The Representation of Blindness in Nineteenth-Century Opera

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Abstract

Many nineteenth century operas represent disability in the form of madness and physical disfigurement. A smaller group of such operas from this time feature blind characters. This thesis considers the representation of blindness in Gaetano Donizetti's *Belisario* (1836), Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867), Amilcare Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (1876), and Pietro Mascagni's *Iris* (1898). The way in which blindness functions in these four operas can be divided into two categories. In the first group, *Belisario* and *Don Carlos*, Belisario and the Grand Inquisitor are paradoxically powerful despite their disabilities. Although blind, Belisario engages in warfare and serves as a Byzantine military general while the Grand Inquisitor wields his authority as the most powerful figure in the Spanish Inquisition over King Philip II to serve his own interests. In contrast, La Cieca from *La Gioconda* and Il Cieco from *Iris* resonate more fully with the common literary and artistic stereotype of the blind as pitiful and weak. Both La Cieca and Il Cieco are mistreated by the characters surrounding them and are limited in their ability to defend themselves. I build on disability theory and historical studies to discuss how these operas reveal an emphasis on familialism and reflect the support systems available to people with visual impairments in nineteenth-century Italy. By engaging with disability scholarship in this way, I demonstrate how these four Italian composers stage difference and mark their blind characters as abnormal.

Résumé

Beaucoup d'opéras du dix-neuvième siècle représentent l'incapacité sous la forme de folie où de défiguration physique. Une petite part de ces opéras mettent en scène des personnages aveugles. Cette thèse examine les représentations de l'aveuglement dans *Belisario* de Gaetano Donizetti (1836), *Don Carlos* de Giuseppe Verdi (1867), *La Gioconda* (1876) de Amilcare Ponchielli, et *Iris* de Pietro Mascagni (1898). La manière dont l'aveuglement fonctionne dans ces quatre opéras peut être divisé en deux catégories. Dans la première, comprenant *Belisario* et *Don Carlos*, Belisario et le Grand Inquisiteur sont paradoxalement puissant malgré leurs incapacités. Quoiqu'aveugle, Belisario s'engage à la guerre entant que général dans l'armé Byzantine tandis que le Grand Inquisiteur brandis son autorité pour avancer ses propres intérêts étant la figure la plus puissante de l'Inquisition Espagnole - même supérieur au roi Philippe II. Cependant, La Cieca de *La Gioconda* et Il Cieco de *Iris* résonnent plus pleinement avec l'image de l'aveugle comme étant pitoyable et faible – stéréotype qui est répandu en littérature aussi bien que dans les arts. La Cieca et Il Cieco sont maltraités par les personnages qui les entourent et ils sont restreint en leur capacité de se défendre. Je m'appuie sur la théorie de l'incapacité et les études historiques pour analyser la manière dont ces opéras soulignent le familialisme et reflètent les systèmes de soutien qui étaient disponibles aux aveugles en Italie du dix-neuvième siècle. En puisant dans les recherches sur l'incapacité de cette manière, je démontre comment ces quatre compositeurs Italiens mettent la différence en scène et marquent ces personnages comme anormaux.

(traduit par Henri Colombat)

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Introduction

In her memoir *There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness,* the writer and performer M. Leona Godin discusses the impact fictional depictions of blindness can have on the lives of people with visual impairments. She writes, "We [blind people] are considered to be touched by God, endowed with superpowers, or in need of a cure…we the blind parade through the theater of sighted people's lives as representations. Blindness must mean something, and therefore the blind individual must mean something."[1] Godin's comment points out how blind people are forced to navigate through an ocularcentric world that confers meaning to blindness largely from the viewpoint of the sighted. When a piece of literature or art contains a blind character, that character's blindness takes on significations beyond "just" the physical or medical realities of blindness. As most of these portrayals are created by sighted people, fictional representations of blindness then become fantasies of the sighted who assign a range of contradictory meanings to blindness including helplessness, insight, ignorance, purity, and immorality. Most important, these representations have real repercussions for people with visual impairments as they inform the ways in which they are treated by sighted individuals and groups.

As a representational art form, opera offers an opportunity to consider how both music and theatre can be utilized to convey disability. Opera is no stranger to disability and composers have a long history of showcasing disability whether it be blindness, madness, physical disfigurement, vocal disfluency, or chronic illness. In this thesis I examine how blindness is represented in four Italian operas from the nineteenth century: Gaetano Donizetti's *Belisario* (1836), Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867), Amilcare Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (1876) and Pietro Mascagni's *Iris* (1898). I chose these operas due to their connections with some of the

[1] M. Leona Godin, *There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021), 275.

most well-known Italian composers of the nineteenth century as well as the range they offer in their representations of blindness. Before discussing these operas in more detail, I would like to introduce some basic concepts in disability studies and issues that performance scholars have found when staging disability.

Dealing with disability studies means differentiating between the physical realities of a given disability and the social meanings conferred to it. Current disability theory makes a distinction between the ideas of impairment and disability. An impairment is "a physical attribute of the body"[2] while disability is "the social process that turns an impairment into a negative by creating barriers to access."[3] The definition of blindness has not been consistent and stable throughout time and space; many different sensory impairments could be consolidated under the label "blindness." For example, congenital blindness and cataracts are two very different impairments, but they both fall under the category of blindness. Also, the particularities of each condition do not play a significant part in the meanings conferred to blindness in the operatic examples under consideration. In fact, three out of the four operas that are the main focus of this thesis do not give an explanation for each character's disability.[4] Because this project is concerned with the fictional representation of blindness, it is focused on disability rather than impairment. Cultural stereotypes of blindness and the realities of living with the disability may interact with each other and this study does consider the way blind people were treated throughout history. But the reality of blindness and the ways it impacted people's lives is

[2] Mairian Corker and Sally French, "Reclaiming Discourse in Disability Studies," in *Disability Discourse,* ed. Mairian Corker and Sally French (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 2.
[3] Lennard Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 41.
[4] In *Belisario,* the main character Belisario is blinded as punishment.

referenced for the ways in which they interact with the musical representations of blind people on stage.

Most theoretical discourse on disability focuses on the two main models of disability: the medical and social models. A medical view of disability focuses on the individual body and possible medical interventions. Under this model, disability is a deficit that needs to be corrected or cured. The disability theorist Simi Linton offers an appropriate definition.

> Briefly, the medicalization of disability casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and, significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy. Society, in agreeing to assign medical meaning to *disability,* colludes to keep the issue within the purview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and "treat" the condition and the person rather than "treating" the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people's lives.[5]

We will see this model in action with the rise of medical treatments and interest in the blind that coincides with the Enlightenment that I discuss in chapter one. When it comes to the humanities, most disability scholars shun the medical view of disability in favor of a social one or what Davis calls the "constructionist model." Davis writes, "As opposed to the medical model, the constructionist model sees disability as a social process in which no inherent meanings attach to physical difference other than those assigned by a community."[6]

However, there are limits to both the medical and social model. This project favors Tobin Sieber's concept of complex embodiment for the way it incorporates the medical and social models and pays attention to the corporeal aspects of disability. Critics of the medical model believe that it overly focuses on embodiment while ignoring the part that environments and cultures play in forming disability. Having said that, the social or constructionist model can also be criticized for ignoring embodiment. Complex embodiment seeks to correct this and allow the

[5] Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 11.
[6] Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions,* 41.

body a type of agency while still acknowledging the social construction of disability. Siebers explains, "Complex embodiment theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative. Social representations obviously affect the experience of the body…but the body possesses the ability to determine its social representations as well."[7] Complex embodiment is well suited for a study of blindness, as fictional representations of the blind focus on their dependency on touch and hearing, which is based on the physical reality of the disability. People with visual impairments do rely on these senses to interact with and navigate their surroundings.

What becomes important when examining disability is how these physical realities make their way into stage performance. Dealing with performances of blindness requires reconciling multiple artistic modes that take part in creating the fictional representation of the disability. The theatre scholar Stacy Wolf notes

> In each play, the performance "context" simultaneously produces three bodies: the scripted body-subject who is the physically disabled character, the imagined referent of an actual disabled body-person on whom the character is based (even in the playwright's and audiences' imaginations), and the signifier of the actor's body on stage.[8]

When it comes to opera, there are multiple steps that should be taken to make sure all three of these bodies are addressed. The scripted body-subject is created through the libretto as well as the musical syntax and compositional choices; this includes formal conventions such as arias and voice type. All of the operas I consider in this thesis produce a blind character based on the composer and librettist's pre-conceived notions of how a blind individual would act and speak—the imagined referent mentioned above. Although this project does not deal with any specific

[7] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 25-26.
[8] Stacy Wolf, "Disability's Invisibility in Joan Schenkar's *Signs of Life* and Heather McDonald's *An Almost Holy Picture,*" in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance,* ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 306.

staging or performance, the stage directions included in the score work to suggest an imagined disabled body that reflects historically contingent ideas about the physical attributes of blindness.

As with most fictional representations of disability, these operas will always misrepresent the full reality of blindness. The feminist disability scholar Carrie Sandahl points out "Whether used as a negative or positive metaphor, the use of disability as a dramaturgical device tends to erase the particularities of lived disability experiences."[9] Disability is used as a metaphor when the representation of disability symbolizes something beyond physical or biological realities of that disability. Commonly blindness is introduced as a metaphor to represent clairvoyance, despite the fact people with visual impairments do not have innate psychic abilities. However these metaphors rely on stereotypes that are repeated through fictional representations and the social imaginary. In this case, blind people are stereotyped as individuals who develop a sense of interiority due to a lack of sight. Without the distractions of the "outside" world, they are thought to develop an intense spiritual life. Of course, most people do not genuinely believe blindness and clairvoyance are inextricably linked. Nevertheless, audience members have difficulty recognizing representations of disability on stage without those representations relying on metaphors or stereotypes.

As Sandahl discovered working as the director of the play *Signs of Life*, without depending upon metaphors or obvious physical depictions of disability on stage, the audience did not understand the deconstructive project she was trying to accomplish. She did not hire any actors with disabilities and instructed the actors not to attempt to portray any disabilities through their gestures and movement. Sandahl writes, "To avoid legitimating the connection between disability and freakishness, the actors did not mimic actual disabilities but rather focused on the

[9] Carrie Sandahl, "Ahhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femalenenss in Performance," *Theatre Topics* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 15.

connection between femininity and freakishness, leaving actual disabled bodies out of the equation."[10] Because of this, Sandahl found that the audience members she spoke with understood her critique of the connection between feminine performativity and freakishness, but some did not understand the play contained any disabled characters at all. She writes, "Once the production had peeled away levels of disability metaphors, disabled bodies disappeared. Without actual visibly disabled bodies, disability in this production could *only* be a metaphor."[11] Acting in general may rely on metaphors, but the performance of disability does so to a larger degree. Our conceptions of disability are so heavily tied to visible and stereotypical markers that when they are not there, the presence of disability can be missed.

Nineteenth-century composers and librettists had to rely on popular clichés and images of blind characters in order to ensure an audience could understand their references to blindness. This is part of the interactive aspect between work and audience that is central to stage depictions of disability. The disability and performance scholar Stacy Wolf notes "[Visibly disabled bodies] function to allow nondisabled characters to demonstrate their generosity and nondisabled spectators to experience their normalcy."[12] Part of the process of staging disability is audience experience itself. Rather than considering these operatic representations of blindness as failed reflections of the "real" experience of blindness, this project focuses on what they can tell us about the nineteenth-century attitude towards difference.

In order to locate this attitude, this project is separated into three main chapters. The first one, "Musical and Literary Depictions of Blindness," consolidates a relevant history of fictional representations of blindness starting in Ancient Greek mythology. Some of the most pervasive

[10] Sandahl, "Ahhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femalenenss in Performance," 22.
[11] Sandahl, 26.
[12] Wolf, "Disability's Invisibility in Joan Schenkar's *Signs of Life* and Heather McDonald's *An Almost Holy Picture*," 302.

and long-lasting stereotypes we associate with blindness can be found in works such as *Oedipus Rex* and the *Iliad*. These notions reappear later not just in literature and stage works, but also educational treatises for the blind and philosophical works from the eighteenth century. Composers working in the nineteenth century relied on these earlier perspectives in order to stage blindness in ways that their audience would have recognized. The last part of the chapter briefly considers how each of the four operas fit into this larger history and discourse around blindness.

Focusing on *Belisario* and *Don Carlos,* the second chapter delves into how Donizetti and Verdi create two different images of powerful blind men. Belisario is an esteemed military general but becomes blind after being exiled and punished for a crime he did not commit. While at first his loss of sight seems to overwhelm any possibility for him to wield agency, he emerges out of exile as a more insightful and skillful leader. Due to Donizetti's unusual musical treatment of his lead Belisario, I theorize the possibility for operatic forms and conventions to produce disabling environments for blind characters. My discussion of *Don Carlos* focuses on the Grand Inquisitor and how his frail physical condition is contrasted with the musical and political power he wields over King Philip II and the common people. As a corrupted figure, this power turns into a vehicle in which Verdi critiques the "blind" power of the Church and the role it played during the Spanish Inquisition.

The last chapter "Insight and Ignorance in *La Gioconda* and *Iris*" focuses on two vulnerable blind characters. In *La Gioconda,* La Cieca's blindness places her as a dramatic device for Gioconda and Laura to demonstrate their normalcy and benevolent natures. As an explicitly Christian figure, her blindness becomes imbued with a sense of spiritual insight that allows her to bless other characters. A less powerful figure compared to the other more "normal"

characters in *Iris,* the fatherly Il Cieco and his blindness becomes a metaphor to demonstrate ignorance. His disability allows Osaka and Kyoto to deceive him into unjustly denouncing and attacking his daughter Iris. I speculate how the violence and mistreatment La Cieca and Il Cieco face from other characters could create more empathetic and positive interactions between blind and sighted people, although I also acknowledge the stigma that is inherent in the stereotypes on which these representations rely. With this in mind, my conclusion deals with the realities of the Italian welfare state during the nineteenth century and how specifically *Belisario, La Gioconda,* and *Iris* promote an attitude of familialism.

Literature Review

Disability studies began to gain traction in the late twentieth century in response to the rise of North American disability rights movements in the 1980s and 1990s. Accompanying these efforts to push for civil rights and protections for those with disabilities, academic activists established the field of disability studies with the intent of historicizing the formation of disability and investigating the sociopolitical aspects associated with it. Going beyond the physical and biological aspects of impairments, disability studies seeks to understand how environments and discourse play a role in producing disability. Similar to feminist and critical race theorists, disability scholars conceptualize disability as a social construct. While there may be a physiological basis, the meanings attributed to disability are geographically, culturally, and historically contingent. Because of this, scholars also maintain that the stigma attributed to disabilities also changes throughout time and space. As a politically motivated project, disability scholarship aims to challenge that stigma and improve the real-life treatment of those with disabilities.

Due to its interdisciplinary nature, disability studies has many applications throughout the humanities. Music theorists and musicologists started to formally apply disability-informed perspectives at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Before this, scholars such as Arthur Groos and Linda and Michael Hutcheon examined representations of disease in opera, although these analyses are not explicitly aligned with disability theory.[13] They did however provide a basis for historicizing medical discourse and the ways in which it can influence cultural attitudes towards medical conditions and the musical arts. Within music scholarship, a specialized field of music and disability studies systematically began to form after a panel discussion that took place during the 2004 meeting of the American Musicological Society.[14] A group of these participants went on to contribute to *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, a 2006 collection of essays coedited by Joseph N. Straus and Neil Lerner. I will discuss two articles from *Sounding Off* written by Andrew Oster and Laurie Stras later in this chapter.

Early on, Straus was a leading promoter of disability-informed perspectives in musicology. His 2006 article "Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory" in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* brought disability scholarship into the forefront of musicological research.[15] Focusing on instrumental music, Straus theorizes how formal musical parameters can represent bodies, both disabled and abled. This first branch of music and disability research that is so associated with Straus is primarily focused on the representation of disability. Other researchers have focused more on the intersections between disability, social identity, and performance—the second branch of disability-informed

[13] Arthur Groos, "'TB Sheets': Love and Disease in *La Traviata*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no. 3 (1995): 233-60.; Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).
[14] Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner, and Joseph Straus, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe, et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.
[15] Joseph N. Straus, "Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory," *Journal of the. American Musicological Society,* Vol. 59, No. 1 (Spring 2006): 113-184.

musicology. In 2010, Alex Lubet published *Music, Disability, and Society*. Here, Lubet shares his own experience with disability to consider how traditional western classical musical practices and organizations tend to be discriminatory towards disabled musicians.[16] Outside of the classical sphere, George McKay's 2013 monograph *Shakin' All Over* represents the first major look at disability and popular music.[17] Covering the popular music industry and disabled musicians, McKay discusses the ways in which pop music both accommodates and discriminates against those with disabilities.

The remainder of this literature review considers essays that feature questions surrounding embodiment, aesthetics, and performance as these remain central concerns within the newly founded field of music and disability studies. Straus and his focus on the representation of disability through formal musical means reappears throughout this review as well as Lubet and McKay and their preoccupation with the social negotiation of disability in performance and musical cultures. I also highlight the foremost literature on the representation of disability in opera—a type of music that has the potential to communicate disability in a much more immediate way due to its textual components and connection with theatre. While all these case studies rely on earlier disability theory that established disability as a social construct, they continue beyond this fundamental notion and propose a wide range of ways to examine the intersections between music and disability.

Straus' oft-cited essay "Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory" paved the way for musicologists and theorists to examine the representation of disability through musical means such as harmony and form. Focusing on the middle period of

[16] Alex Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).
[17] George McKay, *Shakin' All Over: Popular Music and Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

Beethoven's work, Straus identifies the disability narrative contained within many of these compositions. As a starting point, Straus states that music has the ability to depict objects and conditions; disability being an example of a type of human condition expressible through music. Similar to other disability scholars, Straus makes sure to historicize his work in the appropriate cultural contexts and explains that during the nineteenth century, the narrative of "disability overcome" becomes popular due to changing medical practices and general societal attitudes towards disability. More specifically, medical intervention was increasingly seen as a way to correct or "cure" numerous forms of disability. Once disability became capable of being corrected, this sense of a "heroic" overcoming of disability invaded artistic mediums. Of course, heroic narratives are not confined to discussions of disability, but Straus believes the particular changes that occurred regarding medical science during the nineteenth century make the connection between narratives surrounding heroic compensation and disability important to note.

One of the clearest examples of this lies in the first movement of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony in E-flat major. Straus points out that the non-diatonic C-sharp in the fifth measure of the theme represents a tonal problem—something he defines as "a musical event, often a chromatic note that threatens to destabilize the prevailing tonality."[18] And this tonal problem can be understood as a musical representation of disability. As the piece progresses, the C-sharp reappears in the development and recapitulation, creating multiple harmonic and formal disruptions that complicate the narrative progression of the piece. Eventually by the coda, the C-sharp is subsumed within the work and the prevailing E-flat major tonality is upheld and secured. Straus views this harmonic progress as an example of "disability overcome." By tying his analysis to historical realities, Straus demonstrates that Romantic instrumental works adopted a

[18] Joseph N. Straus, "Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory," 138.

narrative of compensation at the same time that European society adopted an attitude towards controlling and fixing disability through medical means.

In a similar way, Andrew Oster's article "Melisma as Malady: Cavalli's *Il Giasone* (1649) and Opera's Earliest Stuttering Role" focuses on the representation of stuttering as a source of comedic relief through text setting and harmony. By concentrating on musical details, Oster seeks to consider the vocal elements surrounding the hunchback courtier Demo from Francesco Cavalli's *Il Giasone* asking; "What if disability were dematerialized and recast with the operatic voice?"[19] As a consequence, Oster ignores embodiment and Demo's physical disability (hunchback) in an effort to de-essentialize disability as entirely pathological or medical. Instead, he considers stuttering, a non-visible type of disability, purely through musical markers. This decision to ignore the character's bodily markers is somewhat unusual when it comes to both opera and disability studies, and other articles discussed later deal more specifically with embodiment and the performance of disability.

By analyzing Demo's vocal output throughout the opera, Oster finds that the courtier's vocal disfluency improves during his arias compared to the text setting in his recitatives. Whereas he repeatedly stumbles on beginning consonants in his recitatives, this spasmodic repetition of syllables occurs considerably less during his arias. In the logic of seventeenth-century opera conventions, recitative singing is considered "speaking" while aria singing stands in for "singing." Consequently, Demo's improved vocal fluency during his arias reflect the real treatment of neurological speech defects due to the fact that symptoms of stuttering can be mitigated through music or singing exercises. Arias allow Demo to vocally conform with the

[19] Andrew Oster, "Melisma as Malady: Cavalli's *Il Giasone* (1649) and Opera's Earliest Stuttering Role," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 157.

speech of his fellow characters—at least momentarily. Oster's work lays a starting point for considering how speech related disabilities act as a vocal marker in opera and other musical stage works.

So far we have considered disability in connection with musical narratives. Straus and Oster examine texts and musical examples, but other scholars investigate embodied representations of disability. When it comes to opera studies, disability theory offers approaches to consider how the body is represented through musical stage works. Over the past few decades, opera scholarship has extensively focused on the representation of gender and sexuality. As an embodied art form, it follows that disability perspectives can offer new ways of examining physical and sensory impairments that appear in opera in connection with earlier feminist efforts. Hanne Blank's essay "Sexuality, Dis/Ability, and Sublimity in Grand Opera" introduces a possible way of looking at nonnormative bodies in nineteenth-century opera. Although not focused on one specific opera in particular, Blank discusses the role that disability played in generating a sense of the sublime in audiences under the backdrop of sociopolitical changes that took place during the "long nineteenth century." Unlike Oster, Blank ties her argument specifically to the bodily experience of performing and viewing opera.

