

Mozart and Wagner: Audience Reception Through Communication of Emotion in Opera.

Justin Laukat

Abstract

This paper explores how Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Richard Wagner conceived of their audiences and how audiences both historical and in modern day have interpreted their works. While Mozart composed within the conventions of eighteenth-century entertainment culture, Wagner sought to reform opera through spiritual and artistic transformation. Through a comparative study of *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Lohengrin*, this project examines how musical expression alone conveys dramatic and emotional intent. A listening experiment is proposed in which participants hear short excerpts from each opera without contextual or visual information, describing the emotions and situations they perceive. This approach combines historical reception analysis with modern day audience study to evaluate the communicative power of each composer's musical language.

Introduction

Few figures in Western music history embody such contrasting visions of opera as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Richard Wagner. Mozart's operas, written for eighteenth-century audiences seeking entertainment, humor, and moral reflection, display an extraordinary capacity to balance accessibility with sophistication. Wagner, in contrast, rejected the notion of opera as

entertainment altogether, conceiving of his works as transformative artistic experiences that demanded intellectual and emotional immersion. Both composers, however, share a common preoccupation: the desire to reach and move their audiences through the expressive potential of music.

This paper investigates the relationship between the composers general philosophy and audience reception through a comparative study of excerpts from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) and Wagner's *Lohengrin* (1850). By examining their historical reception and conducting an original listening experiment, I seek to understand how these composers' differing approaches to musical drama communicate emotion and narrative, and how audiences interpret what's being presented to them.

Mozart: The Entertainer and Humanist

Mozart's operas stand as masterpieces of Enlightenment, where music and drama serve the ideals of clarity, reason, and emotional truth. According to Hermann Cohen, often held to be the most important Jewish philosopher of the nineteenth century, describes love as "the action of pure feeling and, even more, it is the only aesthetic action. Music is the expression of pure aesthetic feeling, and for this reason opera, as the amalgamation of drama and music, has to make love the spring of dramatic action. This is possible because all actions, and also all conceptual terms of ordinary language, have 'feeling suffixes' referring to the manifestations of the eros. Thus love became the central theme of Mozart's operas; his problem was to show how all human actions originate in love and terminate in it, and to unify this principle with the ethics of the dramatic action. He succeeded in doing so by maintaining his musical independence and, at the same time,

merging the dramatic idea of the plot with the harmonies of his language of love - love of the natural and the human world. For this reason the human voice is the back-bone of his operas; everything else is of secondary importance. It was a particular achievement of Mozart's genius to keep the connection between love and the dramatic idea on the level of pure humanity and nevertheless to express on this level the experience of the transcendent and the divine. He brought the two movements of the beautiful - the sublime and the comic - into a balanced combination attained before him by Shakespeare alone.” (Schutz, 225)

Audiences in Mozart’s time valued immediacy, grace, and moral intelligibility. His success depended on meeting these expectations while subtly challenging them. Mozart claimed that opera must maintain- "Music," he wrote, in a sentence more often quoted than used as a starting-point for study, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the hearer, or in other words must never cease to be music”. (Webster, 234)

Unlike Wagner, who was considered an artistic director, Mozart was considered an employee whose authority generally ended at the manuscript. Wagner once said of Mozart: “Nothing is more characteristic of Mozart’s career as an opera composer than the careless indiscriminateness with which he went to work: he thought so little about opera’s fundamental aesthetic scruple that he engaged in setting any libretto offered him with the greatest impartiality.” (Hildesheimer, 153)

Despite his lack of authority, he did, however, have a keen awareness of both his audience and performers strengths and weaknesses and would often revise his arias to tailor roles to singers.

Good examples of his keen awareness appear in letters he wrote to various family members, friends, and colleagues. Some of his descriptions of Opera singers include: “He was a good singer, a baritone, but very affected when he speaks out a falsetto”...”she sings out of tune like a

devil Ruggiero”... “has a powerful voice, and a flexible voice”...”has a most beautiful voice, but sings so softly on stage that you really hear nothing at all”...”has a very harsh voice, and always sings”... “The prima donna sings well, but is inanimate”. (Mozart, Milan, Jan. 26, 1770)

