morte a cui m'Apresso"**

## **Heroic Sacrifice for Love and Faith**

### **Rachel in Halevy's La Juive**

- **In Rome, the Magistrate Brogni loses his wife and, he thinks, his daughter in a fire. Unbeknownst to him his daughter has been rescued by the Jewish goldsmith Eleazar, who brings her up as his own daughter. Eleazar is forced to leave Rome because of his faith.**
- **He meets Brogni later as a Cardinal in Constance in 1414, after the victory over the religious reformer Jan Hus by Prince Leopold, the son of the Emperor.**

### **La Juive, continued**

- **Even though Leopold has a wife and children, and the Christian law prescribes death for any Jewish woman who loves a Christian, he falls in love with Rachel under the disguise of the Jewish painter Samuel.**
- **Prince Leopold's love of Rachel is discovered and they both may die for this "crime." Leopold's wife pleads with Rachel to spare the man they both love.**
- **The public gathers to witness the execution of the "heretics." Rachel admits to her father that her testimony saved Leopold's life, but she refuses to give up her faith and is pushed into a cauldron of boiling oil.**

## **La Juive, continued**

- **When Brogni asks Eleazar about his (Brogni's) daughter, Eleazar points to the cauldron and shouts, "There she is!"**

**Disc 2, Act 5, Chapter 10, 11 and 12 Finale**

**"le concile prononce un arret rifoureux!"**

**"is quitter la terre"**

**"Il est temps!"**

## **Heroism for the Love of One's Country**

### **Giovanna in Verdi's Giovanna D'Arco (Joan of Arc)**

- **The story goes back to 1429, during the French-English war. The Maid of Orleans grew up in a simple French village. She felt her calling and offered the French King Carol VII her banner and help to fight the English. She was victorious and led the King to Reims to be crowned King.**
- **The English captured her and she was burned at the stake.**
- **In the opera, she is freed and goes back to battle and dies. Due to her help the French won the war and she eventually was elevated to sainthood.**

## **Giovanna D'Arco, continued**

- In the prologue of the opera, she offers King Carol VII her banner and encourages him to fight.

**Prologue Chapter 6**

**"Pronto Sono".**

## **Heroism for love of One's Country**

### **Odabella in Verdi's Attila**

- In Aquileia, 452 AD, Attila the Hun invaded Italy. The leader of the Roman women was Odabella, whose father Attila killed.
- She declares that Italian women will always defend their country. Attila is impressed by her courage. She waits for her revenge.

**Prologue, Chapter 4**

**"Allor che I forti corrono".**

## **Attila, continued**

- **Odabella prevents her fiancée Foresto from poisoning Attila; she insists on carrying out her revenge herself. Attila offers to marry her as a reward for saving his life. Odabella stabs Attila with his own sword while her fiancée Foresto and the Roman general Ezio attack the unsuspecting Huns.**
- **During the Italian Risorgimento an opera celebrating Italians fighting foreign usurpers was very popular.**

## **A Heroic Woman Saves the World**

### **Brunnhilde in Wagner's Goetterdaemmerung**

- **The story of Wagner's four-part Ring Cycle goes back to legends of the Icelandic Edda and legends from Burgundy.**
- **The Walkuere Brunnhilde is one of the nine Walkuere daughters of Wotan and the only one who questions Wotan's action. She grows from an unquestioning, loving daughter to an independent-thinking woman who dares to oppose her father by saving Sieglinde and her unborn child, Siegfried.**
- **Wotan punishes her by putting her to sleep as a mortal, on a lonely mountain, surrounded with fire that only the greatest of heroes can walk through.**

## **Goetterdaemmerung continued**

- **Siegfried is that hero. After he slays the dragon, he takes from his Nibelung hoard the Tarn Helm and the magic cursed Ring which was forged from the gold Alberich stole from the Rhine maidens. He walks through the magic fire and wins Brunnhilde as his wife.**
- **He goes on to new adventures and falls victim to the intrigues of Alberich's son Hagen.**
- **After a magic potion takes his memory away, he betrays his wife and wins Brunnhilde for Hagen's half-brother Gunther.**
- **Brunnhilde now experiences the grief of human betrayal and loss of love.**

## **Goetterdaemmerung, continued**

- **Hagen slays Siegfried, running his spear through the only spot where he was not protected by the magic of the dragon's blood.**
- **The grief-stricken Brunnhilde orders his funeral pyre, takes the cursed ring from Siegfried's finger and jumps with her horse, Grane, into the fire.**
- **The Rhine flows over and the Rhine maidens take back their gold, which is at last purified of its curse.**
- **Flames engulf Valhalla and the world of the guilty gods collapses, leaving the human world redeemed by Brunnhilde's love and sacrifice.**

**Disc 2, Act 3, Chapter 23 Finale: "Fliegt heim, ihr Raben"**