Drawing on the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of the sublime, Blank characterizes sublimity as, "a way to characterize the experience of interpolating one's thinking, feeling, experiencing body into a natural world that exceeded the body's capacities."[20] She suggests that physically impaired characters such as the hunchback Rigoletto from Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto,* the dwarf Alberich from Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold,* and the hunchback Tonio from Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* represent embodied forms of abnormality whose

[20] Hanne Blank, "Sexuality, Dis/Ability, and Sublimity in Grand Opera" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body*, ed. Young Kim and Sander L. Gilman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 307.

physical presence on stage had the ability to inspire feelings of the sublime in a nineteenth-century audience. This was only possible because of specific historical changes concerning human ideals that took place during the 1800s. Around the mid part of the nineteenth century the new concept of "average" and "normal" entered mainstream discourse. Eventually these concepts were applied to medical discourse to describe humans, which led to a new popular notion of the average man.

People who diverged from this standard began to be seen as abnormal examples of human nature. As characters with physical and physiological deformities, disabled operatic characters such as Tonio, Alberich, and Rigoletto become reminders of the uncontrollable natural world—the sublime. Blank writes,

> Bodies that did not conform to newly important norms of formation and function acquire new resonance and meaning. The windows of acceptable human variation narrowed, and the connotations of the bodies that would not fit through them came to include not only older customary notions of misfortune and sin but also a new, complex sensibility of imperviousness to reason, science, and similar modern priorities…These nonconformist, excessive bodies were intransigent, and at the core of their intransigence was nothing less than nature itself.[21]

As physical representatives and reminders of the abnormal, disabled opera characters allow audiences to safely gaze at the "abnormal" limits of human nature.

Of course, at the heart of these arguments lies the truth that disability was utilized in nineteenth-century opera as an aesthetic tool at the expense of real people who live with disabilities—both past and present. Other scholars have examined the changes that took place throughout twentieth-century opera. Unlike in earlier eras, the 1900s offers examples of operas in which disability becomes more positively affirmed. Sherry Lee's essay "Modernist Opera's Stigmatized Subjects" deals exactly with this subject in the operas of Richard Strauss, Franz

[21] Blank, "Sexuality, Dis/Ability, and Sublimity in Grand Opera" 311.

Schreker and Alexander Zemlinsky. The modernist aesthetic from which these composers drew represented a shift from earlier portrayals of disability and afflictions. By focusing on physical disfigurement, especially the figure of the hunchback, these composers conceptualized physical disability as a metaphor for damaged subjectivity. Lee explains,

> As the conditions of modernity created apprehensions about the nature of subjective identity, so the artistic products of modernist culture reflected a growing concern over the vulnerability of the self and, further, the lack of stability of inner and outer identity in a context of political, economic, and social upheaval.[22]

The dominant approach towards physical impairment in the modernist context involves reconceptualizing disability and "broken" bodies with positive aesthetic value.

Strauss accomplishes this in *Die Frau ohne Schatten* through the main character Barak's three brothers—the One-Eyed, the One-Armed, and the Hunchback. Throughout the opera they are musically aligned with chaotic rhythms and harmonic dissonance—musical manifestations of their physical appearance. Although secondary to Barak and the Empress, they are idealized through their natural ability to judge the moral character of Barak's wife. Other composers dealt with more explicit critiques of the ways stigma can affect the lives of disabled characters. In *Die Dezeichneten,* Schrecker portrays the social stigma that the hunchback figure Alviano Selvago experiences as an explanation for his desire to surround himself with aesthetic objects. He becomes an aesthete in order to pursue the beauty he lacks and romantic relationships that are denied to him based on his appearance. Finally, Lee focuses on the Dwarf from Zemlinsky's *Der Zwerg,* as "a prime example of the conception of disability as a culturally circumscribed identity rather than a medically defined pathology."[23] The Dwarf is not aware of his aesthetic defects or

[22] Sherry D. Lee, "Modernist Opera's Stigmatized Subjects" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 663.
[23] Lee, "Modernist Opera's Stigmatized Subjects," 677.

physical impairment. As such, he is portrayed as an innocent victim of society's ignorance and represents the ideal portrait of damaged selfhood that is so associated with the modernist aesthetic.

Building on the understanding of modern art as an aesthetic that accepts disability in its sense of beauty, Straus' article "Representing the Extraordinary Body: Musical Modernism's Aesthetics of Disability" considers how a disabled embodiment is expressed in modernist instrumental music. He focuses on the second passage of Igor Stravinsky's Three Pieces for String Quartet as he hears the musical techniques and structures within this piece as representing a disabled body. Focusing on the first A section in the small ABA form, Straus explains how through fragmentation, distortion, and deformation, Stravinsky creates a musical work in which each musical fragment functions as its own discrete unit. These fragments are juxtaposed without any type of transition and create a sense of contrast and discontinuity. If the ideal classical-romantic musical body is one in which there is a sense of continuity and seamlessness, "The Stravinskian musical body in contrast is fractured, fragmented into pieces, shattered, and splintered."[24] Not only does Stravinsky challenge structural norms, but his harmonic choices undermine traditional tonality. Straus breaks the A section into four fragments: A, B, C, and D. The first two fragments (A and B) are focused on an A major tonality, but C and D are concentrated on B-flat and C-flat, respectively.

The resulting musical body created throughout Stravinsky's chamber piece is static as musical ideas are asserted rather than developed. Instead of propelling the piece forward, the tonal and structural choices obstruct the movement of the piece towards any type of goal. In

[24] Joseph Straus "Representing the Extraordinary Body: Musical Modernism's Aesthetics of Disability" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe, et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 735.

Stravinsky's own words, he based this composition off "the jerky, spastic movements" of Little Tich—a British musical hall performer. Little Tich was best known for his Big Boots dance in which he would wear clogs and perform numerous comic routines. Relevant to Straus' discussion of disability within Stravinsky's composition is the fact Little Tich was a person of short stature at 4 feet and 6 inches. Little Tich's physical appearance was central to his reception and many of his contemporaries labelled him as a gnome, a dwarf, a gargoyle, and a grotesque. In reality, the surviving footage of Little Tich's performance demonstrate that he was quite graceful and dexterous. Despite this, Stravinsky's explicit remarks about the connection between his composition and Little Tich's movements point to the ways in which modernist compositions accept and valorize corporeal aspects of disability.

Here we turn to the second strain of disability studies concerned with the lives of disabled musicians, listeners, and performance conventions. The previous four authors showcased how to use musical analysis to discuss the presence of disability in compositions and other musical works, but other methods help us explore the experience of living and performing with disability. Julie Singer's chapter "Playing by Ear: Compensation, Reclamation, and Prosthesis in Fourteenth-Century Song" is an early essay dealing with the reception of disabled musicians, and conveniently related to this thesis as it deals with blindness. Examining late medieval French composers, Singer reflects on the status of disability during the late Middle Ages. Through her research into Francesco Landini and Guillaume de Machaut, Singer finds that the modern concept of disability is not easily applied to medieval studies. She asks, "If a disability detracts

from one type of sensory experience but enhances another ability, or creates new possibilities for artistic expression, is it really a *disability* at all?"[25]

Singer touches on the problem facing medievalists when it comes to disability: is the word disability appropriate when discussing European medieval history. European languages did not yet have overarching terms such as disabled or any equivalent phrases to refer to disabled people as a group. There were specific terms (blind being one of them) that referred to different disabilities, but these words carried their own unique connotations. Whereas the modern-day usage of the word disability suggests a lack of ability and an element of social ostracization, certain physical and sensory impairments were viewed as sources of creative talent in the late medieval period. Accounts from the fourteenth century directly link blindness and virtuosic musical talent together and the blind were encouraged to partake in musical activities. The late medieval environment in Europe did not uniformly ostracize people with visual impairments from taking part in mainstream society but instead redirected their efforts towards specialist activities. Additionally, Landini and Machaut's contemporaries wrote of their impairments as if they were a gift and source of musical talent. These two medieval composers were not just passively accepted as musicians but revered for their differences. Consequently, Landini's blindness and Machaut's self-described status as a "borgne" (one-eyed or squint eyed) become beneficial additions to their musical personalities and heighten their sense of worth in fourteenth-century artistic and musical worlds.

Disability has not just been viewed as a source of artistic talent, but also a performance aid. Laurie Stras considers the possibility for disability to serve as a musical asset in her essay

[25] Julie Singer, "Playing by Ear: Compensation, Reclamation, and Prosthesis in Fourteenth-Century Song," in *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations,* ed. Joshua Eyler (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 52.

"The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect." As a scholar with performance experience as both a classically trained singer and jazz vocalist, Stras reflects on the positive and negative values placed on vocal damage and injuries between the two genres. Traditionally, Western art music values undamaged voices with any type of audible vocal disruption indicating a malfunction or abnormality in the singer. Whereas nodules and hoarseness can be traumatic injuries and career enders for classical singers, hoarseness is specifically valued in jazz and pop genres. Specifically, within many popular genres this type of damage denotes authority, authenticity, and integrity.

Stras theorizes that the damaged singing voice becomes an aesthetically and culturally valuable product due to the ability for listeners to empathize and identify with performers. Drawing on trauma theory, she suggests that the sound of damage in a singer's voice "connects the listener inescapably with the body of the performer."[26] And this connection may create a sense of catharsis in the listener, as hearing trauma in another's voice may validate and heal one's own trauma. To support her claims, Stras refers to Julie Andrews' performance of "The Rain In Spain" during a New York AIDS benefit concert in 2000. Andrews had lost her voice due to complications of nodule surgery, and the resulting vocal damage was highly publicized. Despite this, the benefit audience gave her a standing ovation. According to Stras, the audience praised Andrews' voice not because of its beauty but rather because they empathized with the suffering her damaged voice signifies. That voice then becomes an audible reminder of trauma that audience members can connect with and use to validate their own suffering and feelings.

McKay touches on a similar issue in his chapter, "*Vox crippus*: Voicing the Disabled Body" from *Shakin' All Over*. Here, McKay considers whether or not we can disembody the

[26] Laurie Stras, "The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect ," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 176.

voice from its owner. Unlike Stras who took for granted the connection between the singer's body and their voice, McKay complicates this presumption by discussing different vocal techniques indicative of damaged voices in pop music: falsetto, yodeling, and stuttering. He finds that a damaged voice does not necessarily indicate that a singer has some type of corporeal disability. Building on Stras, McKay provides a stronger theory that can be applied to a variety of techniques. He also addresses the use of assistive technology to manipulate and correct damaged voices.

Although the falsetto is widely used in pop music, it generally indicates a "failure" on the part of the singer to adequately reach the higher registers. McKay writes, "*Fallsetto*—the singing voice that sounds the failing, falling body; as the voice goes up, the body goes tumbling down."[27] For a singer such as Neil Young who commonly used falsetto and also had polio as a child, the falsetto signals a weakness in his body and voice due to a serious disease. However, falsetto is used more generally as a vocal technique to convey sincerity and authenticity by singers in pop and rock music. We cannot simply designate falsetto as an aural sign of physical weakness or disability. Similar to falsetto, yodeling represents a break in the voice, but it used by both disabled and abled singers. Additionally, it serves an emotional purpose and can enhance the meaning of the sung text. The third technique—stuttering—can be a "vocal performance of disability"[28] but is used by both singers with stutters and those without. McKay summarizes these techniques by stating, "Disabled pop is capable of both hiding and laying bare the experience or symptom of disability."[29] While these techniques obfuscate the singer's bodily qualities, recording technology has the ability to disembody it completely. The damaged or

[27] McKay, *Shakin' All Over,* 69.
[28] McKay, *Shakin' All Over*, 85.
[29] McKay, *Shakin' All Over,* 85.

disabled voice can be manipulated by recording technology to transform into a "whole" and "functioning" voice that is associated with able bodied singers.

Even without the direct connection to disabled corporeality, damaged or disabled ways of singing become resources for all types performers. Jeanette DiBernardo Jones deals with the possibility for Deaf culture and identity to spur new ways of conceptualizing hearing and performance in her article, "Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Deaf Culture." Traditionally, music making and listening has primarily been thought of as an auditory process. But the experience of many Deaf listeners and musicians challenges us to consider the bodily responses involved in listening and making music. Additionally, it allows us to ask how these aspects could be emphasized to create inclusive experiences for both deaf and hearing audiences. With an understanding of American Sign Language as a definitive feature of Deaf culture, music that employs this visual language creates a practice in which "musical activity is articulated as a bodily experience that privileges felt vibrations and observed visual cues."[30] The main way this occurs is through translated songs. In translated songs, lyrics from a spoken language are translated into ASL during performance.

Jones demonstrates how this type of song performance is articulated by Deaf musicians and performers such as the rock group Beethoven's Nightmare and the two rappers Sean Forbes and Signmark. These artists incorporate ASL and visuals into their performance in order to prioritize the extra-auditory effects of music. The vocalist in Beethoven's Nightmare sings and signs ASL simultaneously. In addition, the instrumentalists focus on playing loudly in order to increase the vibrations their audience feels throughout their body. Sean Forbes and Signmark both perform their spoken rap while using sign language to attract both Deaf and hearing

[30] Jeannette DiBernardo Jones, "Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Deaf Culture" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe, et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 56.

audiences. Signmark in particular invites his audience to sign along with him during performances as he dedicates time to teach them the sign language to the chorus of his songs. By inviting audience members to partake in the kinesthetic experience of sign language, Signmark promotes a type of Deaf hearing that prioritizes sonic vibrations rather than auditory ones. In relation to this alternate multisensory experience of hearing, Jones writes, "I believe that music scholars can begin to understand the broad spectrum on which musical experience can lie, somewhere between the ears, the eyes, and the body."[31] Ultimately, Jones believes that incorporating Deaf culture into our concept of listening and performance allows us to create new modes of hearing that can enrich other musical practices.

Although Jones deals with musical spaces connected to pop music, other musicologists have payed attention to the presence of disability in classical organizations. In "Play Like an Egyptian: Music and Blind Culture" from *Music, Disability, and Society,* Lubet explores the possibility for Blind culture to enhance the way classical musicians collaborate in orchestra settings.[32] By providing the case study of the Al-Nour wal Amal Orchestra of Cairo, he argues that it is possible to create spaces in which disability ceases to exist. Within this orchestra, the all-female and blind musicians are accommodated with Braille musical notation and the expectation that everyone must perform from memory. This unique institution offers opportunities for its members to receive an education, perform in public, and receive a salary that is not available for many sighted Egyptian women. Additionally, in Egypt, the choice to perform classical western music carries progressive connotations. Lubet points out,

> An ensemble that is female and perceived as feminist and disability-positive specializes in the Western classics may indicate that a music elsewhere regarded

[31] Jones, "Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Death Culture," 68.
[32] Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society,* 69-88.

> as European American 'old-time religion' may be viewed by some in the Arab and Muslim world as a symbol and vehicle of social progress.[33]

Whether or not the ensemble has feminist potential is less important to Lubet than its ability to challenge ableism. In fact, he believes the organization can serve as an example for traditional orchestras located in Europe and North America. The reliance on memorization could be adopted by other orchestral groups as it allows musicians to listen more carefully to each other and "maintain musical rapport without reference to visual clues."[34] This may help challenge the convention that although orchestral performance produces an aural product, the performance itself is a visual act. The Al-Nour wal Amal Orchestra also proves that blind individuals are missing from orchestras not because of an inability to perform the standard repertoire, but an inability on the part of organizations to adequately accommodate blind people's needs. Within the right environment, visual impairments cease to be disabilities.

This brief look at some of the literature on music and disability studies showcases some of the musical applications of disability theory. By challenging the premise of disability as an innately negative trait, music scholars such as Singer, Stras, McKay, Jones, and Lubet demonstrate the possibility to create new narratives around impairment and disability from debilitating conditions to resources and sources of ability. These authors are more concerned with the active or lived experience of disability, yet they share a concern for the socio-historical meanings conferred to disability demonstrated by Straus, Oster, Blank, and Lee in their studies on the representation of disability. By investigating the meanings attributed to disability throughout the Middle Ages to the present, music scholars have taken on the political project that

[33] Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society,* 83.
[34] Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society*, 76.

was first led by early disability advocates and academics to investigate and improve the treatment of people with disabilities.

Chapter 1: Musical and Literary Representations of Blindness

The literary scholar Lennard Davis defines disability as a "part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances."[35] For this project it is necessary to have an understanding of the multitude of ways disability and more specifically blindness were perceived in European culture and musical circles during the 1800s. Much of the Romantic and late nineteenth-century perception of blind figures comes from religion and ancient and medieval representations. Despite technological and medical advancements that took place, many of the ways blindness is portrayed in nineteenth century opera remain unchanged from earlier manifestations. The persistent myths of the blind as clairvoyant, insightful, and helpless rely on idealistic and unrealistic views that were upheld in both historical and fictional accounts of the blind. Throughout this chapter, I will trace the societal treatment of blindness through the ancient time period through early Romantic opera and into the late nineteenth century.

Ancient and Medieval Representations of Blindness

There was no monolithic view of disability in Ancient Greece. The Historian Martha Rose has refuted the popular idea that the Ancient Greeks held a common notion of the ideal body and that anyone who deviated from that ideal dealt with intense stigma or abuse. When it comes to blindness "the story of blind people in the ancient Greek world is neither glorious nor dismal," and there is no proof to support the idea that they suffered from negative social practices directed towards them.[36]

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[35] Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995), 5.
[36] Martha L. Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 79-80.

More importantly, ancient literature gave birth to the association between the blind and music. In Homer's *Iliad* the musician Thamyris is blinded by the Muses for his hubris in challenging their musical skills and gifted extraordinary hearing in return. Most blind people are portrayed as extraordinary characters like prophets in Greek mythology, but contradictory meanings persist. Most famously, the blind prophet Teiresias from Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex* has greater insight than "regular" men. By challenging the limits of human knowledge, prophets and seers demonstrate that greatness can be dangerous as it is usually accompanied by blindness. On the other hand, blindness could be used as a metaphor for foolishness as is evident by the slapstick clumsiness of the newly-blinded cyclops figure Polyphemus in Euripides' *Cyclops*. Towards more tragic ends, blindness is commonly portrayed as a punishment and used as a metaphor for ignorance and death.[37] The unrealistic yet exceptional treatment of blind characters in Greek mythology bled into reality as blind poets were venerated due to the famed reputation of the blind author and poet Homer.[38]

During the Middle Ages, many of the contradictory meanings attributed to blindness in ancient times persisted, but they also became influenced by the pervasiveness of Christian values in daily life. In the Gospels, the blind are particularly treated as proof of God's power and creation and tools for others to reach salvation.[39] In his seminal study *A History of Disability,* the French anthropologist Henri-Jacques Stiker argues that the largest change in the view of the disabled from Western antiquity to the medieval period was due to the Christian concepts of charity and almsgiving. Stiker notes

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[37] Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece,* 81-82, discusses blindness as punishment; Eleftheria Bernidaki-Aldous, *Blindness in a Culture of Light: Especially the Case of Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 11-26 discusses blindness as a metaphor for death and 49-55 blindness as a metaphor for ignorance.
[38] Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 33.
[39] John. 9:1; Luke. 14:13.

> This would be the system of foundations where, through the intermediary of the church, the generosity of the rich was transformed into the subsistence of the poor. We can even see, in the way in which the church would come to aid the poor, the passage from an economic system based on gifts to a system of exchange. We should add that the ongoing discourse of the Middle Ages claimed that the rich assured their salvation by giving alms to the poor and it thus posited the necessity of the poor for such salvation.[40]

One of the most famous examples of this system of charity is the establishment of the Quinze-Vingts hospice in the thirteenth century. Here, blind members were required to solicit for charity and pray for the benefactors of the hospice. The royal and wealthy benefactors that financially backed this hospice believed that the blind held a special power when it came to God and prayer. This was due to a general belief during the Middle Ages that almsgiving to the poor was necessary for salvation. As part of the poor, blind beggars were privileged intercessors with Christ. Nevertheless, the emphasis on begging in the community at Quinze-Vingts solidified a connection between the blind as beggars that would remain an important force in the secular attitude towards the blind as well.

Due to poor nutrition, sanitation, and disease, blindness was more common in medieval society compared to today. The majority of blind people were poor and the most visible and noticeable blind population in early modern Europe were beggars—this included street musicians and singers. The material reality of most blind people's social status played a part in representation of blindness and the blind in Western Europe. The French historian Zina Weygand has documented the treatment of blindness in France from the medieval period to the nineteenth century.[41] According to Weygand, the secular attitude towards blindness was quite different than the religious one. Whereas religious plays might utilize blind figures to serve as unfortunate

[40] Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability,* trans. William Sayers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 73-74.
[41] Zina Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

souls who are miraculously cured by a saint or Christ—displaying proof of God's grandeur—secular literature repeatedly portrayed the blind as fools. Weygand writes, "Even if there are scenes in medieval religious theater that are not comic in the least, 'in which the blind man is there only to let the grandeur of God and his saints shine forth through a miracle,' the literature of the period often depicts the blind as buffoons whose crude manners, clumsiness, and getups provoke laughter, or as pseudo-paupers to be tricked without remorse."[42] The sheer number and visibility of blind beggars created a culture in which writers could rely on their audiences to be familiar with a stereotype of the blind as pathetic and blindness as something to be pitied or vilified.

