

# Role development from a Feminist Perspective

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Susanna's influence towards Ilia

by

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>The Projects Catalyst</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<i>The Feminist Perspective</i> .....	4
<b>Background</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Challenges in the Interpretation of Ilia</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<i>Methods</i> .....	6
Susanna’s Influence and Impact .....	7
<b>Documentation</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>The Presentation – An analysis</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>List of references</b> .....	<b>12</b>

## Abstract

This paper reflects on the process of developing an artistic role from a feminist perspective, focusing on methods and approaches used to imbue a young female character with agency and drive—even when these qualities are not fully articulated in the storyline. It examines how an artist can draw inspiration from existing operatic characters to construct a new role, demonstrating how this process benefits both the performer and the character being developed. Specifically, the paper explores the challenges and transformations involved in reinterpreting the character of Princess Ilia from Mozart’s *Idomeneo*, using Susanna from *Le Nozze di Figaro* as a key influence to enhance Ilia’s agency and motivation. The research concludes in a performance that integrates these findings, premiered on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2026. This paper also reflects on the artistic process and the outcomes of the performance, offering insights into the intersection of feminist interpretation and operatic character development.

## Introduction

Welcome to my reflection of my own Master's Project, *Role Development from a Feminist Perspective – Susanna's Influence towards Ilia*.

As a young lyric soprano, one is often cast in young female roles that lack agency and independence in the way they are portrayed. This has been challenging for me, as I frequently encounter characters whose values do not align with my own, both as an artist and as a person. At the same time, this is part of being a young singer—we must engage with these, at times, “old-fashioned” roles.

## The Projects Catalyst

This internal challenge led me to ask myself: What can I do to give these female characters a stronger voice and a more compelling story? How can I find their inner strength and build a genuine connection to them?

When I began my studies at Stockholm University of the Arts, I initially wanted to work with several female roles, focusing on the contrast between authority and individuality. The focus would be centered on how these roles can impact one another and see how they can influence each other. However, one year is a short period to develop several roles and the limited amount of time did not allow me to dive deeper into several characters at once, as it requires time to understand the libretto, the characters, and the historical context in which the works were created.

I therefore chose to focus on two roles from two different operas by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Ilia from *Idomeneo* and Susanna from *Le Nozze di Figaro*. These are two very different characters, and the central question of my project became: How can characters from different operas influence one another? Can they offer each other new perspectives and contribute to greater agency?

And that's when the central research question of the project came to life:

**“How can Susanna's influence affect Ilia's stage presence and willpower?”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Clément (1988)

## The Feminist Perspective

The central aim of my artistic project revolves around exploring how one female role can influence another. But just as important is the process of building a character from the artists' perspective – because it's our job and responsibility to bring these roles to life on stage<sup>2</sup>.

Personally, I am drawn to female characters who possess agency and drive that are not solely directed toward male counterparts. While these roles—such as *Musetta*, *Norina*, and *Despina*—were written and composed by men, their motivation and willpower often stem from their own narratives and inner strength.

As mentioned in the introduction, I frequently encounter characters whose values and portrayals conflict with my own identity and artistic vision. As a feminist, Black, and lesbian woman, I strive to feel free and authentic on stage as a performer. Characters like Ilia, however, present unique challenges for my artistry. They are often depicted as delicate and innocent women with limited agency or influence over the events unfolding around them in the storyline. This lack of willpower makes it difficult for me to connect with roles like Ilia on a personal and artistic level, often resulting to these characters appearing passive and neutral on stage from a dramaturgical perspective.

For me, adopting a feminist perspective has been essential for me to explore ways to imbue roles like Princess Ilia with confidence, willpower, emotional depth, and drive. This approach allows me to connect with these characters on a personal level and align their portrayal with my values as an artist. Importantly, my intention is *not* to rewrite their storylines or alter the operas' plots. Instead, I aim to develop interpretations that provide these female characters with a stronger narrative presence and a more authentic voice, making them feel human, relatable, and multidimensional. By doing so, I hope to portray them in a manner that is both respectful and meaningful, honoring their place within the operatic tradition while offering a fresh and empowering perspective.

