



7-17-2023

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Recommended Citation

Virgil, Natalie (2023) "The Music of Stranger Things: The Rebirth of a Hero through the Lens of Opera," *The Mall*: Vol. 7 , Article 20.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol7/iss1/20>

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The Music of *Stranger Things*: The Rebirth of a Hero Through the Lens of Opera

Natalie Virgil

The power of music is something the television industry has used to its advantage for years. By incorporating musical elements into the storyline of characters in their show, directors are able to emphasize the emotions and motivations of these individuals, and the Duffer Brothers are no exception to this technique. Known for including popular 80s pop, rock and punk songs within their series, *Stranger Things*, Matt and Ross Duffer introduce a musical twist in season four: opera. While this selection of music may seem odd to many viewers, it has intentionality at its core. Through the incorporation of several operatic arias into the prominent scenes of Eleven's character arch, the Duffer Brothers accentuated her drive to put her past aside and become the hero she once was.

At the very start of season four, the audience is introduced to an extremely scarred version of Eleven. Struggling to adjust to her new life in California, she faces social repercussions because of it and automatically becomes a target among her peers. El gets teased in and out of class for her naive personality, but the worst treatment comes from Angela, the school bully. Angela not only verbally abuses her but is also physically aggressive on multiple occasions; the worst being at the roller rink. In episode two, "Vecna's Curse", El excitedly takes Mike to her favorite place in town, Rink-O-Mania. Upon their arrival, they unfortunately run into Angela who leads in the group plan to enclose El and dump a milkshake on her. Feeling publicly humiliated, El seeks revenge by pounding her in the nose with a roller skate and faces negative social consequences in return.

As the scene transitions away from the roller rink, the audience is placed into a conversation between Argyle, Jonathan, and Eleven as they drive home. In an attempt to clear the tension within the car, the boys try to make El feel better by telling her that "in the grand scheme of things, it's just a little blip"(Chapter 2: Vecna's Curse, 6:24), but she still remains visibly upset. The camera focuses in on a teary eyed El as she stares out the window, but surprisingly, the music during this moment does not reflect her saddened demeanor. Instead, flamboyant vocals from the song "Who

ingannato...Colpevole fui," found in the opera *Rigoletto*, flood the background. Although the plot of this operatic aria doesn't directly align with El's personal story, the similarities between her emotions and those of the main character, Rigoletto, are extremely revealing.

In "V'ho ingannato...Colpevole fui", Rigoletto describes the intense remorse he feels upon realizing he accidentally stabbed his own daughter. He exclaims "Great God in heaven! She was struck by the bolt that I, in righteous vengeance, loosed" and begs for her life (Verdi, 3-4). These lines of the song paint a picture that parallels El's journey up until this point. Instead of opening the heavens and striking people with a lightning bolt, Eleven accidentally opens the Mothergate in Hawkins Laboratory. Like Rigoletto, Eleven's actions throughout the first three seasons unintentionally led to the downfall of those she loves. Despite her attempts to close the portal and protect the town of Hawkins, the power of the Upside down continues to negatively affect the lives of many and ultimately lead to the loss of the person who means most to her, Hopper. The guilt she experiences from seeing the way her failures have not only impacted her life, but the lives of everyone involved, boils inside her; ultimately influencing her actions at the roller rink. Although these internal feelings may be hard to acknowledge just by watching, the way the Duffer Brothers skillfully paired "V'ho ingannato...Colpevole fui" with this specific scene allows viewers to understand El's struggles more deeply. Rigoletto lets guilt overcome all aspects of his life, resulting in his ultimate defeat, and the audience recognizes that if Eleven follows this same pattern she will lead herself down the path of self-destruction as well.

Faced with the option to wallow in her past or move forward, Eleven is presented with an opportunity that may make her choice much easier. At the end of episode three Dr. Owens seeks out El and informs her that "Hawkins is in danger" (Chapter Three: The Monster and the Superhero, 53:26), and they believe she is the only solution. Along with Dr. Brenner, they trust that through the act of memory recall El will be able to regain the ability to use her powers. In episode four, they test this by putting her in a sensory deprivation tank. This allows her to easily transport herself into her past memories at the Hawkins Lab. While interacting with one of those memories, Dr. Brenner described to Eleven the plot of the opera *Nina*, "the story of a young woman whose lover was killed in a duel". He explains that "Nina was so traumatized that she buried

the memory. It was as if it never happened. Every day she would return to the train station to await her lover's return." (Chapter 5: The Nina Project, 43:40). Similar to the character Nina, Eleven's trauma has caused her to block out the past. The strength of her guilt is unbearable and therefore, forgetting about those memories protects her from experiencing the emotions attached to them. However, Dr. Brenner knows that the only way to successfully get El's powers back is by convincing her to "leave [her] train station" (Chapter 5: The Nina Project, 44:15).