Nevertheless, blindness was also considered propitious for divine creation. The musicologist Michael Scott Cuthbert stresses the possibility for disability as a positively acknowledged difference, noting that Italian composers with disabilities in the Middle Ages had abilities that "were rewarded financially and with positions of power, and, more enduringly, their musical styles were considered exemplars for the next generation."[43] For the composer and musician Francesco "Il Cieco" Landini (Francesco "The Blind"), one of the most important musicians of the *ars mutandi,* blindness was considered the source of his extraordinary music abilities. Writing of Landini, the fourteenth century chronicler Filippo Villani remarks

> None of these [contemporary composers], however, nor, for that matter, any composer of fabled antiquity—can measure up to Francesco, who is still alive, and whom I cannot write about truthfully without some fear of seeming to exaggerate. Francesco was hardly past the middle of his childhood when disaster struck him blind with the smallpox. Music, however, compensated him for his

[42] Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille,* 16.
[43] Michael Scott Cuthbert, "Difference, Disability, and Composition in the Late Middle Ages: of Antonio 'Zachara' da Teramo and Francesco 'Il Cieco' Da Firenze," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Black Howe, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 528.

> loss with the bright lights of fame and renown. A harsh mischance took away his bodily sight, but his mind's eye was as sharp and acute as an eagle's.[44]

Joseph Straus discusses Villani's remarks in detail along with Landini's visual depiction in the *Squarcialupi Codex*, noting "These representations simultaneously capture a salient biographical fact and link Landini, through a long line of artistic representations, to 'blind bards,' preeminently Homer, whose blindness is an external mark of a higher vision: the blind person as seer."[45] Reducing Landini to his disability may have been reductive, but it did not lead to stigma or dismissive attitudes towards his work. In the medieval imagination, blindness was portrayed in extremes; it could be a source of creative power while at the same time also signify helpless subjectivity.

So far, this chapter has mainly relied on European analysis of literature and other written sources for their depictions of blindness. Before the late seventeenth century, there are no types of stage music known that contain blind characters.[46] The first opera that depicts blindness is Henry Purcell's 1691 *King Arthur.* Although only given a speaking role because this work is a semi-opera, King Arthur's love interest Emmeline is blind. Her character relies on what the American literary theorist Naomi Schor designates "fortunate blindness." When it comes to love, fortunate blindness depends on the understanding that "Blindness to the other's physical appearance and gestural language is precisely what enables the lover to see…because what is at stake here is a massive repudiation of the supremacy of vision—the lover's true soul."[47] In

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[44] Filippo Villani, *Liber de civitatis Florentiae famisis civibus*, translated in Joseph N. Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 20.
[45] Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music*, 20.
[46] This is based on my own knowledge and Blake Howe, "Musical Representations of Disability," accessed May 1, 2022, https://www.lsu.edu/faculty/bhowe/disability-representation.html. There are three earlier operas based on the Greek mythological characters Acis and Galatea that feature visual impairment through the cyclops character Polyphemus: Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Acis et Galatée* (1688), Antonio de Literes' *Acis y Galatea* (1708), and George Frideric Handel's *Acis and Galatea.* These are not actual cases of blindness because the cyclops character can see and cyclops normally have one eye.
[47] Naomi Schor, "Blindness as Metaphor," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1999): 84.

exchange for her loss of vision, Emmeline has access to a pure form of love for King Arthur. In keeping with the mystical element of the legend, Emmeline's blindness is cured through a magical concoction and the two lovers are reunited at the end of the work. Purcell's *King Arthur* is particularly interesting for the present study, as it foreshadows a development in medical practices and the artistic attitude towards blindness in the eighteenth century. Soon, curing blindness would become a significant preoccupation for Enlightenment thinkers.

The Enlightenment Attitude

A major development concerning blindness occurred in the middle part of the eighteenth century when in 1747 the French oculist Jacques Daviel performed the first cataract extraction.[48] Doctors now had the knowledge to perform surgery on cataracts that cause blindness, one of the most common causes of the disability throughout history. The idea of curing blindness was not new, but the idea that it could be cured by intervention through science and reason had ramifications in philosophy and literature. Alongside this medical advancement came a philosophical preoccupation with how a newly cured blind person would perceive the world, made famous by John Locke's reaction to the Molyneux problem in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* from 1689. Locke concludes that there are no innate senses and a recently cured blind person would not be able to transfer their tactile informed knowledge to their newly acquired vision and required experience in order to gain access to sight. Locke's work was then expanded upon Denis Diderot's 1749 *Lettre sur les aveugles* and Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's 1754 *Traité des sensations*.[49]

[48] Geetha Davis, "The Evolution of Cataract Surgery," *Missouri Medicine* vol. 1 113, 1 (2016): 59.
[49] For a discussion of Locke, Diderot, and Condillac's writings see William Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

This philosophical reckoning with the nonpermanent status of blindness had ramifications in artistic and literary circles as well. Writing of this eighteenth century tendency, William Paulson notes,

> In literature, and especially on the popular stage, a new blind figure appeared: the blind person cured or curable, no longer grotesque or comic or pathetic, but innocent and sensitive, the object nor of horror but of sympathetic fascination for the seeing. In the place of the old myths of exclusion, malediction, and compensation, new myths of blindness appear, based on the supposed inexperience and innocence of the blind, on the emotional experience of seeing for the first time.[50]

By the very end of the eighteenth century, we see the first stage works and operas that reflect the influence of Enlightenment philosophy—blindness is something that can be remedied by human intervention rather than divine or supernatural action. One of the first well-known appearances of a medical cure narrative occurs in Camillo Federici's 1799 play *La cieca nata* where the cataract surgeon Dr. Grant cures the young and beautiful Adelinda Gray. If the earliest musical stage works containing blind characters focused on the capacity for blindness to promote a pure type of love, a new medicalized twist invades this arrangement. In the one-act opera *Les Aveugles de Franconville* from 1802, an oculist cures two blind adolescent lovers due to a promise he made in prayer. Additionally, Adalbert Gyrowetz's 1811 *Der Augenarzt* features the two characters Phillip and Wilhelmine, whose blindness is cured by an oculist.

Because of the newfound possibility to cure or rectify blindness, the idea of educating the blind became extremely popular in the late eighteenth century, seen by the increase of writings on teaching and managing the blind.[51] Yet, even in strictly "realistic" representations of the blind such as those found in educational treatises, there is still a persistent emphasis on the pitifulness of the blind as well as the innate differences between the blind and the seeing that was

[50] Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France,* 13.
[51] Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France,* 95-120.

emphasized in the Middle Ages. The late 1700s see the birth of the school for the blind, evolving the old European ideal of the hospice for the blind. Now, there is not just a moral duty to take care of the blind, but a social duty to educate them. One such famous institution is Valentin Haüy's Institute for Blind Youth, which was founded in 1784. In his *Essai sur l'instruction des aveugles*, Haüy explains he was inspired to start this school after witnessing a group of people poke fun at blind musicians. He writes,

> Eight to ten poor blind men, glasses on their noses, placed along a stand where the music was placed, were performing a discordant symphony, which seemed to provoke joy in those present. An altogether different sentiment overcome our soul; and we conceived at once the possibility of giving these Unfortunates real possession of capabilities that they only seemed, ridiculously, to have. Does not the blind man, said we ourselves to ourselves, know objects by the diversity of their shapes?[52]

Later Haüy modifies his story and claims he viewed this scene not in real life, but in an engraving noting "this was so that the sight, reproduced by my eyes, bearing into my heart a profound affliction, should fire my genius. Yes, I said then to me myself, seized by a noble enthusiasm, I shall put truth in the place of the ridiculous fable."[53] If Haüy was in fact inspired to establish his school based on an engraving rather than an event he actually witnessed, his testimonial only demonstrates the power that literary and artistic depictions of blindness can perform not just in a cultural imagination, but in the material conditions of the blind and way in which we treat disabled people.

In fact, putting truth in the place of fable was the opposite of what Haüy and other educators for the blind accomplished. There were two common myths that were advocated at these institutions. The first one was that blind men were more intelligent because the absence of

[52] Valentin Haüy, *Esssai sur l'instruction des aveugles* (Paris: Les Enfans-Aveugles, 1786), 119, translated in Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France,* 230n8.
[53] Valentin Haüy, "Troisième note," *Trois notes du citoyen Haüy* (Paris: Les Aveugles-Travailleurs, 1801), 10, translated in Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France,* 230n9.

sight made them less susceptible to distractions. Following this line of thinking, the blind had superior reasoning skills and were optimal figures to become great thinkers and sages of a Homerian type, although this intellectual advantage was confined to the masculine realm and did not apply to blind women.[54] Secondly, educational treatises from the middle part of the eighteenth century emphasized music as a way to build the language skills of the blind due to their innate reliance on touch and hearing, although not all types of music were seen as appropriate and street music and musicians were particularly disparaged. Ingrid Sykes has demonstrated how music making was at the center of these educational efforts and the ways in which blind musicians negotiated their identities. Haüy wanted his students to study "great" musical figures such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Claude Balbastre, and François Couperin so they could fully unlock their ability to be "potential masters of a particular kind of speech that relied on higher musical qualities to showcase lingual eloquence."[55]

Nevertheless, at the heart of these educational institutions was the goal of rehabilitating the blind into ocularcentric society and mold them into "self-supporting citizen-patients."[56] Music was but a means to reach them in their own "world" and aid them in reading and writing. Ultimately, educators for the blind approached their pupils from a paternalistic point of view. Left to their own devices, they would not be able to adequately enter into and communicate with the civilized world of the seeing. Speaking of this contradiction, Paulson remarks

> But the educators, concerned as they were both with utilizing the "essence" of blindness in the classroom and with exploiting or taming the fascination and horror with which the seeing imagine the condition of incurable blindness, came much closer than the philosophers, the surgeons, or the writers inspired by them

[54] Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France,* 116.
[55] Ingrid Sykes, "The Politics of Sound: Music and Blindness in France, 1750-1830," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Black Howe, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 97.
[56] Dora Weiner, *The Citizen-Patient in Revolutionary and Imperial Paris* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 237.

> to reviving old myths, myths whose origin and meaning were bound to a concept of blindness as radical difference and isolation.[57]

As much as educators tried, the assimilation of the blind into an ocularcentric culture would never succeed as long as they based their views of blindness on myths and emphasized the innate difference of the blind from the seeing.

Part of this educational project was the goal to demonstrate blind pupil's abilities. In this way, blind students were called on to perform their disability as a theatrical spectacle. Students were expected to recite passages, solve mathematical equations, and play instruments for the Parisian elite. Not all public displays of musicianship were mediated by educational institutions though and blind musicians exerted agency by performing outside of upper class circles in clubs such as the Café des Aveugles—notably against the wishes of administrators at institutions for the blind due to their association with scandalous activities like gambling and prostitution. Eventually Haüy's institute merged with the ancient Quinze-Vingts hospice in 1801 due to political turmoil, but blind students at the two establishments continued pursuing musical careers with the musical background they received. Weygand and Catherine Kudlick have discussed the musical lives of blind musicians such as Jean-François Galliod, a notable organist and teacher at Häuy's school noting,

> Indeed, a ban that the hospice had tried to place on these activities [performing at cafés] during the Restoration proved futile, and later under the July Monarchy the minster of the interior authorized blind musicians who resided at the Quinze-Vingts to play at night in cafés, 'provided that they left half an hour before midnight' so as not to trouble 'the order of the House' by returning at inappropriate hours. Thus, from this day on, the profession of musician finally became an acceptable one for blind people, even when exercised outside religious institutions. Surely this helped broaden the numbers and scope of a cohesive blind community in Paris.[58]

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[57] Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France,* 120.
[58] Thérèse-Adèle Husson, *Reflections: The Life and Writings of a Young Blind Woman in Post-Revolutionary France,* trans. Catherine J. Kudlick and Zina Weygand (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 199.

Certainly, the visibility of blind musicians and the community they worked to form had an impact on the attitudes towards blindness at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Developing the Romantic Blind Ethos

The association between blindness and music continues to be developed in artistic representations of the blind in early nineteenth century Europe, both on-stage and off. Directly inspired by Locke and Condillac, the Italian physician Cristofano Sarti wrote a treatise on optical science titled *L'ottica della natura e dell'educazione indirizzata a risolvere il famoso problema di Molineux* in 1792. Although not necessarily concerned with curing blindness or the education of the blind, Sarti's writing emphasizes an interest in the compensatory tactile capabilities of the blind and the possibilities for social integration. Additionally, Sarti includes many accounts of blind musicians and posits that the blind have a natural gift for playing instruments. While Sarti's view towards blindness and music dates back to earlier eras, his publication does account for the continued interest in the compensatory attributes of the blind that become a defining feature of the nineteenth century. What eventually evolves into the Romantic revival of the blind seer and tactile skills of the blind eschews the cure model we see in eighteenth century literature and the early nineteenth century operas *Les Aveugles de Franconville* and *Der Augenarzt*.

In her book *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770-1830,* the musicologist Ellen Lockhart demonstrates the connection between Sarti's *L'ottica* and the beginning of a fad for blind characters on the Italian stage. Lockhart discusses Federici's *La cieca nata* mentioned before along with his 1791 *Lo scultore ed il cieco* as well as Gaspare Spontini's 1804 opéra-comique *Milton.* Both of Federici's plays contain blind main characters who have a special affinity for physical interactions with art. In *Lo scultore ed il cieco,* Ferdinando, a social outcast

supported only by his family, creates a sculpture "that represents the victory of truth over philosophy."[59] Secondly, Adelinda Gray of *La cieca nata* lives under the care of her widowed mother. As an amateur harpsichordist, Adelinda can recognize colors through her hands based on the tones she creates through her harpsichord. Inspired by the seventeenth-century English blind poet John Milton, Spontini's opera depicts Milton and his struggle to finish *Paradise Lost*. Despite the depressive moods spurred by his disability, he becomes energetic from interacting with his daughter Emma's harp playing and the smell of flowers.

As mentioned earlier in the discussion of enlightenment philosophy and cataract surgery, *La cieca nata* does invest in the cure narrative. But the play also belongs to a transitionary period in the European treatment of blindness on stage. Even while supporting the eminence of doctors, the play emphasizes Adelinda's musical skills and the interpersonal relationships that allow her to function as a blind person—connecting her *Lo scultore ed il cieco* and *Milton*. It is worth noting that when it comes to artistic representations of blindness, cure narratives tend to involve pairs of lovers or a young woman. It may be that in the face of Adelinda's gender, beauty, and age, no composer or writer would construct a narrative in which a young desirable woman remains blind. In any case, through these three stage works Lockhart identifies "an Italian theory of media in this period, [that] was largely concerned with sense compensation rather than extension. Special attention was paid to the ways in which the sense deprived were able to communicate despite an alienation that was likely social as well as perceptual."[60] Through the fine arts, these characters battle alienation and receive a social purpose—a purpose that has everything to do with their blindness and ensuing compensatory artistic skills.

[59] Ellen Lockhart, *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770-1830* (Oakland: University of California Press), 123.
[60] Lockhart, *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770-1830*, 124.

Considering the public visibility of blindness in the nineteenth century, this emphasis on artistic skills and social purpose is not surprising. The majority of blind people would still have belonged to the laboring class and we know the presence of blind beggars—especially blind street musicians—was felt due to surviving historical accounts. Based on an 1804 travel expedition across Europe, Augustus von Kotzebue recounts

> We do not go far, without encountering a third poor wretch bereft of the most valuable of the senses. He has an old harpsichord placed before him on the *Boulevards*, and is thumping a *sonata* with all his might. Numbers of people stop to hear his performance; but the pewter cup, fastened in front of his instrument, seldom resounds with the boon of pity.[61]

In Italy, similar real-life events took place. A writer for the *Giornale euganeo di scienze, lettere ed arti* recounted witnessing a "moving spectacle" of a musical performance played by blind boys from a local orphanage in 1845.[62] It is important to note that "ordinary" beggars would have made up the majority of blind beggars, but the "pitiful" image of blind musicians either on the street or connected to charity groups played a considerable force in forming the nineteenth-century sense of blindness.

Kotzebue's reaction to the sight of a blind musician is one of pity, but especially in fiction, others were prone to romanticize street scenes such as the one he witnessed. Describing the moment Léonce and Delphine meet Monsieur and Madame de Belmont in her novel *Delphine,* Madame de Staël writes,

> The father began a prelude on the spinet with considerable talent and deep sensibility. I know nothing so touching as a blind man surrendering to the inspiration of music; he is cut off from nature in its plenitude but it is as if restored to him by the diversity of sounds and of the impressions they arouse. The natural timidity inseparable from so unfortunate an infirmity prohibits discussing with others the pain one feels, and one almost always avoids mentioning it; but it

[61] Augustus von Kotzebue, *Travels from Berlin through Switzerland to Paris in the Year 1804,* trans. anon. (London: Richard Phillips, 1804), 1:107.
[62] "Notizie milanesi," *Giornale euganeo di scienza, lettere ed arti* 6 (1846): 569-571, quoted and translated in Lockhart, *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770-1830*, 128.

> seems that when a blind man plays melancholy music for you, he reveals the secret of his unhappiness: it gives him pleasure to have found at last a delightful language that allows him touch the heart without fear of wearying it.[63]

What is worth noting here is Madam de Staël's mention of what the blind could do "for you" and the feelings they could inspire in other people. Assuming a sort of emotional economy, blindness is something that had the potential to inspire and benefit the seeing. Describing this trend in French literature from the first third part of the nineteenth century, Weygand states "In particular, in the two literary genres inherited from the late eighteenth century…blindness is of less interest to authors in and of itself than it is a springboard for a discourse on good and evil, where the blind are asked to make us see something other than themselves."[64] In this sense, blindness is something performed for the enlightenment and improvement of others.

But one of the main differences between the medieval preoccupation with the "pitifulness" of the blind and the nineteenth century is a new preoccupation with the capacity of the blind to be put to work. The establishment of institutions to educate the blind continues into the 1800s. In 1805, about a decade after Häuy's first school for the blind, the Instituto dei Ciechi was established in Palermo.[65] Later, the Instituto dei Ciechi di Milano was formally formed in 1836.[66] *The Education and Employment of the Blind* written by the English doctor Thomas Rhodes Armitage in 1886 briefly mentions nine more institutions for the blind in Italy throughout Turin, Genoa, Padua, Florence, Rome, and Naples established between 1839 and 1873.[67] Most of these institutions were schools, but two (the Instituto Margherita in Rome and

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[63] Madam da Staël, *Delphine,* trans. Avriel H Goldberger (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995), 227.
[64] Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille*, 214.
[65] "Storia," Instituto dei Ciechi, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.istciechipalermo.it/storia/.
[66] "La nostra storia," Instituto dei Ciechi di Milano, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.istciechimilano.it/index.php/chi-siamo/76-chi-siamo/231-la-nostra-storia.
[67] Thomas Rhodes Armitage, *The Education and Employment of the Blind: What it Has Been, is, and Ought to Be* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1886), 172-173.

Casa di San Giuseppe and Santa Lucia in Naples) functioned more as asylums and were therefore less focused on education. Nevertheless, the establishment of these institutions showcase a growing concern to ensure the blind had skills that would allow them to function as part of the work force.

Surviving historical documents of those trying to gain entry into the Quinze-Vingts hospice emphasize the blind applicants' inability to earn a living and isolated status in French society.[68] When educational efforts to produce self-sustaining blind citizens failed, parts of the blind population had to rely on charity. These efforts to take care of blind people represent a compassionate and benevolent attitude towards blindness. That attitude may have been predicated on unrealistic stereotypes about the disability, but it did not come from a place of animosity. Not all accounts share this goodwill as seen in the following passage from *Prism. A Moral Encyclopedia of the Nineteenth Century*.

> Ambulant musicians encumber our streets…Paris, which does not lack for beggars, is little adept at concealing or seizing them. And are they not beggars, I ask you, those blind people with their squawking clarinets, those eternal singers of laments, those little hurdy-gurdy players, unlucky children of both sexes on the road to a life of opprobrium and misery? If there must be poor people, may charity at least be freely exercised, and may we prevent importunity and nascent vice from snatching food from the mouths of the true children of God![69]

Clearly, the sight of blind beggars could inspire disgust and anxiety just as easily as it could inspire pity and awe.

It is difficult to view the concern for the education of the blind and their ability to support themselves separately from the birth of statistics during the nineteenth century. Davis documents the rise of statistics and the introduction of the concept of normalcy throughout Europe in his

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[68] Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille*, 8-9.
[69] Maria d'Anspach, "Lees Musiciens ambulants," *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes,* vol. 4, *Le Prisme. Encyclopédie morale du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: L. Curnier, 1842), 186, translated in Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille,* 196.

book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. The field of statistics began as a source of information that governments could rely on to create state policy. Eventually doctors and medical statisticians applied the new discipline to the body, resulting in the notion of the average as an ideal. Specifically, these writers were concerned with the construct of the average middle-class man who was both physically average and morally average. As an ideal member of society, this average man would bring about progress. Many of the early statisticians in Europe also had industry connections and a vested monetary interest in conceptualizing the average or "normal" worker in order to streamline productivity. Within this environment, disabled or blind workers could be viewed as liabilities to economic efficiency. Davis explains, "The next step in conceiving of the population as norm and non-norm is for the state to attempt to norm the nonstandard—the aim of eugenics."[70] Consequently, the culture in which workshops and educational schools for the blind began to appear in Europe was concentrated on the idea of normalcy.