## Background

The idea and vision behind my project stems from a desire to examine and challenge the portrayal of female roles in opera. The research is focused on how female characters can be given clearer agency and inner motivation within their own narratives, viewed from a feminist

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<sup>2</sup> Hicks (2011)

perspective. With a clear aim to illuminate and further develop character interpretations that provide female roles with greater psychological depth, agency, and dramaturgical relevance.

Susanna, from *Le Nozze di Figaro*, is a strong, intelligent, and independent woman. Despite her position as a servant, she successfully challenges Count Almaviva through her wit, courage, and initiative.

In contrast, Ilia from *Idomeneo* is a Trojan princess who has been taken captive after the Trojan War. She has lost her home, her family, and her freedom. During her journey to Crete, Princess Ilia is saved from a storm by Idamante, the son of Idomeneo, and she falls in love with him—which creates an inner conflict within her, as he belongs to the enemy.

Ilia is a clear example of a character with limited agency. We meet her at the beginning of the opera expressing conflicting emotions of love for a man who's on the enemy's side of the war and grief for everything she's lost due to the war. Throughout the opera, her development is largely shaped through her relationships and interactions with others, especially with Prince Idamante and Idomeneo. Her feelings of love and despair for the Prince, are fueled by her hatred for Elettra as she is Ilia's rival for Idamante's love. For me, this has at times felt abrupt and difficult to relate to, as her identity seems heavily defined by those around her. Especially as she is a character that spends a lot of times backstage and engages in ensembles besides her three arias.

This is where Susanna's influence became essential in my work. By using Susanna as a dramaturgical and artistic reference, I have explored ways to give Ilia greater inner strength and clearer motivation.

As part of this process, I imagined Susanna as a former maid in Ilia's life—someone she lost during the war. A caregiver who listened to her, guided her, and gave her strength. Just as Susanna supports the Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, she can also function as an inner voice for Ilia.

## **Challenges in the Interpretation of Ilia**

Ilia, being a Princess and prisoner of war in Crete has no freedom, no title and no belonging. Therefore, she needs an external input to drive her through the opera if she is to be given a

sense of agency. Ilia has three arias in Idomeneo which are hard to interpret without motivation or drive *Quando avran fine omai... Padre, germani, addio, Se il Padre perdei* and *Solitudini amiche... Zeffiretti lusinghieri*.

The only aria where she sings to directly someone is the second one, presented in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Act: *Se il Padre perdei*, where she sings nonetheless to Idomeneo. This is where she confesses her love for Crete and gives him the title as Father – inclining that she has accepted the country of Crete as her own patriarchy and perhaps implicating that he will become her future father-in-law.

However, the aria wasn't easy to interpret as this shows a very vulnerable and submissive side of Ilia, almost erasing all her anger and devotion for revenge in the first opening aria in the 1<sup>st</sup> Act, *Quando avran fine omai... Padre, germani, addio*. And the question whilst working with this piece became:

*How can I justify Ilia's emotions in this aria whilst grasping for agency?*

In addition to the second aria, I had a huge problem interpreting and understanding the final aria as she is expressing her feelings for Idamante to the flowers and the wind. The challenge was centered around singing to nothing, as Ilia is all alone in the garden. The question in regard to *Solitudini amiche... Zeffiretti lusinghieri* became:

*How can I find Ilia's direction in this aria?*

In which became an essential question towards the first aria *Quando avran fine omai... Padre, germani, addio* as well.

## Methods

The methods applied to answer the research question included studying Ilia's three arias as well as two arias by Susanna, dramaturgical interpretation, practical stage work, text analysis, reviewing different performances of *Idomeneo*, singing lessons, and coaching sessions with a répétiteur and stage director. However, it's important to note that half-way through the project I decided to commit to Ilia's storyline, focusing only on the three arias of Idomeneo, Susanna's arias were not sung in the performance, but they were used when working with Ilia in the second aria.