He often talks about being “amused” as well, showing his preference to entertaining his audiences. Even as a child prodigy, he was expected to “produce what a less sensitive audience would consider mature. If he did not appear personally as performer, the visual effect of a prodigy was lost, but the public wanted it’s enjoyment nonetheless.” (Hildesheimer, 140). He is well respected among many critics such as Peter Brown, music teacher at the University of Indiana who described his music: “For the respect his works have commanded of musicians, and the popularity they have enjoyed among wider audiences, he is probably the most admired composer in the history of Western music”. (Brown, 49) Charles Burney, who was a famous English music historian, composer, and musician who met and wrote about Mozart in the 1770’s assessed a scena wrote by Mozart in Paris: “It is a very elaborate and masterly composition, discovering a great practice and facility of writing in many parts. The modulation is likewise learned and recherchée (rare, exotic); however, though it is a composition which none but a great master of harmony, and possessed of a consummate knowledge of the genius of different instruments, could produce; yet neither the melody of the voice part, nor any one of the instruments, discovers much invention, though the effects of the whole, if well executed, would, doubtless, be masterly and pleasing.” (Barrington, 288).

Wagner: The Transformer and Reformer

By contrast, Wagner's aesthetic project was revolutionary. In essays such as *Opera and Drama* (1851), he denounced conventional opera as a superficial art form and proposed the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "total artwork," uniting poetry, staging, and music in a single expressive purpose. Unlike Mozart, "Wagner had no taste for buffo plots; he was allergic to anything he took for frivolity." (Hildesheimer, 154) In his writings on the nature of the poetic language, he explains how the earliest primitive language was made of speech roots that directly embodied human sensations. "Until we are able, so to say, to "feel back" our sensations-made utterly unintelligible to ourselves by state politics or religious dogmas-and thus to reach their original truth, we shall never be in a position to grasp the sensuous substance of our roots of speech. The sense of a root is "objective" sensation embodied therein; but first by its embodiment does a sensation become understandable, and this body itself is alike to a sensuous one, and one that can be determined apprehended by nothing but the answering sense of hearing, The poet's utterance will therefore be a swiftly understandable one, if he concentrates the expressed sensation to its inmost essence, and this inmost essence will necessarily be a unitarian one, in the kinship of its conditioning and its conditioned moments. But a Unitarian sensation instinctively utters itself in a uniform mode of expression, and this uniform expression wins its fullest enablement from that oneness of the speech root which reveals itself in a kinship of the conditioning and conditioned chief moments." (Wagner, 264) *Tristan und Isolde*, for example, is often cited as his most radical work, extending this philosophy into a musical language of psychological depth and harmonic ambiguity. The work's chromaticism, suspension, and dissolution of tonal centers embody Wagner's idea of music as emotional and metaphysical transformation.

Wagner was deeply opposed to collaborative interpretation of his works, believing it compromised their artistic integrity. As Katherine Syer observes, “from the beginning of his career he assumed the role of his own librettist, and he gradually expanded his sphere of involvement to include virtually all aspects of bringing an opera to the stage” (Syer, 2). This intensive involvement in every element of production led the critic Eduard Hanslick, writing in 1885, to call Wagner “the world’s first regisseur, in the modern sense of a producer or stage director”. (Syer, 9)

Wagner sought absolute control because he believed that his works possessed an internal artistic logic that could not be left to performers personal interpretations. His instructions to his assistant Heinrich Porges make this explicit: “I intend to invite you to follow all my rehearsals, just as you did for the 9th Symphony, in order to record and note down all of my remarks, however intimate, concerning the interpretation and performance of our work, and in that way to establish a fixed tradition.” (Carney, 90). This “fixed tradition” was intended to preserve the dramatic, musical, and visual meaning exactly as Wagner conceived it.

His theoretical writings align with this desire for control. In *Opera and Drama*, Wagner argues that artistic meaning emerges from the internal laws of the work itself: “Everything lives and lasts by the inner necessity of its own being, by its own nature’s need. It lay in the nature of the art of Tone, to evolve herself to a capability of the most definite and manifold expression.”

(Wagner, 23). In other words, the music must unfold according to its own natural expressive logic. A composer cannot simply “force” an idea into a composition if it does not belong there.

