From Page to Stage: Sensibility, Sympathy, and the Operatic Heroine in the Long Eighteenth Century

Liu Yawen

Hong Kong Baptist University, Shanghai 200020, China

Abstract: This essay examines how eighteenth-century opera transformed female suffering from a private emotional experience into a public and shared performance. Taking Samuel Richardson's Pamela as a starting point, it traces how the model of the sentimental heroine—defined by modesty, restraint, and emotional endurance—was adapted for the operatic stage in Niccolò Piccinni's La buona figliuola and further developed in Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro. The essay argues that opera does not simply represent female suffering, but actively shapes how audiences perceive and respond to it. Through musical elements such as descending melodic lines, suspensions, and restrained vocal expression, as well as through gesture and bodily presence, suffering becomes both visible and audible, inviting sympathy from the audience. At the same time, this sympathy is not neutral. It privileges forms of emotion that are controlled, gentle, and non-threatening, while marginalizing expressions such as anger or resistance. By analysing Pamela, Cecchina, and the Countess, this essay shows that eighteenth-century opera not only reflects the culture of sensibility, but also participates in defining which forms of female emotion are considered morally valuable and socially acceptable.

Keywords: sensibility; sympathy; female suffering; eighteenth-century opera; sentimental heroine; Pamela; La buona figliuola; Mozart

0. Introduction

In eighteenth-century culture, women were often admired for the way they suffered. What mattered was not resistance, but gentleness, patience, and restraint. They were often considered signs of virtue, sincerity and moral refinement. A woman who remained in silence while suffering was considered to be more admirable than a woman who would not suffer in silence and would cry out her angry resistance. Emotional self-command therefore became one of the most important signs of ideal femininity in eighteenth-century culture.

Sensibility did not simply mean strong feeling. It meant a person who would respond deeply to the feeling and suffering of others. A person with sensibility was thought to possess sympathy, tenderness, delicacy, and moral feeling. Because of that, sensibility was often understood as both emotional and moral. Sensibility was also connected to the body. Eighteenth century writers and philosophes often imagined emotions as something that could move from one body to another; as something that would vibrate in one body, like on the musical strings. Some even called sympathy a kind of sympathetic vibration, in which the tears, trembling, or sighs of one person could emotionally move another person. Tears, changes in the voice, bodily weakness, and visible emotional reaction were therefore important signs of sincerity.

Women were often seen as especially suited to this culture of sensibility. They were believed to be naturally delicate, gentle, emotionally sensitive, and capable of sympathy. Because of this, sentimental novels often presented women as heroines whose suffering revealed their virtue. These heroines were usually innocent, modest, patient, and emotionally restrained. Rather than fighting openly against pain, they endured it quietly. Their suffering encouraged readers to sympathize with them, to admire them, and to see them as morally superior. One of the most important examples is Pamela in Samuel Richardson's Pamela. Pamela suffers constantly throughout the novel, and her value does not come from power, wealth, or social status, but from the fact that she remains modest, virtuous, and emotionally controlled while suffering. In

this way, Pamela established a model of the sentimental heroine that later became very important in eighteenth-century opera. As Mary Hunter argues, Pamela was very influential because she is both vulnerable and morally authoritative. She suffers, but she also gains power through that suffering because readers are invited to see her as morally superior to the people around her. Opera was especially effective in representing female suffering because it could combine music, text, gesture, and the performing body. Where the sentimental novel asked the reader to imagine suffering, opera could ask the audience to hear suffering in the voice, to see it in the body, and to feel it through melody, rhythm, harmony, tempo, and orchestration. The pauses in the drama, the sighing phrases, soft dynamics, descending melodic lines, restrained bodily movement: all of this could turn private suffering into a public emotional experience. Female suffering was therefore not only a moral idea, but also a performance that audiences could watch, hear, and feel.

Opera did not simply reflect the culture of sensibility. It also helped shape it. The fact that opera would represent so many gentle suffering women as morally admirable, and would do so repeatedly, meant that it was teaching the audiences which sort of emotions deserved to be seen as moving, and which sorts of women were to be seen as worthy. A woman who cried quietly, was patient and suffered with dignity was often seen as more moving than a woman who expressed anger, desire or resistance. In this way, opera was not only representing female suffering, it was turning that suffering into a model of what sort of woman was ideal.