One of the methods that I used the most during this project was watching different stagings of Idomeneo – as to understand the storyline, the music and experience different translations of the libretto<sup>3</sup>. This work became essential as to understand Ilia’s character, as the interactions with the other roles play a huge part in her complex development through the opera. It’s also important to understand that even though Ilia is one of the main characters in Idomeneo, she’s not that often on stage, making it harder to comprehend her choices in the storyline. By watching the opera several times in a row and seeing her interactions and the way the other characters spoke about her when she wasn’t on stage was extremely beneficial when understanding Ilia as a real complex person – even though she’s a fictional character.

### **Susanna’s Influence and Impact**

In the beginning of the process, I had a vision that Susanna would be a real character in the project, where her ghost – since she is imagined to be Ilia’s former maid – would be in the background giving the Princess a sense of trust and acknowledgement for everything that she has been through. Because as mentioned; Ilia, being the main character, has no one to rely on in Crete. She’s left defenseless, a prisoner of war and of love.

Susanna’s physical presence in the arias was efficient and necessary to create an emotional and dramaturgical dynamic for Ilia, especially towards the performance in April. I worked on the floor with a colleague portraying as Susanna in the background of the arias in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Act – as Ilia is all alone in those scenes. The goal was to figure out Ilia’s internal feelings in *Quando avran fine omai... Padre, germani, addio* and *Solitudini amiche... Zeffiretti lusinghieri* by having the ghost of a loyal maid who always listened and cared for Ilia – leading to a result of independence and agency for the Princesses’ story.

However, *Se il Padre perdei* from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Act craved another type of dynamic as the scene involves Ilia and Idomeneo. This is where it became beneficial to use an aspect of Susanna’s aria *Giunse alfin il momento... Deh vieni non tardar* as to build and understand Ilia’s willpower in the aria. This is because Susanna’s aria plays a big role in the *Le Nozze di Figaro*’s plot, as she is intentionally making her fiancé – or newly wedded husband in the 4<sup>th</sup> Act – jealous as she is pretending to call for the Count to meet her in the garden – an

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<sup>3</sup> Recordings and sources used in this project include: Agapò te Musikè 2 (2014, 0:00), Medici.TV (2023, 0:00), Classical Music Archive (2021, 0:00), Monarda (2023, 0:00) and Helsinki Baroque Orchestra (2025, 0:00).

indication to sexual desire and infidelity, in which Susanna would never do towards Figaro. *Giunse alfin il momento... Deh vieni non tardar* is a complex and powerful aria, as it shows Susanna's wit in the opera, not only luring the Count but also her fiancé / husband for doubting her – and a perfect example of agency in which has influenced my work with Ilia.

Firstly, the idea was to make it manipulative from the Princesses' side to regain power and be vengeful for her kin and her country. But it was rather difficult to work with this approach as the composition of the aria involves honesty, making it almost impossible to work from a bitter perspective. That's when I realized the importance of watching an opera multiple times and always falling back to the libretto – because that's when you unravel the hidden riddles.

After watching it for the third or fourth time – *I've lost count at this point* –, I realized that Ilia has a deep and complex feeling of love for Idamante – and unfortunately, due to her circumstances of being a prisoner of war and later freed from the chambers, Ilia has no power and no sense of self in Crete. Her only way to come back to Idamante is to accept her faith in Crete, confess her love for the patriarchy and its people to Idomeneo and rather wisely unravel her true feelings for the Prince to the King. *Se il Padre perdei*, is in many ways a complex aria to interpret, but when we look at it through the eyes of Susanna in *Giunse alfin il momento... Deh vieni non tardar* it becomes a meaningful and sincere aria for Ilia. Especially if her maid, Susanna, is standing by the throne room, encouraging Ilia to be true and show vulnerability to Idomeneo so that she can be reunited with Idamante.