Despite the many efforts to educate the blind, the accounts of blind beggars and requests for charity confirms that nineteenth century European society was not especially accommodating towards blindness. In an increasingly industrial society, they were not included in the notion of the average or desirable worker. Only through correction or compensation could the blind be eligible for social inclusion. However, this type of social inclusion was predicated on the segregation of the blind from mainstream society. The establishment of institutions specifically meant "for the blind" inherently denotes a type of separation or isolation. These schools and charities mark their occupants or students by their deviation from the norm. Davis writes, "When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with

[70] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body,* 30.

disabilities will be thought of as deviants."[71] Through exclusion, nineteenth-century institutions for the blind worked to stigmatize their inhabitants while simultaneously mitigate their physical differences.

Even when upholding positive stereotypes about blindness or portraying a sympathetic approach to it, artistic and musical representations of disability reflect the growing call for sameness in the nineteenth century. As we saw earlier, stage works and literature from the first part of the nineteenth century upheld the special skills of the blind whether that be in poetry, music, or three-dimensional art. While supremely gifted, these blind characters are still abnormal. Shunned from their outside communities, they rely on their family members' kindness in order to function. Opera represented a stage in which composers and librettists could negotiate the concepts of normalcy and abnormalcy. Although focused on physical disfigurement, Linda and Michael Hutcheon have discussed the ways in which Verdi's portrayal of Rigoletto places the blame on society for treatment of the disabled—he is the victim, not the instigator. Mistreated by the courtiers and motivated by his love for his daughter Gilda, he is "A typical scapegoat, he is both inside that community and excluded from it, distanced by his special isolating identity."[72] Throughout the opera, Rigoletto's abnormality is contained by his ostracization and tragic fate. The segregation of the disabled reflected in *Rigoletto* reflects a larger societal trend towards disability postindustrial Europe. We see this same narrative play out in nineteenth-century operas that contain blind characters.

Relying less on cure narratives, Romantic composers revive the ancient topos of the blind seer and visionary. We saw the beginning of this with the two plays *La cieca nata* and *Lo*

[71] Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body,* 29.
[72] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 75.

scultore ed il cieco and the opéra-comqiue *Milton,* but as the nineteenth century continued composers become less interested in aligning blind characters with the arts in favor of immaterial spiritual gifts. With the revival of the blind seer comes an attitude of permanence towards blindness. Paulson notes "In many of the eighteenth century writings studied here, blindness implicitly means congenital and possibly curable lack of sight; in many nineteenth-century writings it means incurable *loss* of sight."[73] Paulson is referring to his study of literature and French Romanticism, but he outlines an important point. Just as the construction of normalcy gains traction in European society, so too do fictional representations of blindness focus on its permanent quality. Consequently, the blind are considered *permanently* abnormal and clear lines are drawn between them and their sighted companions—especially in opera. In some cases, this has violent repercussions for blind characters.

Chapters two and three will deal with the archetype of the spiritually gifted and insightful blind visionary in more depth, but I will briefly mention two instances here as an introduction. We can see this in Donizetti's *Belisario,* which portrays the famed blind Byzantine general Flavius Belisarius as he leads his troops to victory. Unjustly exiled by the Emperor based on lies, Belisario resigns to live out his days in the mountains. While there, he convinces the leader of the enemy troops to abandon his post and fight on behalf of the Byzantine Empire. His ostracization is posited as a positive force, as it is what allows Belisario to save Byzantium. Mortally wounded in combat, Belisario succumbs to his injuries and dies. Premiered in 1836, this opera offers a sympathetic portrayal of blindness and blames societal forces for Belisario's mistreatment, even as it normalizes the death of a disabled character. A similar operatic narrative plays out later in Ponchielli's 1876 *La Gioconda* through the portrayal of the elderly blind

[73] Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France*, 4.

woman La Cieca. Although a side character, she constantly prays to God and is a devoutly religious foil to the townspeople who are more concerned with the amusements of Carnival. Accused of witchcraft, La Cieca is exonerated through the intervention of Laura. In return, La Cieca offers Laura her rosary and a blessing in her *romanza* "Voce di donna o d'angelo." However, La Cieca's piety is not enough to save her as we find out she has been unjustly murdered by Barnaba at the end of the last act. Most important, the blind La Cieca's presence in the opera guarantees that the audience views Barnaba as a villain.

Not all late nineteenth century operas offer this rose-colored view of blindness. Sometimes, it is used more literally as a metaphor for ignorance, as is the case in Mascagni's *Iris.* Il Cieco, the father of Iris, is blind and unable to understand that his daughter has been kidnapped. Instead, he believes that she has chosen to abandon him and become a prostitute. When Il Cieco finally does locate Iris in a red-light district of Japan, he curses and formally rejects her. Doomed to wander without his "Iris" (eyes), the father is permanently ostracized from society. Additionally, the Grand Inquisitor from Verdi's *Don Carlos* represents an ironic use of blindness, as he is a weak elderly man but also one of the most powerful figures of the Spanish Inquisition. In the Duo scene with King Philip II, he is revealed to be immoral as he uses his influence to push for the death of the freedom fighter Marquis de Posa. While not totally ostracized because of his blindness, he is still marked as an abnormal disabled character.

When it comes to blindness, we see an amalgamation of meanings attributed to blindness available for use by nineteenth century composers. As the century went on, composers go beyond normalizing blindness with cures in favor of a kill narrative.[74] This was part of a larger

[74] Tchaikovsky's 1892 *Iolanta* represents a notable outlier as the young and blind Iolanta falls in love with a knight and is eventually cured by a physician. Again, the cure narrative appears when it is a young beautiful woman who is blind.

societal movement in the nineteenth century in which blindness was configured as a permanent abnormality that had to be contained. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder examine the use of disability as a "narrative prosthesis" whereby the abnormal (and more specifically disabled body) is repaired by the end of the work.[75] Almost always this is accomplished by the murder and ostracization of disabled characters. In the case of opera, some of the most sympathetic blind characters such as Belisario and La Cieca face extreme violence and segregation. After the first third of the century, even when blind opera characters are not killed, they do not "overcome" their disability through artistic achievements. Instead, they become side characters "either left behind or punished for [their] lack of conformity."[76]

As demonstrated in this chapter, the fictional representation of blind characters can reflect the ways in which blind people are treated in society. In this sense, this thesis is a political project as it seeks to address the ways in which blindness has been represented on the operatic stage and the ways this participated in producing a European society unable to adequately meet the needs of blind people. By investigating the meanings attributed to blindness and treatment of blind characters, I hope to bring attention to the importance of representation and the social problems it can exacerbate.

[75] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press).
[76] Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse,* 56.

Chapter 2: Power and Disability in *Belisario* and *Don Carlos*

When it comes to disability and blindness, there are a few familiar stereotypes on which composers and artists draw. Whereas the previous chapter mainly focused on blind literary and artistic characters who were pitiful or clumsy, this chapter considers a new image—the paradoxically powerful blind man. Focusing on two Italian operas—Donizetti's *Belisario* and Verdi's *Don Carlos*—I track how common stereotypes inherited from the past concerning blindness and physical frailty are interwoven with notions of power.

Belisario is an aging Byzantine general who becomes blind throughout the course of the opera, thus becoming physically dependent on others. Even though we witness the decline of his senses throughout the opera, we also observe the blind general overcome his physical limitations and disability—even going as far as to take part in battle. By doing so, he secures the future of the Byzantine Empire and its reputation as an important military force. When it comes to nineteenth-century opera, *Belisario* is a special case, as the operatic conventions followed in this work raise significant points about how musical forms and opera itself can create disabling environments for characters with impairments or disabilities. We do not see this displayed in the musical materials of *Don Carlos,* but the Grand Inquisitor's character resonates with the contradictory nature between blindness and power, as he is both physically frail and a powerful political and aural force in the opera. Both of these characters wield an unusual type of agency, as they display behaviors predicated on the idea of the blind as weak, but they also exert physical force and showcase capabilities not traditionally attributed to blind men.

Belisario

> *I will do Belisario at Venice, and I am really going there like a blind man because I don't remember the way, and I don't know who the tenor will be.*
>
> Gaetano Donizetti, letter from November 1835[77]

Although not a particularly profound remark on the experiences and characteristics of blindness, the opening quote from Donizetti reveals his personal attitude towards the disability. Despite its humorous undertones, Donizetti's remarks resonate with traditional notions of blindness as an incapacitating and traumatic experience. The librettist of *Belisario*, Salvatore Cammarano, based his writing on Luigi Marchionni's adaptation of Eduard von Schenk's play *Belisarius.*[78] All three of these retellings were inspired by the tale of the sixth century Byzantine general Flavius Belisarius, who had a reputation as a skilled military leader.

From surviving records, military studies recount Belisarius being a major figure in guaranteeing the success of the Byzantine Empire during the Gothic and Vandalic Wars as well as leading successful defensive campaigns against the Huns and Persians.[79] Eventually, Belisarius' genuine military accomplishments blended with fiction to create a romanticized image of a selfless leader. Regarding his last act as general during which he spearheaded a defense of Constantinople, the British aristocrat Philip Stanhope writes,

> In this general confusion and affright, Justinian and his subjects turned with hope to the illustrious conqueror of Africa and Italy, whose strength was broken by old age and military labours, but whose heart was still alive to the call of loyalty and honour. The struggle was no longer for increase of territory or dominion over foreign nations, but for the very existence of the Roman empire, and Belisarius prepared to crown his glorious life by a last and decisive battle. He resumed his

[77] Gaetano Donizetti to Jacopo Ferretti, Roma, November 12, 1835, in Guido Zavadini, *Donizetti: Vita – Musiche - Epistolario* (Bergamo: Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1948), 391, translated in William Ashbrook, *Donizetti and His Operas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 105.
[78] Ashbrook, *Donizetti and His Operas*, 561.
[79] For more on Flavius Belisarius' accomplishments see Ian Hughes, *Belisarius: The Last Roman General* (Yardley, Pa.: Westholme, 2009).

> rusty armour, he collected a handful of his scattered veterans, and his contemporaries were astonished at observing, amidst the weakness of decrepitude, all the martial spirit and buoyancy of youth.[80]

Written in 1829, the above excerpt showcases an elaborate form of rhetoric that is easy to dismiss given its outdated style. But it helps reconstruct the reputation that Belisarius would have held in nineteenth-century Europe. According to apocryphal accounts that have since been refuted,[81] Belisarius was falsely accused of betraying Emperor Justinian shortly after his campaign in Constantinople. As punishment he was blinded and "reduced to beg his bread before the gates of the convent of Laurus."[82] The veracity of these claims are less important than the reality that Donizetti and Cammarano were inheriting the image of an extraordinary blind literary and historical figure before they began writing this opera.

Although it is not widely performed today, *Belisario* had a successful first run with twenty-eight performances in its opening season after premiering on February 4th, 1836 at the Teatro la Fenice in Venice.[83] This made it more successful at the time than Donizetti's now famous opera *Lucia di Lammermoor.*[84] Labeled an *opera seria,* the work is divided into three acts: *Il Trionfo* (The Triumph), *L'Esilio* (The Exile), and *La Morte* (The Death). As Belisario remains sighted during the first act, most of the relevant musical and dramatic details relating to his disability are focused in the second and third acts.

The first act opens with celebratory festivities after a successful military battle with Belisario (baritone) at the head of the Byzantine troops. In a conversation with Belisario's wife Antonina (soprano), another general claims that on his deathbed, Belisario's slave Proclus

[80] Philip Stanhope, *The Life of Belisarius* (London: J. Murray, 1829), 413.
[81] Hughes, *Belisarius: The Last Roman General*, 386.
[82] Stanhope, *The Life of Belisarius*, 422.
[83] Stanhope, 107.
[84] William Ashbrook, "Popular Success, the Critics and Fame: The Early Careers of 'Lucia Di Lammermoor' and 'Belisario,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2, no. 1 (1990): 65–81.

revealed that Belisario is responsible for the death of their son Alamiro. Antonina decides she will conspire against Belisario as an act of revenge. Meanwhile, Belisario requests that Emperor Giustiniano free all of their captives and the Emperor complies. One captive named Alamiro (tenor) asks to stay by Belisario's side which Belisario allows in their duet "Quando di sangue tinto." Behind the scenes, Antonina has been conspiring against Belisario and eventually convinces Emperor Giustiniano of Belisario's guilt. The act closes with Belisario being sentenced to prison as a punishment for filicide.

Relatively brief compared to the first and third acts, Act II begins with Alamiro pledging to seek revenge against the Byzantines for their treatment of Belisario and threatens war against the Empire. Now blind, Belisario is about to be released from prison. Belisario's daughter Irene (soprano) travels to reunite with her father and guide him away from prison culminating in their duet "Oh tu che dell'eterna orribil note."

The last act focuses on Belisario's ability to remain a skilled general and protect the Byzantine Empire. Irene leads Belisario to a cave in the mountains where they are soon joined by Alamiro and his army of Barbarians (enemies of the Byzantines) who are headed to attack Byzantine forces. Belisario becomes angry and confronts Alamiro for betraying the Byzantines. In the ensuing argument, Belisario realizes Alamiro is his son. Following his father's orders, Alamiro abandons the opposing army. We return to a hall in Byzantium where Antonina admits to the Emperor that her testimony was false. Irene joins them and reveals that it was Proclus, not Belisario who is responsible for the attempted murder of Alamiro. Meanwhile, the Byzantines have fought a successful defense against the imposing Barbarian army but in the process Belisario was mortally wounded. As Belisario lays dying, Emperor Giustiniano pledges to act as

a father to Irene and Alamiro and Antonina begs for forgiveness for the role she played in Belisario's fate.

Creating the Blind General

Belisario is one of the few examples of operas in which a disabled character receives the title role and he is not a sidekick—in fact he is the hero. Another striking aspect of the opera is Donizetti's decision to write the lead character as a baritone. The opera scholar William Ashbrook has discussed how this was part of a trend in Donizetti's writing during the 1830s in which he reserved low masculine voices for a special emotional and psychological purpose. Discussing the main character and principal baritone role of Donizetti's *Il furioso all'isola di San Domingo* (1832), Ashbrook writes,

> Since for much of the action of *Il furioso* Cardenio is represented as driven mad by the thought that his wife is unfaithful, it is understandable that Donizetti wanted the masculine sound of the baritone to convey the character's sexual anguish, rather than the more ambiguous vocal color of a *tenore contraltino*…It is relevant to remember here that Donizetti's only previous presentation of a deranged male character (Murena in *L'esule di Roma*) was written for a bass; he seems therefore to have judged this kind of vocal sound appropriate to the expression of the sufferings of a deeply troubled mind.[85]

Although Belisario is not mad like Cardenio, the manner in which he reacts to accusations of filicide and his experience with blindness does point towards a man dealing with "the sufferings of a deeply troubled mind." In Act I, after Belisario receives the news that he will be punished due to Antonina's betrayal, Belisario declares, "Grief makes me blind!"[86]—foreshadowing the physical change he will soon undergo.

[85] Ashbrook, *Donizetti and His Operas,* 337.
[86] *Cieco mi rende il duol!*

The main musical event that contributes to our understanding of blindness in the opera is the scene and duet between Irene and Belisario that occurs well into the second act. For instance, the staging of the duet in Act II scene iv emphasizes physical indications of Belisario's blindness. The score includes the direction "Belisario arises from the prison with the blindfold,"[87] which helps make clear to the audience that Belisario no longer has access to his sense of sight. Beyond this immediately recognizable symbol of blindness, there are explicit textual references to darkness and light that fully convey Belisario's transformation and the traumatic punishment he has just experienced. This emphasis on darkness to symbolize blindness relies on a conventional literary trope that the blind are confined to live in a world of darkness.[88] During the recitative, Belisario bemoans his new condition and the "horrible night" that covers his eyes (*Oh tu, che della eterna, orribil notte/Che ricopre il mio ciglio*).

Although subtle, Donizetti musically emphasizes references to eyesight throughout the duet. This scene began with mourning the loss of his eyes, but during the *moderato* section of the duet—"Dunque andiam"—Belisario's mood quickly changes to one of gratitude and optimism. He declares to Irene, "You are the angel, you are the leader/You among the shadows are the light."[89] As Belisario continues throughout the *moderato,* the strings switch to a *pizzicato* texture in the orchestral accompaniment. This thinner timbre quality accentuates Belisario's repeated utterings of the phrase "And of the eyes that I lost/You are more dear to me"[90] with agogic accents on *occhi* (eyes) and *perdei* (lost), which can be seen in Example 1. The last syllable of those two words is repeatedly placed on the first and strongest beat of the next measure.

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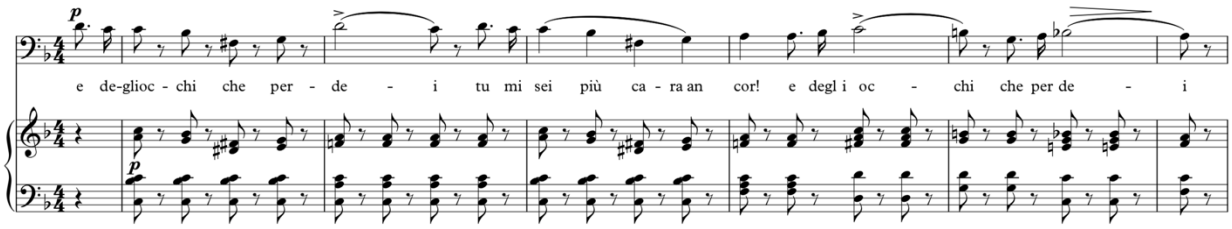
[87] "Sorte dal carcere Belisario colla benda agli occhi." Gaetano Donizetti, *Belisario*: An Opera in Three Acts, libretto by Salvatore Cammarano (Melville, N.Y.: Belwin Mills Publishing, [197-?]), 89.
[88] Michael E. Monbeck, *The Meaning of Blindness: Attitudes Toward Blindness and Blind People* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 31.
[89] *Tu sei l'angelo, tu il duce/Tu fra l'ombre sei la luce*
[90] *E degli occhi che perdei/Tu mi sei più cara ancor*

Normally this would be a poor or unusual example of text setting, but here it draws extra attention to Belisario's "lost eyes." The most defining musical feature o f "Dunque andiam" is the manner in which Donizetti accentuates Belisario's loss of sight.



Example 1. *Belisario*, Act II scene iv, *Dunque andiam*

Repeating the same melody as her father, Irene enters thanking God for reuniting the two of them and asks Him for protection. In true *bel canto* fashion, the duet culminates with the father and daughter singing an identical rhythm in thirds apart on top of a I-IV-V harmony.

What we do learn from this duet is the importance of the relationship between Belisario and his daughter—a pious woman with a strong religious attitude. In a noteworthy move, the stage direction for the beginning of Act III indicates that Belisario is no longer wearing a blindfold.[91] Symbolically, this expresses a type of rebirth or awakening; he is literally removing limitations to his sight. Whereas the previous act focused on Belisario's descent into a "horrible night," the third and last act focuses on Belisario claiming his identity as a blind man and the agency he can still wield as a military authority. Acting as his eyes, Irene leads Belisario to a cave. Soon, they are joined by Alamiro and his chorus of troops who dominate the second scene with a military inspired call to arms. Belisario interrupts Alamiro and his troops by crying out *Fermate!* (Stop!) while "throwing down his stick and posing in a majestic demeanor."[92] Relying on touch, Belisario recognizes Alamiro as his long-lost son by placing his hands on a cross

[91] "Belisario senza benda, ed Irene: entrambi avanzandosi a stento." Donizetti, *Belisario*: An Opera in Three Acts, 102.
[92] "Gettando il bastone ed atteggiandosi a maestoso contegno." Donizetti, *Belisario*: An Opera in Three Acts, 110.

necklace and dagger in Alamiro's possession. Only as a blind man with a reliance on touch is Belisario able to access the truth about his son's identity. Once Belisario makes this connection, he convinces Alamiro to abandon his allegiance to Byzantine's enemies and desert his troops.

Reflecting on the emphasis on the compensatory non-visual skills of blind characters contained in Italian stage works from the turn of the nineteenth century discussed in chapter one (the sculptor in *Lo scultore ed il cieco,* the harpist in *La cieca nata* and the visionary poet from *Milton*), *Belisario* can be seen as a continuation of that practice. But in this new Romantic operatic treatment of blind characters, the compensatory gifts Belisario receives are more immaterial. The first gift involves the ability to perceive the familial bond he shares with Alamiro; no one else in the family is able to make this connection, not even Alamiro himself.[93] In the end, blindness is constructed less as a punishment and rather a type of insight that allows Belisario to strengthen and develop familial bonds. We see this also in the second act duet between him and his daughter. Irene must act as his eyes and guide, forcing the two into a stronger relationship.

Outside of the private sphere, Belisario does not produce artwork or any type of artistic product for the Byzantine public, but he does ensure a successful military outcome and the preservation of the empire. Therefore, blindness also enhances Belisario's ability to serve as a wise general. If it were not for his punishment and exile, he would not have been in the position to incapacitate the Barbarian army. When he shouts *Fermate!* to the opposing army he not only aurally projects his authority over them, but he also physically imposes himself by throwing

[93] This type of recognition based off an object is conventional, especially in French melodrama. "Hence the importance of the notorious melodramatic token of identity, which came to be known as *la croix de ma mère,* "my mother's cross," from the number of plays in which an apparent orphan or young person of otherwise misattributed parentage is recognized in the last act by a token preserved since birth." Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1994), 605.

down his stick, an object intimately connected to his status as a blind man. For all of the negative stereotypes of blindness in which *Belisario* engages, at times the dramatic plot challenges the premise of a weak blind man. After reuniting with Alamiro, Belisario miraculously engages in warfare despite his physical state. We never see this on stage or hear any music depicting the battle, but we do witness one of the repercussions in the last scene of the third act when Belisario returns to Emperor Giustiniano's court with a mortal wound.