This essay argues that eighteenth-century opera did not only represent female suffering, but that it made female suffering into a musical, bodily, and emotional experience. Opera encouraged audiences to sympathize with women whose gentleness, self-command, and emotional sensitivity were treated as signs of virtue. At the same time, opera also placed limits on female emotion, privileging forms of suffering which remained beautiful, restrained, non-threatening. Female suffering was thus not only a

moral ideal, but something to be heard, seen, emotionally shared and socially regulated.

This essay will show, by taking the example of Pamela, Cecchina, and the Countess in Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro, how eighteenth-century opera turned female suffering into both an emotional performance and a model of ideal femininity. Opera did not just reflect the culture of sensibility, but it helped shape the ways audiences understood virtue, sympathy, and the emotional role of women.

1. Pamela and the Model of the Suffering Heroine

One of the most influential sentimental novels of the eighteenth century was of course Samuel Richardson's Pamela. Its heroine is one of the important models for later representations of women in opera. Pamela is a young servant girl who is constantly in danger because Mr. B, the man she works for, has power over her. Throughout the novel, she is frightened, pressured, humiliated, and emotionally hurt. But it is not the way she fights back, not the way she tries to gain power, that makes Pamela admirable. It is what she is, that she is modest, that she is patient, that she is virtuous, that she is in control emotionally, even while she suffers.

Pamela's value therefore comes from the way she endures pain rather than resists it. She cries, (and, in fact, only very rarely is her anger directly expressed), that is, she prays, hesitates, writes letters, asks for help. But her tears, her silence, her trembling, her repeated prayers make her seem emotionally sincere. In this way her pain becomes proof of her value. The more she suffers, the more the reader is encouraged to sympathize with her. Suffering is therefore turned into a kind of emotional and moral performance.

The form of the novel is also important. Because Pamela is written as a series of letters, readers are

brought very close to her thoughts and feelings.

Figure 1. Joseph Highmore, *Mr B. Finds Pamela Writing* , 1743–44, Tate Britain.

As shown in Figure 1, Pamela ' s act of writing becomes not only a narrative device but also a visual marker of privacy and emotional exposure. The intrusion of Mr. B into this intimate space further highlights the vulnerability of female privacy.

They read her fears almost at the same moment that she experiences them. There is a feeling of Pamela and the reader being very intimate. The reader is not only told that Pamela is suffering; she is invited to feel Pamela's suffering with her. The novel therefore teaches readers how to feel sympathy. It also teaches them which kinds of women deserve sympathy most: women who are modest, obedient, emotionally sincere and, of course, socially powerless.

This idea became central to the culture of sensibility. Women were praised because they seemed delicate, vulnerable and emotionally honest. Their tears, their silence, their bodily weakness, their gentle behavior, were understood as signs of innocence, of virtue. A woman who did not say anything, who remained emotionally patient, was often considered more admirable than a woman who was angry, who resisted. Pamela therefore performs here an ideal form of polite femininity in which emotional restraint becomes a sign of the moral value.

As Mary Hunter argues, Pamela became an important model for many eighteenth-century operatic heroines. For example, characters such as Cecchina in La buona figliuola are clearly influenced by Richardson's heroine. Like Pamela, Cecchina is gentle, modest, and emotionally restrained, and she is also socially vulnerable. She suffers because of class difference, uncertainty, and the fear of losing love, but as with Pamela, her suffering makes her appear even more morally beautiful.

At the same time, however, opera changed the way female suffering could be represented. What is special about Pamela is that her suffering is private. Readers experience it, mainly, through letters, thoughts and written descriptions. Opera turns the suffering into something that is to be

public and visible. The audience can hear the sadness in the voice, can see it in the body, can hear it in the pauses, in the tears, in the slow movement, in the restrained gestures and in the soft singing. In this way, opera does not simply describe female suffering; it stages it.