Wagner’s reflection on the conflict between musical drama and spoken theater illustrated by his attempt to reconcile the characters Siegfried and Frederick Barbarossa further

reveals this principle: “Once again, and that the last time, did Myth and History stand before me with opposing claims; this while, as good as forcing me to decide whether it was a musical drama, or a spoken play, that I had to write... because it was here first that I arrived at its definite answer, and thus at a full consciousness of its true nature.” (Wagner, Goldman, Sprinchorn, 264)

This struggle demonstrates Wagner’s refusal to compromise the coherence of his musical dramatic vision. Wagner’s insistence on fidelity to artistic truth extended to the practical challenges of staging. While some of his contemporaries preferred shortcuts to avoid technical difficulties, Wagner demanded total authenticity: “Wagner’s adventurousness, his willing to take risks, sometimes won out against Fricke’s seasoned professionalism, which preferred to duck problems by seeking the security of seasoned stage tricks.” (Carney, 89) His willingness to risk failure rather than rely on convention reflects his commitment to an uncompromised dramatic ideal.

F. E. Kirby discusses 2 different approaches critics have taken in analyzing/interpreting Wagner’s operas: “The compulsion to explain Wagner’s works in words is as old as the works themselves.

Yet there are those who remain convinced that this compulsion represents nothing more than a misguided pedagogical belief that creations of such size and intensity cannot possibly be adequately comprehended directly, immediately, and comprehensively during performance and those who think like this might even conclude that all attempts at verbal explanation are likely to

do more harm than good”. (Kirby, extract) This view suggests that Wagner’s operas are so powerful and immersive that audiences should experience them directly without explanation.

Although there is no claim for a single interpretive approach, it is important to note that this immersive experience is meant to be felt rather than explained. If audiences were to have differing immersive experiences, would this suggest that the deeper meaning has not yet become

clear to them or that there are aspects of the music that are unclear? Various studies have shown how a more “immersive” experience was more effective than relying on program notes and explanations prior to listening to the music. One such study revealed that “short music descriptions (being either dramatic or structural) resulted in less enjoyment of the music compared with listening without reading any texts prior to listening (Margulis, 596-605). These results match those observed in a recent qualitative study on audience reactions to program notes by Bennett and Ginsborg (2018), who observed that “only 39% of the listeners reported a positive impact of program notes on their listening experience.” (Bennett, 588-605) Wagner did not want a free marketplace of personal interpretations, but he also didn’t expect his works to be instantly, consciously understood. What he wants is somewhere in between- emotional submission to a meaning he believed was already embedded, unified, and universal.

“A less extreme approach regards critical commentary on Wagner as of genuine value, not least in providing a counterweight to the Master’s own sinister desire to seduce passive audiences as they experience the Gesamtkunstwerk in the theatre, and become vulnerable to dangerous, deluded beliefs and actions. It could well be concluded, therefore, that such commentaries are most useful when they openly aspire to confront the significance of the works through questioning and interpreting all aspects of their materials as fully as possible. To the extent that a single attitude can be abstracted from them, present-day Wagner studies seem to subscribe to this view”. (Kirby, extract) Wagner’s works in this view are considered powerful and persuasive- not just artistically, but psychologically and ideologically. Critical thinking is required rather than passive emotional surrender. Again, there is no claim to a singular interpretation, but through analysis and questioning, audiences perceptions can be altered and brought to a greater and

deeper understanding of Wagner's works. Even Wagner himself kept changing the way he explained his own works, so he must have been discovering deeper meaning to his music as well.

Listening Experiment

How effective is music alone at conveying feeling and communication? Do we need visual and narrative cues to aid in our understanding or do these things get in the way of the "immersive" experience that Wagner describes in his music. "Prior information may not just change the listeners' emotions, attention, or enjoyment of the music, but might also affect more fundamental aspects of the way the music is perceived (Crozier & Chapman, 242-278). The perception of basic musical characteristics such as dynamics or affective character of a piece of music may be strongly influenced by prior information. Supporting this notion, research by Chapman and Williams (1976) indicated that the context in which music is heard does not merely induce effects in evaluations but also operates at higher levels, causing changes in subjective listening experiences." (Chapman and Williams, 15) To explore how audiences interpret musical meaning in the absence of visual or narrative cues, I designed a controlled listening experiment.

Participants will hear two short excerpts:

1. Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Act II trio excerpt -performed by Joshua Hopkins, Federica Lombardi, and Olga Kulchynska, as Count, Countess, and Susanna with the Metropolitan Opera. Production: Richard Eyre. Conductor: Joana Mallwitz. 2024-25 season. In this scene, the Count has found the door to the closet locked. This is part of the Countess and Susanna's plan to trap the Count by making him think Susanna has agreed to a secret rendezvous. Their plan is to expose the Count's infidelity. The Count suspects that his wife (Countess) is hiding someone

inside, given the fact that Figaro sent him an anonymous letter suggesting the Countess has a lover. He demands to know what is going on. Susanna eventually emerges from the closet, destroying the Count's accusations.