In his article "Screening Stereotypes: Image of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," Paul Longmore discusses the cultural work that myths of heroic compensation perform in real life. Longmore writes that according to the common myth,

> Disability is primarily a problem of emotional coping, of personal acceptance. It is not a problem of social stigma and discrimination. It is a matter of individuals overcoming not only the physical impairments of their own bodies but, more important, the emotional consequences of such impairments. Both fictional and nonfictional stories convey the message that success or failure in living with a disability results almost solely from the emotional choices, courage, and character of the individual.[94]

As a blind military general, Belisario exemplifies the ideal of a courageous individual who overcomes personal physical limitations. Immediately after becoming blind, he is portrayed as physically weak and dependent on his daughter although through personal adjustment, he discovers a new type of agency and reclaims his strength as a military leader. Through doing so, he returns to his original and "rightful" position as a Byzantine general and becomes more physically and symbolically able.

Referring back to Stanhope's characterization of the real Flavius Belisarius mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it seems there was a strong nineteenth-century tendency to idealize Belisarius' character and legacy—and the operatic Belisario is no exception. Certainly

[94] Paul Longmore, "Screening Stereotypes: Image of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 137-138.

Stanhope's words "his [Belisarius'] contemporaries were astonished at observing, amidst the weakness of decrepitude, all the martial spirit and buoyancy of youth"[95] easily apply to our baritone hero. By combining elements of weakness, authority, and power into one figure, Donizetti and Cammarano indulge in the narrative of heroic compensation. And the idealization of Belisario's physical capabilities and ability to command others even in the face of his disability is at the heart of this sense of compensation. Without moments of frailty and vulnerability, the sight of Belisario's triumphs would not be as significant.

Operatic Convention as a Disabling Environment

Here lies one of the most confounding aspects of the opera. While Belisario is still off-stage battling Barbarians, Antonina begins singing her *cantabile "*Da quel di che l'innocente" marked *larghetto* in A major. True to convention, it ends with a cadenza after which the chorus announces the victory of the Byzantine army. So far throughout the third act, Belisario has only made one appearance consisting of the reunion trio with Alamiro and Irene. Already, we have heard more from Antonina, a rather unsympathetic character, than Belisario. For his second appearance, Belisario is carried to the Byzantine court after "Da quell di che l'innocente" with a mortal wound where he utters his last breath.

A te…Cesare,	To you…Caesar
de' figlia la sorte affido…	I entrust my children's fate…
rammentalo…nell'ora di…morte	Remember it…in the hour of…death

Donizetti did not give Belisario his own formal aria to deliver these words although it is fittingly placed in D minor for his "hour of death." Here, Belisario proclaims he harbors no ill feelings towards Emperor Giustiniano who he asks to take care of his children after he is gone. It is

[95] Stanhope, *The Life of Belisarius*, 413.

imperative to add that his death is remarkably brief; he only sings five and a half measures of music. After Belisario's short swan song he succumbs to his injuries and collapses. The orchestra reacts accordingly and the strings continue to stress the D minor tonality through an agitated descending motive outlining a C-sharp fully diminished seventh chord. This motive then leads into final repetitions of unison octave A's stressing the dominant tonality, which creates a sense of arrival at a low point mirroring Belisario's own fall.

Quickly, this moment is interrupted by a *maestoso* tempo change and Antonina's *cabaletta* "Egli è spento" in D major—the real finale of the opera. Although this move makes sense harmonically, the key change from D minor to D major does not fully capture the guilt Antonina expresses in her aria. She is not singing praises of Belisario's legacy but rather bemoaning the suffering and torment she will experience for the rest of her life from the knowledge she played a central part in his death. In addition, it should be noted that by ending the work with a *cabaletta* Donizetti is accommodating the aria finale convention. So the move to the *cabaletta* is not unexpected, but it does not adequately underline the dead hero Belisario. After such a weak death scene, it is strange to have the chorus join Antonina in her *cabaletta* and continue singing over Belisario's dead body. Ultimately, while "Egli è spento" is quite Donizettian in nature and offers the soprano a chance to demonstrate her *coloratura* abilities, it belittles the emotional impact of Belisario's death.

The circumstances of Belisario's death bring up an important point about the balance of musical and dramatical elements in this opera. Despite the fact Belisario is the hero of this opera, there is a sense of dissonance between the dramatic importance of his character and the attention paid towards him musically. Belisario and his blindness are crucial to the plot, but it seems strange that the hero of the opera does not receive his own standalone aria considering Irene,

Alamiro, and Antonina all do. This is not due to the status of the role as a baritone part and Donizetti seemingly made this decision to reflect the psychological development of the character. In addition Cardenio from *Il furioso,* the first opera Donizetti opera in which a baritone plays a disabled hero, plays a much more integral role to the musical makeup of the opera and has his own mad scene; he does not only appear in duos or trios with other characters.

Besides *Il furioso*, there are four other Donizetti operas with a baritone playing the title role: *Alahor in Granata* (1826), *Olivio e Pasquale* (1827), *Il borgomastro di Saardan* (1827), and *Torquato Tasso* (1833). As is the case with *Il furioso,* all of these operas feature baritone leads who receive their own arias.[96] The last opera in particular—*Torquato Tasso*—demonstrates how Donizetti strayed from his own precedent in his musical treatment of the blind hero Belisario. Premiering just three years before *Belisario, Torquato Tasso* contains extended solo material for the baritone Tasso during the last act—the *larghetto* "Perche dell'aure in sen," *cantabile* "Parlera ne sogni miei lascera," and *cabaletta* "Tomba di lei, che rendermi." This *cantabile* and *cabaletta* conform to the aria finale convention, but they are written for the baritone lead whereas in the finale to *Belisario* the double aria is sung by the soprano Antonia.

Practical issues such as a singer with vocal limitations did not seem to pose a problem to Donizetti's compositional process for Belisario. In fact, Ashbrook's work analyzing Donizetti's letters points to the completely opposite idea. Donizetti already knew by October 1835 that Celestino Salvatori would sing the lead role just a few months after the contract for the opera was signed in July by the impresario Natale Fabbrici. Ashbrook writes,

> The composer's [Donizetti's] concern over the singers engaged to appear in the *prime* of his operas did not stop with their dramatic abilities; he was, of course,

[96] Alahor's "Ombra del padre mio" from *Alahor in Granata,* Olivio's "Non fate strepito, non mi seccate" from *Olivio e Pasquale,* Tsar Pietro's "Va, e la nave in un balento" from *Il borgomasto di Saardan*, Cardenio's "Raggio d'amor parea" from *Il furioso nell'isola di San Domingo*, and Torquato Tasso's "Perché dell'aure in sen" from *Torquato Tasso.* For more on these operas see Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas*.

> even more anxious to know their vocal strengths and defects. In his letter 24 October to Fabbrici, he voices his anxiety at still not knowing who will be the leading tenor for *Belisario*… until he knows for sure, he says, 'I cannot compose duets, finales, trios'. In this context, he mentions ensembles rather than arias because he knows that he can easily adjust solo passages during the rehearsal period.[97]

Even if Donizetti did not know which singer was going to cover the principal tenor role (Alamiro), this should not have led him to write no arias for Belisario. Donizetti began composing *Belisario* in October, which was the same month he wrote to Fabbrici about his anxiety over who would perform as Alamiro. Yet, Donizetti still wrote two arias for Alamiro—"A sì tremendo annunzio" and "Trema, Bisanzio! sterminatrice"

There is also no reason to believe Donizetti questioned Salvatori's dramatic or vocal capabilities. Regarding a performance of Gioachino Rossini's *L'assedio di Cortino* in January 1836*,* which featured three singers for *Belisario*, Donizetti wrote, "*L'assedio* did not please, rather la Vial did not please at all. Only Salvatori was applauded a great deal, and Pasini avoided disaster."[98] Apparently Donizetti's real issue was with the singers for Irene (Antonietta Vial) and Alamiro (Ignazio Pasini). Combined with the figure of Cardenio, this information regarding the casting of the premiere indicates that Donizetti had no difficulties creating large principal baritone parts. His compositional choices and distribution of musical materials regarding Belisario were particular to this opera and blindness itself.

Belisario suggests that blindness poses a problem to *bel canto* operatic conventions in a way that other disabilities such as madness do not. After all, some of the most famous Italian arias from the early part of the with nineteenth century are mad scenes: "Il dolce suono…Spargi

[97] Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas,* 106.
[98] Gaetano Donizetti to Giovanni Ricordi, February 5, 1836, 35, in *Studi donizettiani* (Bergamo: Secomandi, 1962), translated in Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas*, 106.

d'amaro pianto*"* from *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), "Qui la voce…Vien diletto*"* from *I puritani* (1835), and "Ah non credea" from *La Sonnambula* (1831). And these scenes are subsumed within formal operatic conventions; they do not represent a problem to the continuity or structure of the opera. In contrast, Belisario's death appears almost as an after-thought—it does not even last a full six measures. Instead, it interrupts Antonia's two-part *cantabile* and *cabaletta* finale. This indicates a hierarchy of disability in nineteenth-century opera with blindness serving as a less valuable form of disability compared to madness. It seems "easier" or more logical to give voice to madness. Blindness, related to the visual and not the voice, is less naturally represented by musical means.

The inability for Belisario to function as a real musical force even in a potentially musically rich moment such as death during this opera may explain why we see so few blind or disabled heroes in nineteenth-century literature and opera. *Belisario* demonstrates that when a blind character plays an principal dramatic role, they are not adequately accommodated into the world of operatic conventions. Disability theorists have long stressed the social construction of disability as something produced in relation to a disabling environment. Lennard Davis writes, "But an impairment only becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers—affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural."[99]

Belisario may play the principal baritone part and act as a hero, but he is sidelined by less important characters. In his writing on the opera Ashbrook admits "There is a certain brash extroversion about much of the choral music and marches, both frequent in this military ambience, that does not accord well with the more personal and human aspects of the drama, such as the duet for Irene and Belisario."[100] The Italian musicologist Guglielmo Barblan has

[99] Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions*, 41.
[100] Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas,* 385.

similarly accused the opera with the charge of being impersonal.[101] Although not speaking from a disability perspective, these remarks seemingly acknowledge the problem I have identified as a failure in *Belisario* to properly accommodate its blind hero into the architecture of the opera.[102] The remainder of blind characters I consider in this thesis are side characters so they may not present the same challenges to the musical structure as Belisario did. However, *Belisario* points to the further need to consider how blind and disabled characters are accommodated within operatic conventions. Just as societies and cultures can produce disabling environments, so too can composers and musical conventions.

Don Carlos

So far, we have only encountered a heroic blind character who is highly sympathetic and idealized. Verdi's 1867 *Don Carlos* introduces us to one of the most negative portrayals of a blind character so far seen on the nineteenth-century Italian opera stage. The source for Verdi's grand opera is Friedrich Schiller's 1787 play *Don Karlos, Infant von Spanien*. As a representative of the Inquisition and the violent consequences of religion, the Grand Inquisitor's formal function in the play is to serve as opposition to the idealist and populist figures Marquis de Posa and Carlos.[103] In his study of the representation of blindness in Western literature, Michael Monbeck identifies Schiller's Grand Inquisitor as one of the first portrayals of a blind person as immoral and evil. Monbeck writes, "Schiller, in his play *Don Carlos* (1787), portrays the extremely cruel and merciless grand inquisitor as blind. His cruelty is at least partly due to

[101] Guglielmo Barblan, *Gaetano Donizetti:Vita e opere di un musicista romantico* (Bergamo: Società di assicurazioni Liguria, 1983), 125.
[102] I am indebted to Calum Jensen for engaging in a conversation with me on *Belisario* that led to this idea.
[103] Graham Orton, *Schiller: Don Carlos* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1967), 35.

his blindness, for as one of the characters says, 'The world has one less access to your heart—your eyes are sunken night.'"[104]

The Grand Inquisitor and the Duo Scene

As mentioned, *Don Carlos'* Grand Inquisitor is an immoral blind figure. But he also represents an ironic use of disability, as the Grand Inquisitor (bass) is blind and a frail ninety-year-old man who wields a considerable amount of power due to his position as the head of the Church and the most powerful figure of the Spanish Inquisition. Despite his frail physical condition, the other characters have to submit to his authority. Nowhere is this more apparent than the Duo scene between King Philip II of Spain (bass) and the Grand Inquisitor in Act IV. Julian Budden fittingly describes this scene as a "conflict of two superhuman, patriarchal forces, Church and State."[105]

In the score, the staging requires that the Grand Inquisitor enters this scene with support from two Dominican priests (*Le Grand Inquisiteur aveugle (90 ans) entrant appuyé sur deux dominicans*), underlining his weak physical condition. King Philip begins by asking the Grand Inquisitor if the Inquisitor would be able to absolve him of murder if Philip allowed his son Don Carlos (tenor), a political rebel, to be executed for treason against the crown. The Grand Inquisitor reassures Philip and reminds the King that even God sacrificed his own son. Swiftly, the Grand Inquisitor changes the subject to push for his own agenda—he also wants the freedom fighter Marquis de Posa (baritone) to be put to death. Philip attempts to resist, but the Grand Inquisitor reminds him that royalty has to bow down to the power of the Church (Everything

[104] Monbeck, *The Meaning of Blindness: Attitudes Toward Blindness and Blind People*, 56.
[105] Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Volume 3 From Don Carlos to Falstaff* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 123.

bows and remains silent when faith speaks!).[106] In Schiller's play, Posa has already died by the time the King and the Grand Inquisitor meet. The choice to keep him alive during this scene in the opera provides Verdi an opportunity to emphasize the immoral nature of the Grand Inquisitor who calls for Posa's murder.

The Grand Inquisitor is a bass role, but this vocal category does not necessarily point to his disability. King Philip and *Un moine* (A monk) are two other characters in Verdi's opera written for basses. Voice type alone does not account for the Grand Inquisitor's distinctive vocal authority in his interactions with the King. Rather, it points towards the masculine struggle for power between Church and State. Catherine Clément notes

> The opera [*Don Carlos*] is dominated by masculine tonalities: three bass voices where it is hard to establish any hierarchy among the burgraves. One is the holder of royal power, Philip II, a gloomy and solitary prince…The other holds him in the palm of his hand. This is the Inquisitor, blind but backed by two little monks, impotent but omnipotent in State decisions. When these two are allied against Philip's own son, Church and State come together to destroy him.[107]

Musically, the instrumentation underlines the Grand Inquisitor's religious command. While he enters the scene, there is a four measure legato melody in the bassoon, contrabassoon, cellos, and basses. This melody is repeated underneath Philip's vocal lines, but never the Grand Inquisitor's, suggesting that the Inquisitor wields some power over Philip's speech. In addition, the trombone underlines much of the Grand Inquisitor's vocal line, and it was consistently associated with the sublime, the supernatural, and the ancient at the time of *Don Carlos'* premiere.[108] Thus, the Grand Inquisitor is simultaneously represented as a powerful aural force and supernatural being.

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[106] *Tout s'incline et se tait lorsque parle la foi!*
[107] Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 67.
[108] Flora Willson, "Of Time and the City: Verdi's *Don Carlos* and Its Parisian Critics," *19th-Century Music* 37, no. 3 (2014): 207.

Blind Power

Both Schiller and Verdi shared anticlerical views, however this ideology is more heavily emphasized in the opera through the plot changes regarding Posa's death. In a letter to Reinwald Bauerbach from 1783 Schiller writes, "It was my intention to expose the shameful horrors of the Inquisition and to revenge prostituted humanity."[109] In a similar vein, Martin Chusid has connected the publication of Pope Pius IX's encyclical *Quanta cura,* which criticized religious liberalism and the separation of Church and State with Verdi's own anticlerical views.[110] In a letter to his friend Clara Maffei in 1870, Verdi writes, "Let a pope arrive tomorrow who is agile, crafty, a really cunning fellow, as there have been many in Rome, and he will ruin us. Pope and King of Italy; I can't see them together, not even in this letter."[111]

During the finale of Act IV, we witness further proof of the Grand Inquisitor's destructive religiosity. Posa has just died as the result of an attack from one of the Grand Inquisitor's assassins. As Carlos grieves over the body of his dead friend, a mob of chorus people rushes into the prison in which Carlos is being held calling for his release shouting "Death! Death to him who stops us! We will strike without pity without fear! Tremble before the vengeful people."[112] These threats are short lived as the moment the Grand Inquisitor enters the scene his voice puts a stop to their protests with the following interaction.

Le Grand Inquisiteur	The Grand Inquisitor
A genoux	On your knees
Chorus	Chorus
Le grand Inquisiteur!	The Grand Inquisitor!

[109] George Marek, "Night Piece," *Opera News,* 14 April 1984, 44.
[110] Martin Chusid, "The Inquisitor's Scene in Verdi's *Don Carlos,*" in *Studies in Musical Soruces and Style,* ed. Eugene K. Wolf and Edward H. Roesner (Madison, Wisconsin: A-R Editions, 1990), 508-509.
[111] "Che domani venga un Papa destro, astuto, un vero furbo, come Roma ne ha avuti tanti, e ci ruinerà. Papa e Re d'Italia non posso vederli insieme nemmeno in questa lettera." Alessandro Luzio, *Profili biografici e bozzetti storici,* II (Milan, 1927), 529.
[112] *La mort la mort à qui nous arrète frappons pitié sans peur. Tremblez devant le people vengeur*

Le Grand Inquisiteur	The Grand Inquisitor
O peuple sacrilege, prosterne toi devant ce lui que Dieu protège! A genoux! A genoux!	Oh sacrilegious people, prostrate yourself before him who God protects! On your knees! On your knees!
Chorus	Chorus
Seigneur, pardonnez nous! Pardonnez nous!	Lord, pardon us! Pardon us!

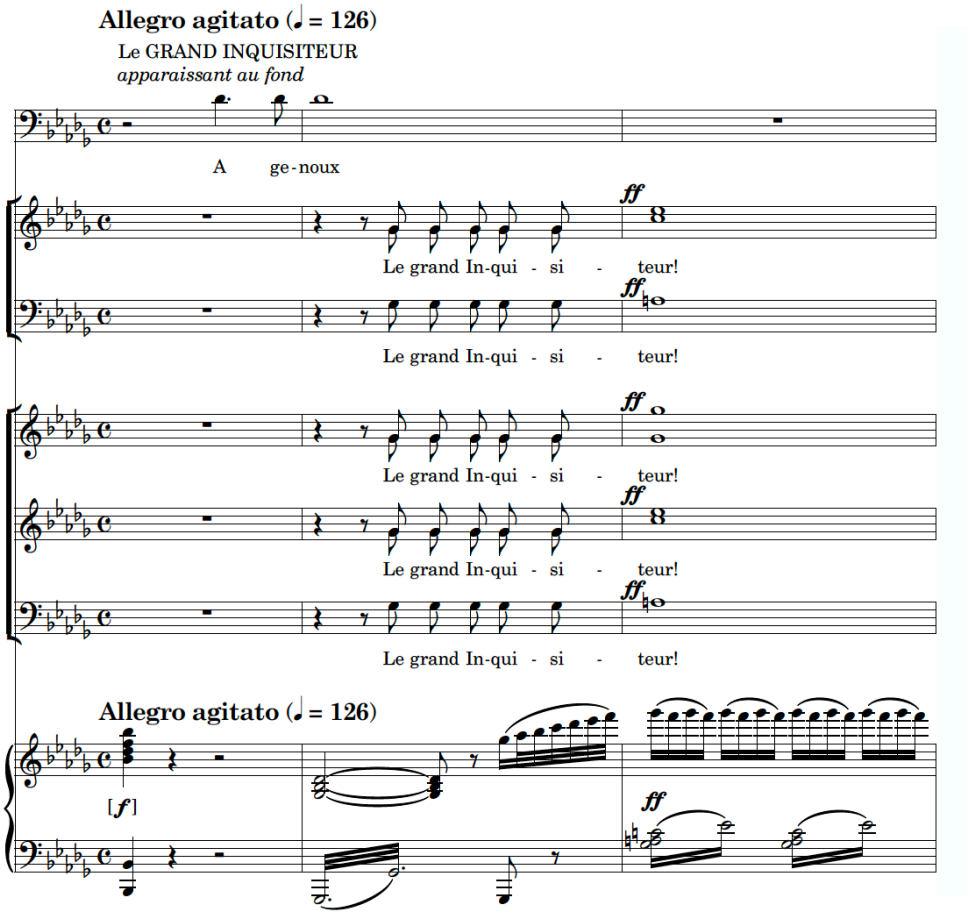
This exchange highlights the power that the Grand Inquisitor yields over the common people even with their fondness for the populist Carlos. Their murderous vows to harm anyone who stand in their way instantaneously transform into cries for forgiveness at the sight of the Grand Inquisitor. In a move reminiscent of the Duo Scene, King Philip again reveals his susceptibility to the Grand Inquisitor's physical and vocal presence. Before the Grand Inquisitor appeared on stage, King Philip himself was encouraging the mob to fight in support his son. Suddenly, the Grand Inquisitor inspires a shift in the King's actions. As the Grand Inquisitor proclaims his last refrain of "To your knees!", King Philip joins him on the exact same words, pitches, and rhythm. For a supposedly "weak" blind figure, he possesses an uncanny ability to force others to enact his will.