Dr. Owens and Dr. Brenner push her to dive further into her suppressed past, but with each step forward El's guilt forces her back. She is too afraid to confront the truths of her past and has no intention of uncovering whether or not she is to blame because in her head she is already the monster. After returning from a memory where she walks into a room of dead children with blood on her hands, she has hit her emotional limit and tries to escape from Dr. Brenner's possession. She hits him in the face and makes a run for the exit of the lab but is quickly blocked off by guards. In a moment of rage, she gains control of her powers, blasting the guards to the walls, however, when Brenner reaches her she is powerless. Frustrated and confused, Eleven confesses to him that she "doesn't understand" to which he replies "I do" (Chapter 5: The Nina Project, 1:10:33). Brenner offers his hand to her, hoping she will let him in once more and Eleven hesitantly takes it. As their hands touch, the song "O sia la Pazza Per Amore: Il Mio Ben Quando Verrá" from the opera *Nina* comes to life in the background.

Directly translating to "when the beloved returns, near his languid friend, spring will then be reborn, the grass will always be a flower" (Dalayrac, 1-4), these lyrics highlight the commonalities between Eleven and Nina. Both characters want to take the easy route and avoid uncovering the pain of their past, expecting that life will go on as normal, but the line "the beloved does not return" (Dalayrac, 8) reveals that this is not a reality. By limiting the depth of their memories, both women are capping their full potential. For Eleven this is seen in the obstacles she faces regaining her powers and for Nina this is displayed through her defiance towards leaving the train station and moving on. The Duffer Brothers' choice to play this song as Eleven takes Brenner's hand exhibits El's acceptance of her fate. Unlike Nina, El's open mindedness has allowed her to view this moment as a turning point. She now understands that her

powers are not coming back without a fight and is committed to putting in the work if it means there is a chance she can make up for her past.

Working to prove herself as a hero once more, Eleven's new mentality drives her to let down her personal barriers and let the past in. She slowly starts to uncover more and more of the truth, eventually allowing her access into the memory she tried hardest to hide: the moment that she opened the Mothergate. Leading up to this, viewers are introduced to the character One; the very first participant in Martin Brenner's mind control experiment. Sought out for his unique gifts, Dr. Brenner worked with One, teaching him how to strengthen and manage his powers. However, he never intended to use his powers for good like Dr. Brenner hoped. While talking with Eleven, he explains his philosophy that "humans are a unique type of pest, multiplying and poisoning our world all while enforcing a structure of their own" (Chapter Seven: The Massacre at Hawkins Lab, 1:23: 44). He believed that he could "restore balance to a broken world" by being "a predator, but for good" (Chapter Seven: The Massacre at Hawkins Lab, 1:25:19), and therefore found it acceptable to kill anyone he deemed as unfit.

In his manipulative ways, One convinces El that they are one in the same. He describes that just like himself, El is a prisoner to Dr. Brenner and offers her freedom at the expense of choosing to join forces with him. As One attempts to persuade her, the thundering chords from the singers of the song "Akhenaten and Nefertiti " come to the front. This love song found in the opera *Akhenaten* showcases the promise of absolute devotion between the two main characters. Although One is not asking Eleven for a romantic devotion, he does seek an alliance with her.

He illustrates to her that if they worked as one, they could "reshape the world" and "remake it however [they] see fit" (Chapter Seven, The Massacre at Hawkin Lab, 1:30:03). Possessing a strong moral foundation, El is not persuaded by his words. As soon as she tells him no, the song cuts out and we are left with the sound of Eleven using her powers to banish One into the Upside Down through the portal she opens. In this scene, music holds a powerful role. While the inclusion of "Akhenaten and Nefertiti" stresses the potential El has to negatively acquire power by working with One, the lack of it showcases El's ability to finally escape from the chains of her guilt and turn him down. By reliving this memory, she is able

to rewrite the story in her head; finally realizing that despite the problems it created, opening the Mothergate was necessary in order to stop One from causing mass destruction. Most importantly, El has come to terms with the fact that she has defeated One once and can do it again. This newly fostered confidence directs Eleven's development throughout the rest of the season, not only helping her regain her powers, but also allowing her to believe for herself that despite her past, she is truly a hero.

Although the inclusion of opera in season four of *Stranger Things* may have seemed as unimportant, its overall effect is something to be talked about. By utilizing songs that are composed of characters who experience such rich emotion, the struggles, and triumphs that Eleven faces within the show take on a whole new meaning. Every scenario that El could have fallen into the traps of guilt and temptation like the characters in these operatic arias, she pushed ahead, leading with the goodness in her heart. The similarities and differences between El and the characters in these songs bring to light her drive to reinstate herself as a hero.

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