The youtube link to the video excerpt can be found here:



2. Wagner's Lohengrin, Act II excerpt -performed by Christine George and Tamara Wilson, as Ortrud and Elsa with the Metropolitan Opera. Production: Francois Girard. Conductor: Yannick Nezet-Seguin. 2022-23 season. This scene takes place outside the palace, late at night and into the morning. Ortrud (pagan sorceress) has just convinced her husband Telramund to ambush Lohengrin. She manipulates Elsa by pretending to be desperate, abandoned, and powerless in order to win Elsa's sympathy. Elsa shows compassion and believes Ortrud's lies. Elsa invites her into the Palace for protection. Ortrud sings with fake humility and Elsa responds with warmth, expressing hope for reconciliation and forgiveness.

The youtube link to the video excerpt can be found here:



Participants will listen without knowing which composer or opera is being heard. After each excerpt, they will describe perceived emotions, possible dramatic scenarios, and any shifts in

tension or resolution. Responses will be analyzed for patterns in emotional vocabulary, interpretive accuracy, and perceived dramatic coherence.

The study's purpose is not to test musical literacy but to observe how effectively each composer's idiom communicates emotion and narrative through sound alone.

Predictions

Mozart excerpt prediction: Excerpt will elicit perceptions of clarity, dialogue, and humor, qualities consistent with his Enlightenment aesthetics and transparent formal structures.

Participants may work out relational dynamics or shifts in social status, even without text, due to the precision of Mozart's tonal and rhythmic cues.

Wagner excerpt prediction: Excerpt is anticipated to evoke descriptions of tension, yearning, and transformation. Listeners may identify fewer discrete "characters" or actions, instead perceiving continuous emotional evolution. These reactions would mirror the nineteenth-century accounts of Wagner's audiences.

By comparing these modern responses with historical reception records, we can assess whether modern day listeners still perceive the same expressive intentions that critics and audiences once did. Moreover, the contrast between communicative immediacy (Mozart) and psychological immersion (Wagner) raises broader questions about how musical language evolves to express human emotion.

Responses

Mozart

1. **General emotion and conflict:** most listeners, trained or not, correctly identified emotions and conflict for the most part such as argument, tension, then resolution/softening. Also, a woman hiding or love-type triangle situation was identified. Emotions were accurately perceived but details in plot varied in accuracy. Musically, characters singing together signified coming to an agreement, especially when things calmed down.
2. **Plot details:** specific narrative meaning was much less accurate. Incorrect responses varied such as “a man courting a woman, but struggling”. Another respondent incorrectly identified a 4th character as being in the “love triangle”. Certain plot details were accurately identified (mostly vague, though) by a few such as “the 2 women’s loyalty in working together”, identifying that “there was a man and 2 women involved when the three sang in harmony”, the “woman being asked a question by the man”, and vague details about infidelity. Sometimes respondents gave multiple scenarios, unsure which was correct. For example, one respondent said they “felt like there was arguing through music or having a contest between them who is better”. Another respondent said that “the man panicked about losing the key and the woman accuses him of losing the key while the maid is hiding because she (maid) may be the one responsible or the lady found the man in the room, thinking he was cheating with the maid and the lady won’t give him the key till he gives her an explanation”.

Wagner

1. **General emotion and conflict:** Listeners identified 2 women “arguing/ fighting”, “full of hostility”, “anger”, “panic”, “urgency”, “in a power struggle”, “in confrontation”, “with public chorus involvement”, “danger” or “drama” (especially in background music).