The Grand Inquisitor's will is also built into the harmonic structure of the scene. When he enters proclaiming "*A genoux*" in B-flat minor, the people answer in a two measure statement ending on an A fully diminished seventh chord (Example 2). The uncanny effect this produces is not resolved until the people finish their refrain of "*Pardonnez nous!"* Regarding this scene Budden writes,

> Like a deus ex machina in the classic tradition of Verdian basses the Inquisitor orders the people to kneel before the Lord's anointed. Tremolando strings, sweeping scales on cellos, basses and bassoons, sustaining wind all add force to his pronouncement. The atmosphere becomes calm, almost radiant as the people fall on their knees and ask for forgiveness in a sequence of cadences descending by fifths from D major to B flat. 'Gloire à toi, grand Dieu' Philip cries, joined later by the Inquisitor; 'Vive le Roi!' reply Lerma and the grandees; 'Pardonne,'

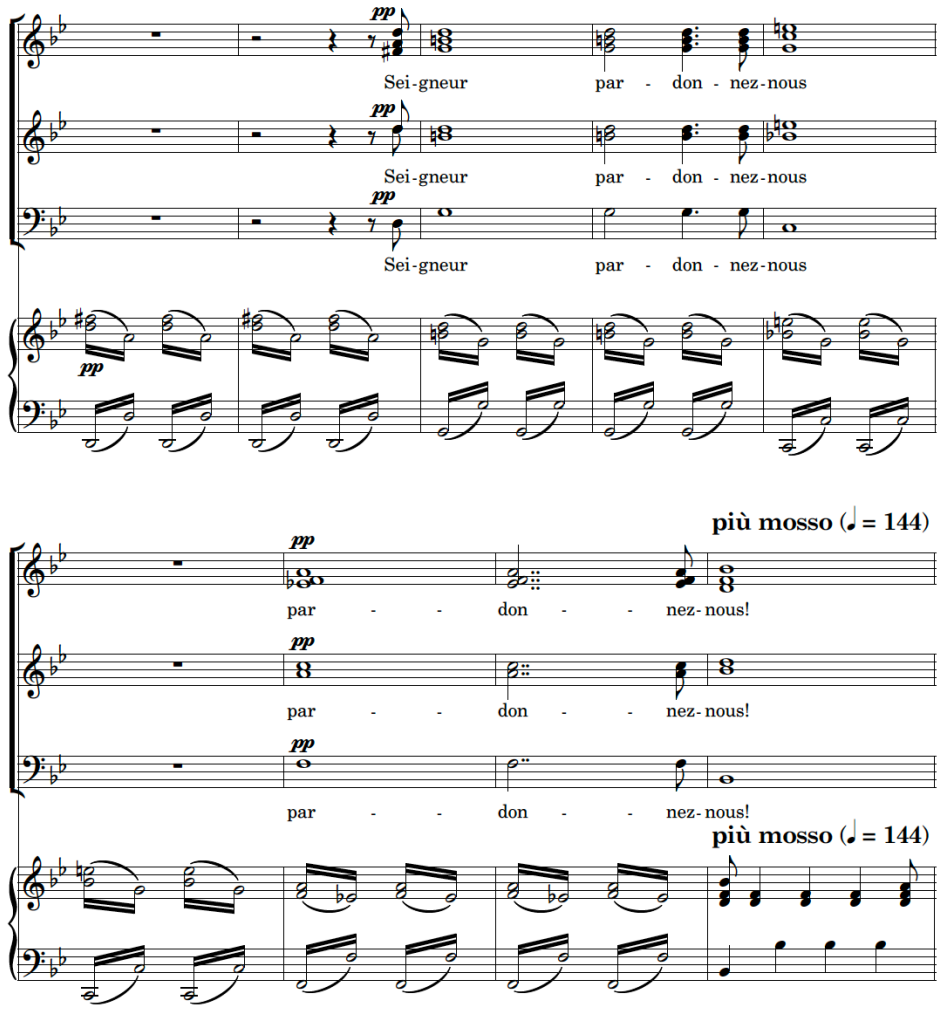
> murmur the people—all this on a long chord of B flat major which swells to a climax embellished by fanfares on cornets and trumpets.[113]

The falling fifths sequence (D-G-C-F-Bb) occurs underneath the calls for forgiveness and ultimately solidifies the B flat major tonality in which the act ends (Example 3). Here the people's music is written in a choral texture indicating that their riot has been subdued and they are now under the control of the Church. While at first the Grand Inquisitor's presence causes a harmonic disruption in the form of an A fully diminished seventh chord, his musical authority brings a resolution in a key a semitone up (B-flat major) and he successfully assimilates the people into obedient followers.



Example 2. *Don Carlos*, Act IV finale

[113] Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Volume 3 From Don Carlos to Falstaff*, 143.



Example 3. *Don Carlos*, Act IV finale

The harm that the Grand Inquisitor perpetuates and the power he holds is musically emphasized in Verdi's score, but more symbolically this character and his blindness represent a warning towards blind obedience to the Church. In their efforts to combat heresy, the leaders of the Spanish Inquisition engaged in torture, religious persecution, and repression. As an official representative of the Inquisition and therefore Christianity, the Grand Inquisitor fails in his duty to represent his faith by ordering the murder of Posa for personal gain. Consequently, the Grand Inquisitor is not only physically blind, but also spiritually blind. All of his acts and words subvert expectations that blindness would encourage a focus on spirituality and other immaterial aspects

of life. Instead, the Grand Inquisitor is especially concerned with earthly matters. Due to his disability, the Grand Inquisitor provides an ideal figure to portray the hypocrisy of the Church.

Chapter 3: Insight and Ignorance in *La Gioconda* and *Iris*

Artistic and literary representations that focus on the blind as dependents with weak constitutions proliferate throughout the nineteenth-century. The two late nineteenth-century operas *La Gioconda* and *Iris* contain two such frail and elderly blind characters: La Cieca and Il Cieco. Unlike the paradoxically powerful figures I discuss in chapter two, the portrayal of La Cieco and Il Cieco resonate with a deterministic attitude towards blindness that treats the disability as a negative source of social marginality. Both La Cieca and Il Cieco are destitute and they hold no special titles or social positions. Without their sense of sight, they are both vulnerable to attacks from malicious characters in the operas. However, La Cieca's blindness is imbued with a sense of religious devotion and spiritual insight, while Il Cieco and his blindness become a metaphor for ignorance throughout the course of the opera. Through the representation of blindness in *La Gioconda* and *Iris,* I locate the possibility for these operas to promote empathy and compassion in their audience members, even as they reproduce ableist stereotypes towards blindness.

La Gioconda

Based on Victor Hugo's *Angelo, tyran de Padoue* (Angelo, Tyrant of Padua) from 1835, Ponchielli's opera *La Gioconda* traffics in themes that are largely absent from the play. Emanuele D'Angelo remarks "*La Gioconda,* in fact, is so distant from the French drama that it is difficult to recognize the source."[114] Yet, both the play and the opera contain social critiques on the treatment of marginalized identities, although there are no blind characters in the play. The

[114] "*La Gioconda,* infatti, è talmente lontana dal drama francese che si fa fatica a riconoscerne la derivazione." Emanuele D'Angelo, "'Nessuno travederà alcuna idea del *Giuramento'* L'*Angelo* di Hugo E il libretto della *Gioconda*," *Musik Des Mörders* (2018): 229.

blind figure of La Cieca is solely the invention of Ponchielli's librettist, Arrigo Boito. Whereas Hugo's social critique is limited to class and the relationship between men and women, Boito's libretto incorporates these elements along with disability. By tracking the differences between *Angelo* and *La Gioconda,* it is possible to identify the role that blindness plays in normalizing Gioconda and marking La Cieca with an aura of spiritual insight.

In the Preface to his play Hugo explains the social critique contained within his work concerning the relationship between men and women.

> Bring together in a single plot entirely involving emotion two grave and distressing figures, woman in society, woman outside society; that is, in two living types, all women, the whole of womanhood…Place the blame where it belongs, that is on men, who hold the power, and on social custom, which is absurd.[115]

The "woman outside society" that Hugo refers to is the main character Thisbe who serves as the model for Boito's Gioconda. Central to Thisbe's identity as an outsider is the fact she is an actress and the mistress of Angelo. Because of her profession, Lenard R. Berlanstein places her in the larger tradition of French Romantic literature as an example of "the actress as a fallen woman still capable of pure love and noble conduct."[116] Throughout the play, Thisbe proves her noble character by sacrificing herself to guarantee Rodolfo (Enzo), the man she truly loves, is able to have a future with his lover Catarina (Laura). In his analysis of *Angelo*, the French literature scholar Albert W. Halsall notes

> In *Angelo,* Hugo develops his theme of woman's unjust treatment at the hands of men and society by demonstrating that, despite the equally unjust conditions separating poor women from their wealthier sisters, they share a common interest

[115] Victor Hugo, *Ouvres Complètes,* ed. Jean Massin, vol. 5 (Paris, Le Club Français du Livre, 1967) 267-268, translated in Albert W. Halsall, *Victor Hugo and the Romantic Drama* (Toronto: Univeristy of Toronto Press, 1998), 146.
[116] Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Magdalenes of Postaristocratic France" in *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 97.

> which should make them allies…Hugo carefully avoids idealizing Thisbe, and so making her a rhetorical personification of the trials of virtue.[117]

Hugo allows Thisbe to remain a flawed character while still maintaining her status as a sympathetic one. Boito remains faithful to the original concept of feminine comradeship across social classes but idealizes Gioconda and her mother La Cieca.

The opera places an emphasis on the relationship between the principal soprano Gioconda and her blind mother La Cieca. However, there is no motherly character who is physically present in *Angelo.* Instead, during the first act the main character Thisbe recounts a story during her childhood about her mother (who is never given a name), a poor street singer. One day, her mother sings a song critical of the lords of Venice without understanding the true meaning of the words. After a senator hears her performance he orders for Thisbe's mother to be put to death. Fortunately, a young girl accompanying the senator intervenes and stops the execution from taking place. As a show of gratitude, Thisbe's mother gives the young girl her personal crucifix. For *La Gioconda,* what becomes important is the poor and religious characteristic traits of Thisbe's mother, as these become qualities associated with La Cieca.

Most important, the unnamed mother figure from *Angelo* is not blind and the element of disability is completely absent from the play. As I discuss in chapter one, there was an explicit connection between blindness, mendicancy, and street musicians during the nineteenth century. Although Thisbe's mother is not blind, she is implicitly associated with poverty and begging through virtue of her profession as a street singer. Consequently, the transformation of the maternal figure in *Angelo* from a street singer to Boito's blind beggar showcases the affiliation between these two marginalized identities in nineteenth-century Europe.

[117] Halsall, *Victor Hugo and the Romantic Drama,* 149.

Although a secondary character, the importance of La Cieca and her disability to the dramatic structure becomes apparent from the very beginning of the opera. Act I begins during Carnival celebrations before Lent in eighteenth-century Venice. Gioconda (soprano) leads La Cieca (contralto) across the town square as Barnaba (baritone), a state spy for the Inquisition, looks on at the mother and daughter duo. Gioconda leaves her mother alone in the square to find her lover Enzo Grimaldo (tenor) but is stopped by Barnaba who professes his intentions to romantically pursue her. Gioconda forcefully rejects him and continues off-stage to find Enzo. Meanwhile, a *regatta* has just finished and a crowd of Venetian townspeople enter the town square surrounding the winner and shouting insults at the loser, Zuane (bass). Barnaba convinces Zuane that he lost the race due to La Cieca, who Barnaba claims is a witch that cast a spell against Zuane. This creates a frenzy among the townspeople and the crowd begins hurling insults and threats against La Cieca. The head of the Inquisition, Alvise Badoero (bass), comes across the commotion with his wife Laura Adorno (mezzo-soprano). Laura sees that La Cieca is holding a rosary and convinces her husband that the blind woman must be saved. Alvise obliges and La Cieca sings her aria "Voce di donna o d'angelo" during which she gifts Laura her rosary. As everyone leaves for evening mass and the scene calms down, Barnaba and Enzo remain in the square. Barnaba recognizes Enzo as Laura's long-lost lover and arranges for the couple to reunite on Enzo's ship, thinking that by exposing their affair he will bring Gioconda closer to him. He dictates a letter detailing Laura's infidelity to his scribe Isèpo (tenor) and sends it to Alvise. Unbeknownst to Barnaba, Gioconda and La Cieca are nearby and overhear Barnaba's entire scheme.

At the start of Act II, Barnaba is waiting on Enzo's ship disguised as a fisherman in order to spy on the couple. Eventually, Enzo makes his way to the ship where he waits until Laura is

rowed out to meet them. After the couple reunite, Gioconda confronts Laura with the intention of stabbing her, but stops once she recognizes her mother's rosary in Laura's possession. Seeing that Laura is the woman who saved La Cieca, she warns Laura to flee because Alvise is on his way to attack the ship. After Laura has escaped, Gioconda approaches Enzo and reveals Barnaba's betrayal and attempts to convince him to come back to the city with her. Instead, Enzo sets fire to his ship and leaps into the water.

Act III is set at the Ca' d'Oro palace where Alvise orders Laura to drink a vial of poison in retribution for her brief affair with Enzo. Still feeling that she must defend Laura, Gioconda enters and gives Laura a sleeping potion that will trick Alvise into thinking she is dead. Meanwhile, Alvise has invited guests to the palace and arranges for a ballet as entertainment. In the final scene, Barnaba finds La Cieca hiding in the palace who claims she is there praying for the dead. As a funeral bell rings, Barnaba informs Enzo that it tolls for Laura. Shocked, Enzo reveals his identity to Alvise who orders Enzo to be imprisoned. Gioconda pleads with Barnaba and offers him her body in exchange for Enzo's release. Barnaba agrees but decides to take La Cieca hostage as leverage. The act ends as Alvise lays out Laura's "dead" body for his guests to observe.

The final act begins with Laura's sleeping body being brought to Gioconda's home. Enzo has been released from prison and makes his way to meet Gioconda but after seeing Laura's body, he begins to berate Gioconda until Laura wakes up and sings to him. Grateful for Gioconda's help, Laura and Enzo escape before Barnaba reaches Gioconda's house where he has eagerly come to claim her as his own. Instead of submitting to his demands, Gioconda commits suicide. Enraged, Barnaba shouts over her dead body that he has killed La Cieca.

There are clearly similarities between the play and the opera, the most obvious being the use of the rosary as a device of recognition. But Boito transforms Gioconda into a much more sanitized version of her French counterpart. In the opera, Gioconda is a street singer who rejects the advances of the state spy Barnaba thereby proving her virtue and respectability. Given the opportunity to enter an affair as an unmarried woman, she resists. In addition, although a street performer, the care she demonstrates for her elderly blind mother La Cieca works to prove her kind-hearted nature. La Cieca's blindness also works to normalize her daughter. Compared to her mother, Gioconda represents a more respectable woman despite her profession as a singer. La Cieca may be pitiful, but the harassment she faces from other characters demonstrates there is a stigma attached to her character that does not apply to her daughter. Concerning the similarities between the female body and the disabled body, the feminist theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes

> Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority.[118]

Despite both characters' feminine identities, the blind La Cieca is more deviant from the norm than her daughter. As a physical reminder of three types of eccentricity (old age, femininity, and blindness), she draws attention to her own difference while distracting from Gioconda's profession. Her disability physically limits her movement and participation in public more than Gioconda. This is even illustrated by their names; Gioconda does not refer to the character's physical characteristics while La Cieca ("the blind woman"), is only identified by her disability.

[118] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 19.

Replacing a street singer with a blind woman and transforming the main character of Hugo's play into a less sexualized Gioconda results in an opera with more sympathetic and virtuous feminine characters. D'Angelo points out that Boito's creation of La Cieca creates a more symmetrical balance between the wealthy and poor classes in the opera. The three noble characters (Enzo, Laura, and Alvise) are counterbalanced by the three commoners (Gioconda, La Cieca, and Barnaba).[119] In a way, Boito preserves Hugo's social commentary of the relations between men and women while more clearly emphasizing the division between low and high social classes. Through her addition, La Cieca becomes a embodied representation of poverty and disability.

Blindness and Religious Piety

La Cieca's character interacts with the ideas that she is deserving of sympathy, better than the sighted people around her, and compensated for her lack of sight with spiritual gifts. Immediately at the beginning of Act I, La Cieca is positioned as a helpless figure deserving of pity as she and her daughter make their way across the town square. Some of La Cieca's first words in the opera refer to how her disability affects her life. She sings, "Daughter, who supports my faltering steps that bend already towards the tomb/Blessed is this darkness that binds me to your hand."[120] La Cieca's blindness confines her to a metaphorical world of "darkness," but she is grateful for the relationship it forces her and her daughter into. Despite living at the mercy of other people, it seems she has found ways to adjust. Later in Act I, after Gioconda has fled the

[119] "E significativi sono anche i tempi dell'azione, un tuffo nella tenebra sempre piu fitta, come pure la simmetrica divisione dei personoaggi, distinti in tre caratteri popolani. (Gioconda, Cieca, Barnaba) e tre carateri nobili (Enzo, Laura, Alvise), intrecciati in una pluralita di azioni tra livelli ambientali diversi, coinvolgendo e illuminando piu facce di uno stesso prisma sociale." D'Angelo, "'Nessuno travederà alcuna idea del *Giuramento':* L'*Angelo* di Hugo e il libretto della *Gioconda*," 233.
[120] *Figlia che reggi il tremulo pie' che all'avel già piega/beata è questa tenebra che alla tua man mi lega.*

scene due to her fear of Barnaba and his advances, La Cieca calls out for her daughter "My child! O light of my eyes, Where are you? Where are you?...O terrible darkness!"[121] Now lost without her daughter, La Cieca begins to finger her rosary beads. La Cieca's turn to rosary beads in the absence of her daughter also demonstrates that she is a woman of strong faith.

There are two explicit instances in the opera where La Cieca is portrayed as better than the sighted people around her which also implicate her strong faith. First in Act I scene iii, Barnaba sings "And Gioconda is mine, I swear to Hell!"[122] and La Cieca is directed to ring her hands around her rosary with fervor and mutter the two words "Ave Maria."[123] Here, La Cieca is set up as diametrically opposed to the diabolical villain who swears to Hell, or what could also be understood as Satan, at the same time that La Cieca turns to God. The second instance of La Cieca's moral superiority occurs in the next scene. As the chorus played by shipwrights sings about gambling and feasting, La Cieca begins reciting the entire Ave Maria prayer in Latin. Here, La Cieca functions as a pious foil for the chorus members. While they are concerned with sinning and pleasure, La Cieca again has put her focus on God.

Even though the audience receives indications that La Cieca is a special spiritual figure, the characters in the opera attack her because of this. Barnaba, recently rejected by Gioconda, takes his frustration out on La Cieca and accuses her of being a witch based on her incantation of "Ave Maria." Despite the fact she was delivering an explicitly Christian prayer, Barnaba uses this moment as proof that La Cieca delivers spells and calls for her to be put to death. The same choir of shipwrights that sung about being excited to sin shouts statements of encouragement

[121] *Figliuola! O raggio della mia pupilla, Dove sei? Dove sei?...Tenèbre orrende!*
[122] *E la Gioconda è mia! Giuro all'Averno*!
[123] "Rigirando con fervore le *ave marie* del suo rosario." Amilcare Ponchielli, *La Gioconda*, libretto by Arrigo Boito (Milano: Ricordi, 1975), 32.

such as “Get the witch!” and “Death to the witch!”[124] Luckily, this moment does not last long and Laura, the wife of a member of the Venetian Inquisition, calls on her husband for La Cieca to be saved. In this moment, La Cieca’s reputation as a pious character is upheld by nobility and the power Laura and Alvise’s titles hold.

Not only are there textual references to La Cieca’s pure and religiously devout character, but also musical indications. Before her famous *romanza* “Voce di donna o d’angelo” Ponchielli includes harp in the orchestral accompaniment. The musicologist Jesse Rosenberg has pointed out how the timbral quality of the harp was deployed in nineteenth-century opera to indicate biblical or angelic associations.[125] By utilizing the harp here, Ponchielli is marking La Cieca as a Christian figure, and the religious aspect of her personality is connected to her blindness. The opera scholar David Kimbell has discussed the ways in which the rosary theme from “Voce di donna” represents a shift in Italian vocal operatic writing towards verismo. Kimbell describes La Cieca’s *romanza* as “slow-moving, ecstatic, [and] self-proclaiming.”[126] Laura and Gioconda’s music also contain veristic moments, but their vocal lines still showcase a type of florid writing expected in the Italian tradition. La Cieca being written for a contralto limits the possibility for her character to deliver examples of coloratura. Taking into account her blindness, this helps mark La Cieca as disabled as her vocal style is in direct contrast with the two other women in the opera.

