

Women, Music, Culture: An Introduction 3/e

Sample Essay for Chapter 11

Some critics contend that operas and musicals are universally sexist. Cite at least one work discussed in Chapter 11 that defies this claim.

STOP and write your essay before scrolling down.

Some critics contend that **operas and musicals** are **universally sexist**. Cite at least **one work** discussed in Chapter 11 that **defies this** claim.

(There are several possible answers to this essay question.)

It is true that many operas and musicals have featured sexist storylines since opera was established in the early 1600s. At the same time, sung dramas on stage have also been used to express alternative views that have placed female protagonists in positions of power.

***Emilie*, a recent opera by Finnish composer Kaija Saariho, is a good example** of a work that celebrates a highly intelligent female protagonist. Based on the life of French philosopher, mathematician and physicist Emilie du Chatelet, the opera **depicts the work of an eighteenth century woman who was a groundbreaking scholar**. Interestingly, this opera is a **monodrama**, which is an operatic work for just one performer. In a sense, the composer uses this genre to **metaphorically depict a woman who**

defeated the odds, and was able to rise above the restrictions of her time to participate in the world of physics and mathematics. The character's **voice is strong**, and the **audience's attention is solely focused on the lone individual performing**, as geometrical shapes and mathematical formulas float around her head by use of modern theatrical techniques. **Unlike 20th century operas that portray women as hysterical or disoriented (through screaming or muttering)**, the strength of Emilie's human character is portrayed with her lone, strong voice.

Note to Students: Longer essays with more points at stake call for more examples. In the world of musicals, *Wicked* would be a good example to add.