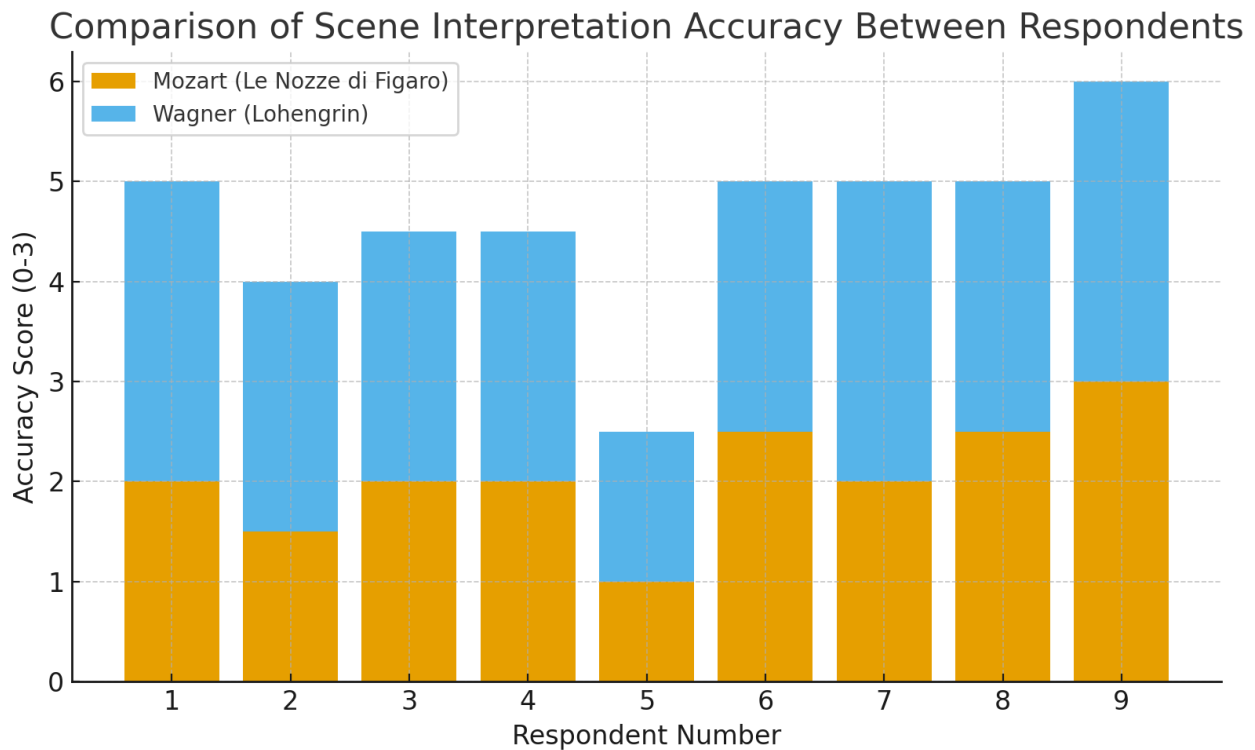
Listeners also noticed the music calming down at the end similarly to the Mozart excerpt. Quite a few responses identified the music specifically as creating the strong emotions, particularly with respondents with extensive musical background.
2. **Plot details:** Wagner’s excerpts communicated conflict with clarity, making even untrained musicians think about enemies, confrontation and mob judgment which were very close to the actual scene. Details given were sometimes vague but accurate. Comments like “struck a nerve with the woman at the end”, “references to false witness/slander”, “damaged reputations”, “questions about nobility and status”, “mortal enemies where one is more vocal than the other”, and “woman delivers alarming news” were remarkably accurate. Because of limited context in a short video clip, it was difficult to gather details such as who the mob was talking to or angry with or the relationship and background details of the two women.

Comparative Chart

-Rating score is on a scale of 0 (incorrect/ misinterpreted) -3 (highly accurate). Scores are based on the above categories of “General emotion and conflict” and “Plot details accuracy”.

-Respondents 1,2, and 5 had little to no musical training. All other respondents had extensive musical backgrounds. Respondent 9 watched the video due to unclear information being given to them. As a result, this respondent was the most detailed in description and was able to gather

more information about the plot than everyone else, especially for Mozart where staging clarifies who is hiding where. Respondents with music background were able to communicate more clearly with musical language but were not necessarily more accurate in descriptions, often making incorrect assumptions about plot details.



Conclusion

Based on this experiment, listeners were consistently capable of identifying the emotional tone and dramatic tension of the opera scenes using only audio, even without music training. Plot interpretation, however, was much less accurate without the aid of visual and written contexts, especially for multi character comedic scenes in the Mozart. Wagner's use of music as an element of the characters emotions and being made it easier for listeners to grasp basic ideas about the narrative and comprehend more complex emotions that were being portrayed.

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