The music of La Cieca’s *romanza* predominantly lies in E-flat major although there are three moments that stray from the home key. During the phrase “*Di quella santa il volto*” the G minor chord on the third beat of the seventh measure seen in Example 4 acts as a pivot into the

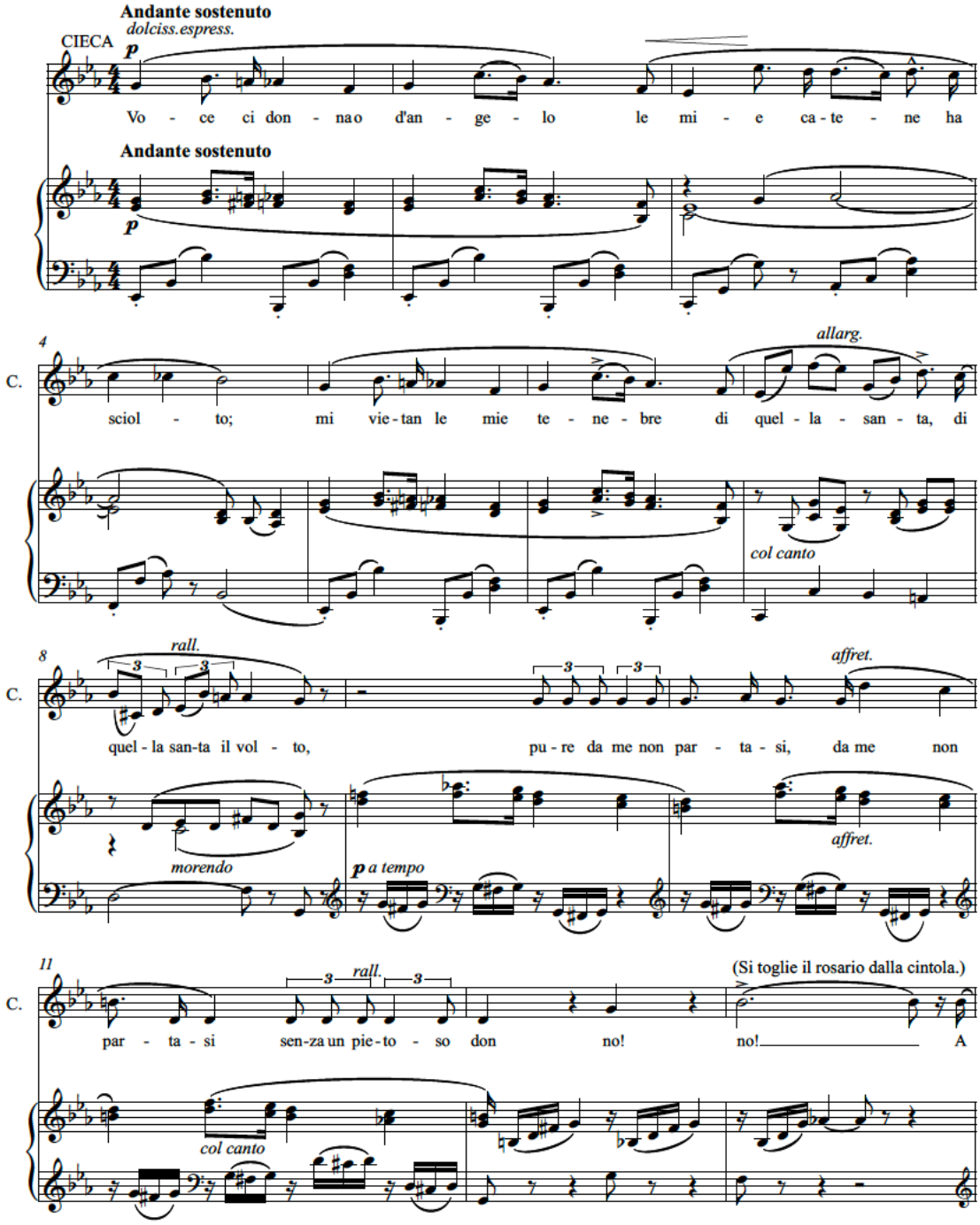
[124] *Addosso alla strega! A morte la strega!*
[125] Jesse Rosenberg, “Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen Greenwald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 741.
[126] David Kimbell, *Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 566.

first tonicization of G minor. The phrase ends with a cadence in G minor on the word *volto* and in the next measure the harmony begins a G dominant seventh pedal implying the key of C minor. This dominant pedal continues as the vocal line becomes more declamatory and conjunct throughout the next two lines "*Pure da me non partasi/Senza un pietoso don, no!*" and ends unresolved. Eventually by the first statement of "*no!*" on a G minor chord the aria begins to revert back to E-flat major which is solidified by the appearance of the dominant on the second "*no!*" The last example occurs on "*Sulla tua testa vigili la mia benedizion*." Again, the text setting on this phrase is declamatory but this time it more clearly tonicizes C minor although it ends unresolved on the dominant which then elides to a B-flat dominant chord and back to E-flat major. Due to their speech-like qualities these two moments are noticeably less melodic than the rest of the aria. The text during passages outside of the home key are separated from the rest of "Voce di donna" in bold below.

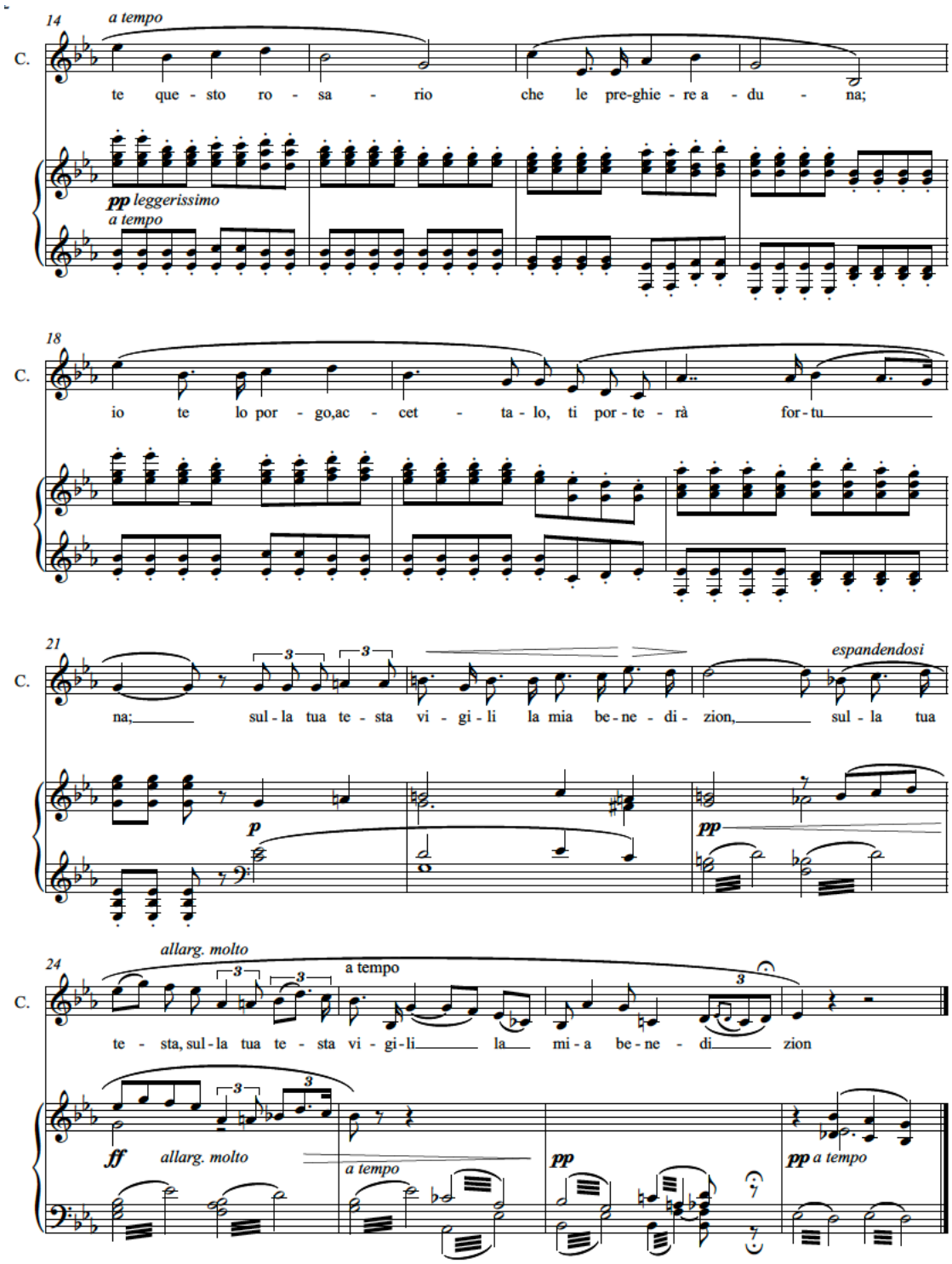
Voce di donna o d'angelo	Voice of a woman or angel
Le mie catene ha sciolto;	Has broken my chains
Mi vietan le mie tenebre	My darkness forbids me
Di quella santa il volto,	**from that holy one's face,**
Pure da me non partasi	**Yet don't leave me**
Senza un pietoso don, no!	**Without a merciful gift, no!**
A te questo rosario	To you I give this rosary
Che le preghiera aduna;	Which has my added prayers
Io te lo porgo, accettalo	I offer it to you, accept it
ti porterà fortuna;	It will bring you fortune
Sulla tua testa vigili la mia benedizion	**Over your head my blessing watches**

These bold sections represent La Cieca at perhaps her most forceful in the opera, especially "*Pure da me non partasi/Senza un pietoso don, no!"* The majority of the time, she is passive, but here she directly demands for Laura to grant her request. The harmonic and vocal changes accompanying these lines call attention to La Cieca's demand, and ultimately the successful

realization of her blessing (*Sulla tua testa vigili la mia benedizion*). In a way, the music outside of the home key represents the musical process of her blessing in action.



Example 4. *La Gioconda,* Act I, *Voce di donna o d'angelo*



Example 4 (continued). *La Gioconda,* Act I, *Voce di donna o d'angelo*

A Hazardous Trinity: Christianity, Femininity, and Disability

By virtue of La Cieca being written for a contralto, her character is vocally singled out from the rest of the cast. It is not only La Cieca's disability that constructs the characters around her as normative, but also her low feminine voice which is intimately connected to her age. Musically, La Cieca plays a minor role in the opera and is vocally outshined by the other women and Barnaba (a low baritone). Gioconda and Laura receive more melodically active lines and have a higher tessitura compared to La Cieca. In addition, La Cieca is only really featured in the first act. She briefly returns in Act III, but only to serve as a hostage. Aurally, she is a minor figure—she speaks very little during the finale of Act III and her featured aria "Voce di donna" is only a short *romanza*. We hear of La Cieca but never from her after Act III when at the end of the opera Barnaba reveals he has murdered her.

Writing of contraltos, the French feminist Catherine Clément remarks that they "express spiritual power" and "verge on the divine."[127] Here, Clément specifically refers to female contraltos of the late nineteenth century, not trouser roles. La Cieca resonates with this description as she is positioned as a voice from another world. She does not truly fit in with the townspeople and her thoughts are more centered on God than earthly distractions. A few other contraltos from the mid to late nineteenth century confirm Clément's categorization of contraltos. The contralto Erda from Richard Wagner's *Ring* is a prophetess and old Earth goddess. In addition, Verdi's Ulrica from *Un ballo in Maschera* is a fortune teller who is also accused of being a witch. Consequently, La Cieca joins these other operatic contraltos as examples of spiritually gifted women.

[127] Catherine Clément, "Through Voices, History," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 25.

Considering the Christian context of *La Gioconda,* La Cieca's age and blindness particularly add to her aura of religious piety. Bearing in mind the fact we associate higher voices with youth and femininity in Western culture, the contralto vocal quality required for La Cieca's voice works to age and desexualize her compared to the other feminine characters in *La Gioconda*—an aspect exacerbated by her disability. The feminist disability scholar Susannah Mintz notes "mainstream feminism's critique of patriarchal myths of women as essentially sexual and maternal ignores the fact that ableist culture also deems women with abilities to be essentially asexual."[128] As a desexualized figure, La Cieca receives the special ability to bless people in return for her lack of sin and spiritual purity. Referring back to "Voce di donna," this *romanza* represents La Cieca blessing Laura for saving her life which she does by gifting Laura her rosary during the aria. This blessing is successful, as Laura is the only female character to survive the opera. Eventually La Cieca is murdered by Barnaba and Gioconda commits suicide.

Even though La Cieca's spiritual purity is portrayed as a positive aspect of her character, this does not mean that it bestows her any sense of authority or protects her from the more powerful masculine forces around her. To use Clément's terminology, La Cieca's contralto voice may "express spiritual power," but only in the sense that she possesses a certain altruistic power that benefits those around her. In the end, her feminine form of spiritual power is ineffective and constrained. Audiences do not expect La Cieca to be a major force in the opera because her disability and contralto voice weaken her position in the hierarchy of late nineteenth-century opera. Ultimately, she is a passive figure with no special abilities that would allow her to protect herself. Serving as La Cieca's polar opposite, Barnaba is able to abuse and vilify her with no

[128] Susannah B. Mintz, "Invisible Disability: Georgina Kleege's Sight Unseen," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 70.

repercussions. La Cieca's disability and death then become a means of demonstrating the true extent of Barnaba's villainous nature.

Iris

Set in Japan during its isolation period before opening to the West, *Iris* is an example of *Japonisme* and demonstrates a Western perspective of Japanese culture. According to Alan Mallach, both Mascagni and his librettist Luigi Illica wanted to move away from Italian melodramatic conventions towards a more abstract symbolist project; their collaboration resulted in *Iris*.[129] As part of the artistic project of the opera, Iris herself is meant to serve as a symbol of innocence and beauty. In his autobiography, Mascagni remarks "Iris is the symbol of immortal art, triumphing over all the filth of the base world, but what graceful contours, what delicacy, what sweetness surround this symbol!"[130] Mascagni's *Iris* tells a different tale of blindness compared to the previous opera. While Il Cieco is taken advantage of due to his disability, he takes part in harming Iris due to his ignorance. Rather than representing wisdom, here blindness indicates an inability to see the truth or understand reality. As part of the base world, Il Cieco becomes a tool for Iris to demonstrate her innocent nature.

The first act begins with the chorus singing about the generative powers of the sun. After Iris (soprano) awakes, she recounts a disturbing dream and thanks the sun for saving her from her nightmare "*Ho fatto un triste sogno pauroso*." Osaka (tenor) and Kyoto (baritone) arrive on the scene spying on Iris and discussing their hope to kidnap her. The two villains watch as Iris' father Il Cieco (bass) prays and Iris tends to her garden. As part of their plan to abduct Iris, Osaka and Kyoto disguise themselves as comedians and put on a puppet show in town. During

[129] Alan Mallach, *Pietro Mascagni and his Operas* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 106.
[130] Pietro Mascagni and David Stivender, *Mascagni: An Autobiography Compiled, Edited and Translated from Original Sources* (New York: Pro/Am Music Resources, 1988), 132.

this event, they employ samurais to grab Iris who cover her mouth as she protests her kidnapping and geisha dancers to hide the abduction from the audience. Due to his blindness, Il Cieco has not seen any of this, and assumes Iris is still sitting beside him. When he asks for her arm and she is nonrespondent, he quickly realizes Iris is no longer there. At home, Il Cieco finds money and a letter Kyoto left on his doorstep supposedly written by Iris explaining that she has fled for Yoshiwara.

Now confused and alone, Iris spends the beginning of Act II adjusting to her new surroundings. Osaka makes his way into her chambers and begins complimenting her in an attempt to seduce her. When he tries to kiss Iris she refuses and asks to go back home, even after he promises her extravagant gifts and riches. Osaka quickly becomes bored with her innocent nature and allows Kyoto to display her to the people of Yoshiwara as a prostitute. Suddenly, Il Cieco appears and asks to speak with Iris. Thinking she is going to be rescued, Iris is overjoyed at the prospect of being reunited with her father but quickly realizes this is not the case when Il Cieco scolds her and attacks her with mud. Now stricken with grief, Iris screams and jumps down into the sewer. During the third and last act, Iris becomes mad and hallucinates three separate visions of Osaka, Kyoto, and Il Cieco coming before her. In all of their monologues, the men berate her and discuss her death. After her father vanishes, Iris bemoans her misfortunes until the chorus of sun and flowers sing to Iris and she dies.

Iris represents another example of an opera in which the blind character plays a passive and limited role, which is partly due to Il Cieco being written for a bass voice. Similar to the situation in *La Gioconda*, Il Cieco ("the blind man") from Mascagni's *Iris* is only identified by his disability. Another similarity resides between the two characters regarding religion and the way in which they depend on their daughters. From his first appearance and interaction with his

daughter, Il Cieco is aligned with Christianity. In the staging, Iris is instructed to "lovingly guide her father to sit down in the garden."[131] Now in the sun, her father requests that Iris hands him his rosary because he wants to pray. After she obliges and hands him his rosary he asks her "And have you prayed?"[132] Concerned with Iris' spiritual life, Il Cieco continues to "pray silently, motionless, moving only to finger the beads of the rosary."[133] Despite residing in a radically different setting than *La Gioconda,* the use of rosaries in the staging and the two blind characters' physical dependencies on their daughters unite these two operas.

Where *Iris* diverts from its earlier counterpart is its connection with Japanese culture—or more accurately a Western take on Japanese culture. Beyond Illica's inclusion of geishas and samurais, Mascagni makes few references to Japanese melodies or music and the only research materials he consulted were the limited resources available in Florence.[134] The pair do not produce a highly authentic piece of Japanese music and *Iris* is ultimately a Western fantasy. Still, in the opera Western Christianity is inserted into a culture in which it does not traditionally belong. This culture clash impedes Il Cieco's ability to fully embody Christian values in the way that La Cieca does.

Ignorance

Where Il Cieco diverges from earlier stage depictions of blindness resides in the fact that he does not receive any type of compensation and does not reside in any position of authority. Far from possessing special gifts, he is "blind" to reality. If Iris symbolizes innocence, Il Cieco

[131] "Sul limitare della casa appare il Cieco, che la figlia Iris guida amorosamente: scendono nel giardino." Pietro Mascagni, *Iris*, libretto by Luigi Illica (Milano: Ricordi, 1982), 39.
[132] *E tu hai pregato?*
[133] *Il cieco prega silenziosamente, immobile, movendo solo le dita per fare scorrere le grana del rosario* Score 41
[134] For a discussion on the specific musical examples of exoticism in *Iris,* see Eleonora Negri, "*Intorno al Giapponismo di Iris*," in *Pietro Mascagni: Atti ella Giornata di Studi promossa al Centro Studi Mascagni, Livorno, 7 dicembre 2020,* ed. Cesare Orselli (Firenze: LoGisma, 2003), 119-136.

can be said to symbolize ignorance and the violent consequences that can result from it. Although he is explicitly religious, he is quick to rebuke and curse Iris; ignoring aspects of his Christian faith that call for forgiveness.

One of the notable aspects of this opera is the emphasis on textual inclusions outside of the music and stage direction. Illica includes lyrical descriptions at the beginning of each act that play no part in the performance. These lyrical descriptions are not read aloud during performance and do not indicate any physical movement for performers; one would need access to the score to locate and analyze them. Rather, these lyrical additions are meant to be read and indicate Iris' psychological state and the ambience of each act. Regarding these texts Sebastiano Bollato writes, "Each passage is connected to the stage action not in a direct way, but with reference to the atmosphere that will be captured in the individual parts: dreamy in the first, seductive and dangerous in the second and dramatic in the third."[135] Even though none of these lyrical descriptions directly mention Il Cieco or describe his moods as they do with Iris, they do symbolically illustrate his separation from Iris. In the description of the second act Illica writes, "Here, luxurious tatamis in fanciful weavings impede any penetrating light. No, the sun does not penetrate the Green Houses!"[136] It is only when he can feel the rays of the sun that Il Cieco has a connection with Iris. When he travels in Act II to a place with no light, he is also out of sync and disconnected from his daughter.

Although a character within a musical work, Il Cieco is perhaps the most unmusical individual in the opera. One of Il Cieco's most important scenes involves pure speech rather than

[135] "Ogni passaggio è connesso all'azione scenica non in modo diretto, ma con ilrichiamo all'atmosfera che si dovrà cogliere nelle singole parti: sognante nella prima, seducente e pericolosa la seconda e drammatica la terza." Sebastiano Bollato, "'Addio cielo fatto di onde piene di raggi di luna e di misteri!': L'evoluzione della didascalia nel teatro per musica tra Otto-Novecento," *Rivista di letteratura teatrale* 2 (January 2009): 54.
[136] "Qui, ricche stuoie a tessiture fantasiose, impediscono alla luce di penetrarvi nelle Case Verdi!" Mascagni, *Iris,* 54.

singing. In the first act, while Il Cieco fingers his rosary, he delivers a prayer towards God with no rhythmic or pitch indications in the score. The last third of his prayer during which he mentions Iris is listed below.

Tu mi hai tolto la vista	You took my sight
Ma mi ha dato quella	But gave me that sight
Degli occhi d'Iris	Through Iris' eyes
Mi hai dato un Genio	You gave me a Spirit
Buono e gentile	Good and kind
Non son solo!	I am not alone!
Io dico la Tua Grandezza!	I speak of Your Greatness!

According to Il Cieco, his daughter serves as a gift from God and a guiding spirit meant to assist him through his experience with blindness. In performance, the prayer is meant to be delivered purely with a speaking voice, more closely resembling French melodrama rather than Italian opera. Over this, Iris sings a different text praising the beauty of nature and flowers on an actual melody. The result is two simultaneous competing vocal events, although due to the speech quality of the prayer, Il Cieco plays a subordinate role to his daughter's soprano melody.