This model of the suffering heroine also had important limits. Women were not admired when they were angry, ambitious, or desiring. Women were admired when they were quiet, patient, and emotionally controlled. Women were praised not because they had power, but because they suffered without threatening male authority. As Mary Wollstonecraft later argued, eighteenth-century culture tended to teach women to be weak, passive, and dependent rather than independent and resistant. For this reason, Pamela is important not only because she is a model of female virtue, but also because she shows how narrow the emotional role of women could be.

2. Cecchina and the Operatic Performance of Sensibility

How the sentimental heroine moved from the page to the operatic stage is shown by Niccolò Piccinni's La buona figliuola. The opera is based partly on the model of Pamela. The heroine, Cecchina, has many of Pamela's most important qualities. She is gentle, modest, emotionally restrained, and socially vulnerable. Like Pamela, she suffers because she has little power. She is uncertain about her birth, her future, and

her relationship with the man she loves. But her suffering makes her appear more innocent and morally beautiful rather than weak.

As Keri Hui argues, Cecchina represents a new kind of sentimental heroine in which emotional restraint becomes a visible and embodied form of moral value. She does not usually express her feelings through dramatic anger or large gestures. Cecchina is often quiet, polite, hesitant, and physically delicate. Cecchina's body becomes part of her emotional expression. Small movements, lowered eyes, slow walking, tears, pauses, and moments of silence all help to show her feelings. Cecchina's body is very well choreographed to look delicate, vulnerable, and emotionally sincere. In this way, sensibility is not only something she feels inside, but also something she performs through her body.

There is one clear example which appears in Cecchina's aria "Una povera ragazza." In this aria, Cecchina describes herself as " a poor girl" who has no family, no protection, and no secure place in society. By calling herself povera, Cecchina presents herself as weak, abandoned, and emotionally exposed. The music reflects this. The tempo is slow, the melody is simple and many phrases move downward. These descending phrases sound almost like sighs. There are also pauses and repeated notes that create the feeling of hesitation and uncertainty. The orchestra remains light and transparent, which keeps attention on Cecchina's voice and makes her sound lonely and exposed. Instead of dramatic orchestral colour, Piccinni relies on simplicity, repetition, and pauses, which make Cecchina's suffering seem intimate rather than theatrical. The descending melodic lines sound almost like sighs, as if the music itself is falling under the weight of sadness.

Because audiences can both hear and see this kind of suffering, opera gives it a stronger emotional effect than the novel. Cecchina's sadness is not only given in words. It is there in her voice, in her gestures, in the music around her. Her arias often have soft dynamics, stepwise melodic movement, suspensions, and moments of silence. Suspensions in the harmony are small moments of tension that do not resolve immediately, and can make the music sound painful and uncertain. Her slow

movement, lowered gaze, and restrained gestures become part of the emotional meaning of the music.

These musical details are important because they make Cecchina's suffering feel sincere and intimate. The audience does not simply understand that she is sad, but is encouraged to feel sadness with her. In this way, opera transforms sympathy into something shared rather than private

or imagined.As Keri Hui suggests, sensibility in the eighteenth century often depended on the idea that emotions could move between bodies, making feeling something physically and socially shared.

At the same time, however, Cecchina's emotional power still depends on restraint. She becomes sympathetic because she remains gentle and self-controlled even while suffering. If she were loud, angry, or openly rebellious, she would probably not appear as morally attractive to the eighteenth-century audiences. Cecchina's suffering only becomes admirable because it still remains polite, feminine and non-threatening. Opera therefore praises a very specific kind of female emotion: one which is soft, patient and controlled.

Cecchina is therefore important not only because she continues the model of Pamela, but also because she shows how opera could make female suffering more visible, more physical, and more emotionally powerful. Through voice, gesture and musical expression, her suffering becomes something that audiences can hear, see, and feel.

3. Mozart, the Countess, and Emotional Complexity

If Cecchina turns suffering into visible innocence, Mozart's Countess turns it into emotional complexity. She is not like Pamela or Cecchina: she is not socially powerless. She is wealthy, noble, and respected. But she suffers because of her husband's unfaithfulness. In this way, her suffering is not caused by poverty or class uncertainty, but by emotional betrayal.

The Countess's aria [Porgi, amor] presents her as a woman who is deeply hurt,

but still emotionally restrained. In the beginning of the aria she asks the god of love to return either her husband's love or her own peace of mind. She does not shout, does not accuse, does not say that she is angry. Her sadness is calm, tamed, dignified. This is one of the reasons why the audience is told to sympathize with her.

But the Countess is more emotionally complicated than the earlier sentimental heroines, like Pamela or Cecchina. She is not in a state of being innocent or passive. She remembers what was better in the past, she feels in the present that she is disappointed and she still hopes that something will change emotionally in the future. Her feelings are therefore mixed. She is sad, but also proud. She is hurt, but still emotionally strong. She suffers, but she does not completely lose control of herself.

This emotional complexity can be heard clearly in Mozart's music. The aria is marked Larghetto. It is slow and thoughtful. The opening phrase is long and smooth. It unfolds very slowly, almost as if the Countess is speaking through sighs.

Figure 2. Mozart, Le nozze di Figaro, “Porgi, amor,” opening phrase.

As shown in Figure 2, the descending melodic motion and the use of suspension create a sense of emotional weight and delayed release, reinforcing the Countess's restrained yet deeply felt sorrow.

The melody is quite lyrical and often moves step by step. Many phrases descend gently. This creates a feeling of emotional heaviness. Mozart also uses suspensions that delay resolution and create moments of tension. These suspensions make the music sound as if the Countess is holding onto feelings that she cannot fully express.

Mozart does not give the Countess broken, explosive phrases. On the contrary, he gives her long-breathed lines that seem to hold pain inside them. The music therefore does not express sorrow as emotional collapse, but as long-sustained inward pressure. Many phrases also end softly, without a strong sense of closure. The aria sounds emotionally unfinished. Because Mozart avoids strong cadences at important moments, the Countess never seems fully emotionally resolved. Instead, she appears suspended between sadness, memory, and hope. What moves the listener is not a dramatic outburst, it is not even (as it were) that the Countess is making the effort to cry. What moves the listener is rather the refusal of release: tension is delayed, closure is softened, and grief is left suspended in sound.

The orchestration is soft and transparent. The strings and woodwinds support the voice, without overwhelming it. There is a feeling of intimacy and stillness. The emotional world of the Countess is not that of later nineteenth-century opera, where the expression of emotional suffering is often carried through large gestures and a much more dramatic orchestration. Here, Mozart keeps it all, even her longing for her husband, restrained, delicate. The audience is invited to listen (and to sit quite still!) to small details in the voice and in the melody: a slight hesitation before an important word, a soft ending to a phrase, or a suspension that resolves slowly, can carry a great deal of emotional meaning. The Countess's body is also important. Unlike more dramatic heroines, she is often physically still. A lowered head, a slow turn of the body, a pause before singing, or a quiet gesture can be as important as the words. Her stillness makes even small movements look emotionally powerful. In this manner, her suffering is not expressed through dramatic action, but as a controlled gesture and a bodily restraint.

As Charles Rosen observes, eighteenth-century music often sustains multiple emotional states at once, allowing contradictory sentiments to coexist within a single musical moment. This is especially important in "Porgi, amor." The aria is not only sad. It also contains dignity, memory, hope, and emotional control. The Countess therefore becomes a more complicated version of the suffering heroine. Her sadness is

not simply weakness. Instead, it becomes a sign of maturity, self-control, and inner strength.

At the same time, however, the Countess still remains within the limits of sensibility. Like Pamela and Cecchina, she becomes sympathetic because she suffers quietly and does not threaten male authority directly. Her sadness is admired because it still remains beautiful, controlled, and feminine. Mozart therefore gives the Countess emotional depth, but he still presents her suffering in a form that eighteenth- century audiences could recognize as morally attractive.