This episode draws attention to the vocal role that Il Cieco plays throughout the opera. Although *Iris* is not traditionally considered an example of *verismo,* the musical language in *Iris* closely matches other veristic operas and reflects the transition among the *giovane scuola* of Italian composers from clearly delineated recitatives and arias to through-composed writing. Thus, the fact that Il Cieco does not deliver any grand aria is not quite as strange as it was in Donizetti's *Belisario,* but his use of pure speech in the earlier scene with his daughter is. Still, verismo operas have extended solos for their main characters and this disregard for Il Cieco points to the issue of an opera serving as a disabling environment to a blind character. The long-term absence of rhythm and melody from Il Cieco's prayer marks him as abnormal compared to

the other characters within the opera who surround him. Through the prayer scene, his physical disability is made vocally apparent.

Even in the moments when he sings actual pitches, Il Cieco's vocal lines have unusual qualities. For example, throughout the opera there are many times when he sings "Iris"—his daughter's name—where the two syllables are placed on a descending tritone. The placement of his vocal lines in other key scenes demonstrate a peculiar quality of Il Cieco's singing. The first of these vocal moments occurs after Osaka and Kyoto have kidnapped Iris and Il Cieco realizes his daughter is missing. Confused, Il Cieco begins calling out for his daughter but is informed by the chorus of beggars that Iris left a note claiming that she has fled to Yoshiwara—a notorious red light district associated with prostitution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the note has really been left by her kidnappers, Il Cieco decides that Iris has willingly left him. He decides to travel to Yoshiwara and angrily declares, "There I want…To slap her!/I want to spit in her face/I want…And curse her!...Iris! My life!"[137] Mascagni places most of this text on a middle C (the beginning of the upper passaggio of the bass voice)[138] and above. The text placement in this tessitura serves an emotional purpose and heightens the psychological intensity of the moment.

When Il Cieco arrives in Yoshiwara in the second act, the stage directions instruct that he should be accompanied by two beggars.[139] Remaining true to stereotypical depictions of blindness, Il Cieco is portrayed as physically frail. However, Iris' disappearance marks a turning point for him. Without his prosthetic eyes (Iris), he becomes impervious to clear signs that Iris did not willingly travel to Yoshiwara. At the sight of Il Cieco, Kyoto becomes agitated swearing

[137] *Or voglia là…/Là schiaffeggiarla!/Voglio sputarle in volto,/voglio…/E maledirla!/Iris! Mia vita!*
[138] Richard Miller, *Securing Baritone, Bass-Baritone, and Bass Voices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 30.
[139] "Appare nella folla il Cieco, accompagnato da due merciaioli." Mascagni, *Iris,* 247.

"He sold his daughter to me!"[140] By ignoring Kyoto's false statement (which could have alerted Il Cieco to Iris' innocence since he did not in fact sell his daughter into prostitution), Il Cieco demonstrates his ignorance. When he confronts Iris his text is again placed in the upper passaggio; heightening the cruelty and impact of his voice. Instead of listening to his daughter who has been trafficked into a brothel, he immediately condemns her and attacks her with mud shouting

To' sul tuo viso!	There in your face!
To' sovra il tuo fronte!	There in your brow!
To' nella bocca!	There in your mouth!
To' ne tuoi occhi: fango!	There in your eyes: mud!

Shocking and violent, this scene clearly demonstrates the resentment and hostility Il Cieco harbors for his daughter. Due to this attack, Iris suddenly becomes mad and leaps down into a sewer. Il Cieco instigates this situation and proves himself instrumental in fashioning a *coup de théâtre*—a violent dramatic event meant to shock audiences that was a common practice in the verismo operas of the late nineteenth century.[141] Due to his own ignorance, Il Cieco perpetuates a cycle of harm and assures his own isolation from society.

However, Il Cieco is also a victim in his own right. Knowing he is blind, Osaka and Kyoto take advantage of his disability to steal his daughter. Even though he rushes to judgment and rebukes Iris, he will now have to live without his daughter—the very person he declared acts as his eyes during his prayer with God. We can only assume he will live the rest of his life ostracized and alone. Iris' hallucination of her father at the very end of the opera supports this. During his brief appearance, he sings, "Who will kindle my fire in the winter and place me in the shade or cool in the summer?/Such is the thought that causes my tears and makes my grief

[140] *Egli venduto m'ha la figlia sua!*
[141] Jay Nicolaisen, *Italian Opera in Transition, 1871-1893* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1977), 249.

profound!"[142] Although these statements stem from Iris' imagination, she is aware of the repercussions her absence and death will have on her father. Il Cieco's situation is only slightly better than Il Cieca's because he does escape the opera with his life, but the librettist Illica makes clear that Il Cieco is doomed to a life of obscurity.

A Perspective on Violence and Disability

Violence against disabled people was highly normalized in the literature of the nineteenth-century. In their book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, the two disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder develop the concept of "narrative prosthesis," the common narrative tool in literature whereby the abnormal or deviant is corrected by the end of the novel or work. Mitchell and Snyder explain

> A simple schematic of narrative structure might run thus: first, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to a reader; second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences; third, the deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner. This fourth step of the repair of deviance may involve an obliteration of the difference through a "cure," the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body, or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being.[143]

Being one of the most common forms of deviancy in literature, disability then becomes a major catalyst for narrative progression. Throughout their respective operas, La Cieca and Il Cieco are singled out for their disabilities. They may be accepted by their daughters, but their physical difference always poses a challenge to the larger societal order. In response, the surrounding "normal" characters repeatedly work against the disabled characters' needs. That conflict pushes

[142] *Chi allumerà nell'inverno il mio foco e all'ombra o a fresco loco la state m'addurrà?/Tale è il pensier che in fondo dispreme il pianto mio e fa il mio duol profondo!*
[143] Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, 53-54.

the dramatic structure forward. In these cases, the blind characters (although secondary) are essential to the fabric of the operas.

Many times, the repair of disability is achieved by the murder or death of disabled characters. Death is hardly a foreign topic to opera, but it requires special attention here because of the added element of disability. The death in *Gioconda* is especially poignant as La Cieca is absent for most of the opera. The announcement of her murder at the end of the last act feels almost as if an automatic response to the presence of disability—following Snyder and Mitchell's theory of "narrative prosthesis." It is no coincidence that La Cieca's death is the last focal point of the opera. As Barnaba bends over Gioconda's dead body, he shouts "Yesterday your mother offended me! I drowned her! She hears no more!"[144] The decision to focus on her hearing reveals an inability to separate La Cieca from her disability, even in death. Even though Il Cieco is not murdered in *Iris*, he is still "purified from the social body" through his ostracization from Iris. No longer connected to his prosthetic eyes and with no family ties, we can only assume he is destined for a lifetime of marginality—a type of social death.

For the most part, La Cieca and Il Cieco are mistreated by the characters surrounding them, and the audience is meant to sympathize with their plights. For these reasons, they both represent what the English scholar Leonard Kriegel identifies as the "charity cripple" in nineteenth-century literature. Kriegel writes, "[the Charity Cripple's] chief function is to perpetuate in his audience the illusion of its own goodness. One encounters the Charity Cripple without risking anything of one's own substance." [145] Kriegel's oft-cited concept of the "charity cripple" easily applies to these blind characters. It is quite easy to experience our own goodness through watching La Cieca and Il Cieco struggle throughout the operas. However, there is still a

[144] *Ier tua madre m'ha offeso! Io l'ho affogata! Non ode più!*
[145] Leonard Kriegel, "The Wolf in the Pit in the Zoo," *Social Policy* 13, no. 2 (1982): 18.

productive call to arms through fictional representations of this sort. In their book *With Wings: An Anthology of Literature by and about Women with Disabilities,* Marsha Saxon and Florence Howe write,

> Literature is an important and effective tool for education and social change. Literature illuminates the details of daily living, the tiniest aspects of life experience, and at the same time the deepest meanings of this experience. Literature may point out social ills, while offering new possibilities; it communicates pain and transcends it. Literature speaks powerfully and profoundly, as well as subtly, delicately.[146]

Although a different form of art, opera holds the same potential to portray social issues. With its connection to theatre and performance, it can educate audiences about societal problems not just through words but also through sound and visuals. It is easy to imagine that viewing the ways in which able-bodied characters harass and abuse La Cieca and Il Cieco could inspire audience members to develop a considerate attitude towards people with visual impairments and push for more accommodations for disabled communities in real-life—providing these operas with the prospect of having a lasting effect beyond the time they are performed in a theatre.

My goal is not to ignore these depictions of violence against blind characters, but rather reimagine how they might be used towards positive ends. The feminist musicologist Bonnie Gordon has demonstrated the necessity to point out sexual violence in opera and the repercussions and societal damage that can be caused by ignoring these artistic depictions. Rather than abandon these operas, she believes they can be used as tools to understand violence in our current times. Gordon writes, "Hearing violence and especially hearing the ways in which the violence has been obscured by centuries of reception can make students more critical

[146] Marsha Saxon and Florence Howe, "Introduction," in *With Wings: An Anthology of Literature by and about Women with Disabilities,* ed. Marsha Saxon and Florence Howe (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1987), xiii-xiv.

receivers of media today."[147] The clear ways in which La Cieca and Il Cieco are mistreated calls us to examine our contemporary media with the same attention we pay to operas from the past.

In a similar way, I would argue that we need to recognize the normalization of violence and ill-treatment of blind characters in opera. The positive potential to inspire a sense of empathy in the sighted does not negate the fact that these representations contain ableist views towards people with disabilities. Both these points can be true at the same time. While it is important to remember the performance of disability on stage differs from the lived experience of it, performance events contribute to disability cultures. Even as composers stage fictional accounts of blind characters, these representations also play a part in the real-life reception and treatment of blind people. Without being careful, violence or ill-treatment against the blind in fiction may work to desensitize us to real-life harm and negative attitudes towards people with visual impairments.

Mitchell and Snyder warn of this in their analysis of Saxon and Howe's comments on the potential for literature to "offer new possibilities." The former explain

> Saxton and Howe provide a brief outline of a more positivistic program located in the promise of literature's commitment to the detailing of lives and experiences that artistic portraits often provide. The passage points to the authority that readers attribute to literary endeavor as a social instrument of change, for personal pain can sometimes prove a catalyst for the correction of social injustice. At the same time, the passage sidesteps the ways in which even the most revered literary texts embody the prejudices and debilitating attitudes of their own historical moments of production. This double-edged formulation makes literature both a utilitarian tool of transformation and a medium for further stigmatizing disability in the imaginations of its audience.[148]

[147] Bonnie Gordon, "On Teaching Monteverdi's *L'Arianna,*" in "Colloquy: Sexual Violence in Opera: Scholarship, Pedagogy, and Production As Resistance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 1 (2018): 233.
[148] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "Introduction," in *The Body and Physical Difference,* ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 13.

These operas were not written by men with disabilities or explicitly for the advancement of people with disabilities. In many regards, they contain stereotypes that perpetuate stigma against blind people. Il Cieco is a prime example of this. Even though he is clearly a victim and his blindness allows others to take advantage of him, ultimately he is also portrayed as an ignorant fool. In both cases, Il Cieco and La Cieca are dependent on their daughters; possibly giving credence to the idea that people with disabilities are burdens.

However, this does not mean that these operas are irredeemable. They do not contain uniquely prejudiced views towards the blind—all of these attitudes towards people with visual impairments can be found in other fictional and artistic works from the nineteenth century. The manner in which these sympathetic blind characters are staged may be stereotypical, but there is no sense that the composers and writers responsible for these operas intended to insult or cause harm. As audience members, we are meant to sympathize with La Cieca and Il Cieco. As I mention in chapter one, Valentin Haüy was inspired to establish his school for the blind based on viewing an engraving that depicted a group of blind men being mocked. Through his school, he wanted to demonstrate to the public that blind people were capable of being fully active citizens. There is reason to believe artistic portrayals have the ability to call people to action. By recreating unjust conditions and situations in which villains unquestionably abuse their blind characters, *La Gioconda* and *Iris* may inspire empathy and progressive treatment towards people with visual impairments.

Conclusion

Despite their differences, each of these operas portray blindness as a condition that physically weakens the characters who possess it. In the first two examples—*Belisario* and *La Gioconda*—this physical weakness is accompanied with authority and insight, but in *Don Carlos* and *Iris* this fragility does not carry any positive connotations. As I discussed in chapter one, the idea of the blind as clumsy, helpless, and pitiful was especially prevalent in Greek mythology and medieval literature. The nineteenth-century attitude towards the physical capabilities of the blind was no different. Through their representation of "fragile" blind characters, these operas help us construct an image of the dominant approach to caring for blind people in nineteenth-century Italy—familialism.

Familialism rests on the idea that the nuclear family should be responsible for taking care of their members rather than the state. *Belisario, La Gioconda,* and *Iris* all promote this situation as the ideal relationship between blind characters and their family members. All three of the operas involve a blind character with an idealized young daughter who acts as a guide and eyes for her blind parent. Additionally, this young woman is always portrayed as religious and dedicated. There are three moments from each opera that clearly demonstrate this tendency: Irene from *Belisario* prays to God at the end of the duet with her father; Gioconda prays to the Virgin Mary as she poisons herself to save Enzo and Laura; Iris follows the instructions of her father to pray and hands him his rosary. The emphasis on familial support reveals a larger truth behind the support systems set in place for the blind throughout nineteenth-century Italy.

At the time, there was not a large amount of state support when it specifically came to educating or caring for the blind. Instead, religious and private groups took on this role. The nineteenth-century physician Thomas Rhodes Armitage covered the topic of state support for

education throughout Europe in his 1886 book, *The Education and Employment of the Blind: What it Has Been, Is, and Ought to Be.* Armitage writes, "The Italian institutions are all founded and maintained by private benevolence. The State does nothing, though that of Padua is supported by the Venetian provinces, and other provinces sometimes pay for the maintenance of their pupils in some institutions."[149] For the most part, the Italian government did not yet view it as its responsibility to financially support these efforts. This role was mostly fulfilled by the Church, which explains the prevalent connection between blindness and religion. During the 1800s, most of the visible blind population would either have been connected to religious organizations, which also established charity houses to support the indigent blind, or reliant upon their families.

Discussing the Italian welfare state, the sociologist Egidio Riva describes a situation in which "Family well-being has largely been conceived as a private (female) responsibility."[150] In addition, the Italian historian Ugo Ascoli provides a more recent analysis of the situation in Italy which supports Armitage's claims. Ascoli writes,

> Our welfare state corresponds above all to a *particularistic* model. It is also…a model that rests largely upon *patronage cultures,* it is highly *dualistic*, and it depends above all on *transfers of income* rather than on services;…it is based mainly on a *familistic, paternalistic* and *patriarchal* culture. The fundamental characteristics of this model have their roots in the nineteenth century and are clearly visible in the social and political history of that era.[151]

This dualistic system sets up one system concerned with education and work, and the other centered on assistance. During the historical moment in which Belisario, La Cieca, and Il Cieco

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[149] Armitage, *The Education and Employment of the Blind: What it Has Been, Is, and Ought to Be*, 171.
[150] Egidio Riva, "Familialism Reoriented: Continuity and Change in Work-Family Policy in Italy," *Community, Work & Family* 19, no. 1 (2016): 22.
[151] Ugo Ascoli, "Il modello storico di Welfare State italiano," in *Cittadinanza. Individui, diritti sociali, collettività nella storia contemporanea. Atti del convegno annual SISSCO (Padova, 2-3 dicembre 1999),* ed. Carlotta Sorba (Rome: Ministero per i beni e la attività culturali, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2002), 215, translated in Matteo Schianchi, "Associations of People with Disabilities in Italy: A Short History," *Modern Italy* 19, no. 2 (2014): 122.

appeared on stage, the majority of the institutions in control of education and assistance were in private hands. Nonetheless, the nineteenth-century model of welfare in Italy still relied on able-bodied female members of the household to take care of disabled family members. Inevitably, this reality made its way into Italian opera and on stage. The Grand Inquisitor is exempt from this equation due to his political role, but *Belisario, La Gioconda*, and *Iris* all reflect a social reality for blind people in the 1800s. The responsibility to take care of blind family members would have predominantly fallen to daughters and mothers.

For those without a family support system, charity or poor houses would have been the only option. But these institutions were largely a last resort, and spots and resources had to be distributed among people with other disabilities and the elderly in general. Additionally, there were no guarantees that all eligible applicants would be admitted. Discussing the *Ospedale di Carità di Asti* in 1875, the Italian historian Silvana Baldi writes, "Preference in admissions would be given to precisely «to the oldest and absolutely unfit for any work, and lacking any relief on the part of their families or other pious work.» The possibility of work was now expected almost as a matter of chance."[152] There was a small effort to establish specialty schools for the blind, but there was no such effort to create special charity houses for blind people who could not work. And in order to receive most forms of assistance, the blind had to be indigent. There were not many options afforded to the elderly blind beyond begging, charity, or familial support.

In a nineteenth-century Italian society in which social services for blind people were limited, the three figures of Belisario, La Cieca, and Il Cieco take on a unique role. By idealizing

[152] "La preferenza nelle ammissioni sarebbe stata accordata proprio «ai più vecchi ed assolutamente inabili a qualsiasi lavoro, e mancanti di ogni soccorso per parte delle loro famiglie o di altra opera pia.» La possibilità del lavoro era ormai prevista quasi come un fatto casuale." Silvana Baldi, *Carità, beneficenza pubblica e assistenza sanitaria ad Asti: dal Medioevo alla prima guerra mondiale* (Torino: Gruppo Abele, 1998), 151.

the relationship between a young female family member and their elderly blind parent, Donizetti, Ponchielli, and Mascagni promote familialism throughout their operas. Familialism may not be an ideal form of social support, but during the nineteenth-century, it would have been important to promote this type of social arrangement in Italy. The state did not yet have adequate resources put in place to adequately serve blind individuals and these operas would have been able to encourage an empathetic view of the blind in nineteenth-century audience members. It is possible to imagine that by viewing these three sympathetic figures, operagoers would feel a responsibility to maintain their relationships with their disabled or elderly family members with visual impairments.

Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted how some of the most pervasive stereotypes associated with blindness appeared in nineteenth-century Italian opera. While my first chapter dealt with the relevant historical background that helped form these stereotypes, the majority of this project has focused on how those ideas were reproduced on the operatic stage. By engaging with the concept of complex embodiment, I allow for the physical realities of blindness to play a part in my reception of operatic representations of blindness. Living with blindness is not entirely a socially mediated experience. There are social barriers that exist for people with visual impairments that can exclude them from accessing resources and limit their participation in certain activities, but ultimately those impairments come from a physiological basis. Ignoring those realities prevents us from understanding fictional representations of blindness, and also denies people with visual impairments the right to need or ask for assistance.

This plays a part in my second chapter, where I discussed how Belisario and the Grand Inquisitor display qualities associated with both weakness and power. At times these blind men are portrayed as frail—something that depends on an ableist view of blind people who use canes

or assistive technologies to navigate their surroundings as physically weak. However other moments challenge our perception of them as such. For Belisario, this impression is shattered when he participates in battle and defends the Byzantine Empire against their enemies. When it comes to the Grand Inquisitor, his political authority is inscribed into the libretto and score. I illustrated how his physical and musical presence controls the speech and music of those around him and forces both King Philip and the common people to enact his demands.

However, only one of these characters' power is portrayed as a positive social force. Belisario's power, which stems from his blindness, has the potential to benefit an entire empire, while the Grand Inquisitor's authoritarian actions have destructive ends. Belisario and his blindness then become a metaphor for wisdom while the Grand Inquisitor represents the "blind" power and hypocrisy of the Church. By engaging with disability theory, I argued that operatic norms and conventions have the potential to produce a disabling environment for blind characters and that there exists a hierarchy of disability in nineteenth-century opera. My work raises further questions about how certain disabilities such as madness may have been viewed with greater aesthetic and artistic potential compared to others during the nineteenth century. It also challenges us to consider the existence of disability hierarchies in operas of other eras.

My third chapter "Insight and Ignorance in *La Gioconda* and *Iris*" focused on two pitiful blind characters. I examined how La Cieca and Il Cieco endure both physical and emotional abuse from other characters. Throughout the opera La Cieca proves herself as the ideal notion of a spiritually gifted blind woman as she prays and focuses her thoughts on God. We expect this behavior from a blind character under a fictional logic of blindness. Blind individuals cannot see, so they "must" possess gravity of inner thought. However, this offers no protection for La Cieca as she is murdered by Barnaba in the last act. As a blind feminine character, her dramatic destiny

is to die to prove the depths of Barnaba's depravity. With Il Cieco, the situation is much different. He does demonstrate a high regard for God, but he becomes an ignorant figure when he rebukes and attacks his daughter Iris. There is no sense Il Cieco has special philosophical or religious insight. Although a victim in his own right, he does not possess the ability to recognize deception and ultimately this dooms him to a life of alienation. These tragic depictions of blind characters compel us to reckon with the potential influence of fictional representations of disability on audiences. I suggested that sympathetic operatic portrayals of blindness such as the ones we witness in *La Gioconda* and *Iris* can move viewers to action even as they enforce negative stereotypes.

None of these operas have finished influencing our ideas about blind people and blindness. As part of the standard operatic repertoire, *Don Carlos* and *La Gioconda* will continue to recreate the history of the Grand Inquisitor and La Cieca on stages to new audiences every year. The aim of this project was not to condemn these operas but rather provide a point of reference for engaging with operatic depictions of blindness. Composers mark their blind characters in particular musical ways, whether through text setting or orchestration, which cannot be replicated in books or images. They produce a "sound" of blindness that contributes to cultural attitudes towards the disability. As sighted audience members, being self-conscious about our participation in the reproduction of these representations can impact the way we treat people with visual impairments and force us to consider how societal disparities between blind people and the sighted continue to exist.

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