4. Sympathy, Gender, and the Limits of Sensibility

What is important in the power of these heroines is not only what they feel, but how it is that opera makes audiences feel with them. Pamela, Cecchina, and the Countess are all made to seem emotionally moving because they suffer yet they are still modest, patient, and self-controlled. Their tears, their pauses, their soft voices, their restrained gestures all make the audience feel that they should sympathize with them. Opera does not simply represent emotion. It teaches audiences which emotions deserve sympathy, and what kinds of women are to be considered morally admirable. This understanding of sympathy also echoes Adam Smith's idea

that moral feeling arises from the ability to imaginatively enter into the situation of another.

Sympathy in opera was never neutral. It did not merely humanize suffering; it also organized it. Opera did not just make women's suffering appear more human; it also drew attention toward quiet, graceful, and legible forms of female pain, while some emotions were treated as morally elevated and others socially more unacceptable. Women who could remain gentle, calm, and emotionally disciplined were more often presented as morally admirable than women who were seen to be angry, rebellious, ambitious, or sexually open.

In this sense, sensibility was inclusive and disciplinary. It gave women emotional importance, but only by asking them to suffer in some recognizable and acceptable ways. In this sense, opera allowed women to become one of the emotional centers of the stage, but it also determined which forms of emotion appeared most acceptable or sympathetic. In this sense, female virtue was connected to silence, delicacy, patience, and self-command.

This is why female suffering became such an important emotional image in eighteenth-century opera. It allowed audiences to feel compassion and at the same time it reinforced the social ideas about gender. A suffering woman could be admired because she appeared morally pure and she also appeared emotionally sincere. But that admiration depended on the fact that her suffering was controlled and not dangerous.

This pattern can be seen clearly in Pamela, Cecchina, and the Countess. Pamela becomes admirable because she endures fear and pressure and does not lose her modesty. Cecchina becomes moving because she appears delicate and vulnerable rather than rebellious. The Countess becomes emotionally powerful because she suffers with dignity and composure rather than anger. These heroines are different in age, class, and personality, but all show that eighteenth-century opera rewarded women who remained emotionally controlled.

At the same time, these heroines also show the limits of this emotional system. These women are given emotional importance, but only in a narrow range of behaviour that is taken to be acceptable. They are valued because they are willing to endure pain without openly challenging the structures that cause that pain. In this way, opera makes female suffering both an emotion and a social ideal.

Many of these expectations still exist today. Women are still praised for being calm, caring, and the emotional centre of the family, and anger, ambition, or open resistance may still be judged more harshly. Eighteenth-century opera therefore still matters because it shows how much ideas about gender and emotion are connected.

5. Conclusion

Eighteenth-century opera did not merely reflect the culture of sensibility; it gave that culture one of its most powerful emotional forms. By means of voice, gesture, musical pacing, and bodily stillness, opera made female suffering something that could be seen and felt collectively. Pamela gave us the moral logic of the suffering heroine, Cecchina gave that logic operatic visibility, and Mozart's Countess gave it greater psychological depth and emotional complexity.

Yet these heroines also show us that sensibility was never an innocent celebration of feeling. The women who were considered most sympathetic were not those who resisted suffering, but those who bore it with grace, composure, and emotional discipline. Opera certainly moved its audiences, but it also taught them how to read the women's bodies, voices, and emotions. Tears were often privileged over anger, patience over rebellion, and quiet endurance over open resistance. In making suffering audible, visible, and beautiful, opera does not merely represent feeling, but participates in shaping emotional norms and social expectations.

Female suffering in eighteenth-century opera should therefore be understood not simply as an

expression of private feeling, but as a cultural performance shaped by ideas about gender, morality, and emotional value. That is why these works still matter now. They remind us that emotional ideals are never merely personal; they are historical, social, and deeply bound up with power. To listen to these heroines, then, is not only to hear their sorrow, but to recognize the cultural conditions that made that sorrow meaningful, audible, and worthy of sympathy.

Author Biography

Liu Yawen is a Master's student in Musicology at Hong Kong Baptist University. Her research focuses on eighteenth-century opera, sensibility, and the relationship between music, emotion, and the body. She is particularly interested in how operatic performance shapes experiences of sympathy and gendered expression.

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