After working with Susanna's physical presence in the arias, I later found out that her presence was no longer needed – as Ilia's intention, direction and agency was becoming more independent and real. That's why, one week before the performance, I decided to remove Susanna's ghostly presence completely from the project – leaving me to focus on Ilia's feelings.

## Documentation

The project has been documented through video recordings from lessons and rehearsals, as well as notes and reflections made throughout the process. These recordings were intended to serve as a tool to involve the audience in the dramaturgical work, highlighting how character development, intention, analysis, and comparison are created in the rehearsal space.

The final project presentation included an introduction to the project, a brief presentation of Ilia and Susanna, reflections on the working methods and approaches used, a selection of video excerpts, and a performance of the arias.

## The Presentation – An analysis

The performance consisting of the three arias was finally presented on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2026, where it showcased a result of my work of the three arias *Quando avran fine omai... Padre, germani, addio, Se il Padre perdei* and *Solitudini amiche... Zeffiretti lusinghieri*. The arias were performed in a dramaturgical perspective with involved prompts, visual effects and costumes – giving the audience a sneak-peak into her character development.

The performance began with a short introduction and background of the project, ending the presentation with the sound thunder and a visual looping video of a stormy sea in the background – lead by the last half of Idomeneo’s overture and a small light into Ilia lying on her bed, chained to the ground and unable to rest.

By the end of the overture, we’re directly introduced to Ilia’s first recitative and aria *Quando avran fine omai... Padre, germani, addio*<sup>4</sup>. And instead of it being an introduction to an innocent and helpless Princess, her agency and complexity is unraveled by the choices she makes throughout the spoken recitativo and aria – feeling sorry for herself, then blaming the Gods for such a horrible fate, feeling avenged for Idomeneo’s death and somehow feeling defeated as her heart belongs to Prince Idamante - who’s on the enemy’s side of the war, trying to understand her feelings of love and revenge and adding Elettra into the riddle, only to further complicate the situation. During the performance of the first aria, Ilia takes ownership for her emotions, creating a deeper and realistic understanding of the character.

As the lights dim out, leaving the scene with Ilia left in her prisoner chamber with every emotion possible, the scene changes and goes directly into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Act in Idomeneo’s throne room<sup>5</sup>. In the performance, Idomeneo, who is played by Sally Sallingboe Jørgensen, is listening to Ilia’s words whilst sitting on his throne. As previously mentioned, Ilia’s 2<sup>nd</sup> aria

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<sup>4</sup> Recording from the Master’s Performance, (A. Dos Santos 2026, 2:07), if not to be found check the other links in the reference list.

<sup>5</sup> Recording from the Master’s Performance, (A. Dos Santos 2026, 10:48), if not to be found check the other links in the reference list.

has been challenging – as I didn't want her to be a submissive character. However, after working with the image of Susanna, and connecting the complexity of *Giunse alfin il momento... Deh vieni non tardar* into *Se il Padre perdei*, Ilia's honesty, manipulation and direction became clearer towards the King. The result in it being more sincere, honest and manipulative from a sweet way – as she is calling him Father, indicating and directing her words from a place of love for his son. The last phrases are more intentional as she holds onto her agency – because she knows what she is doing – and Idomeneo is left in the throne room to unravel the riddle alone, after Ilia leaves him with integrity.

Eventually, the lights dim out again and the throne room shifts into the Royal Garden filled with flowers, a bench and a tree<sup>6</sup>. Ilia's costume includes a cloak, resembling the one Susanna uses in the last act in her aria, in which the Princess takes off in the introduction of *Zeffiretti lusighieri*, as she sees an opportunity to rely on the winds and the flowers as she unleashes her love for Idamante, longing and begging him to stay faithful and true to her. And instead of this being a lovely aria, it becomes something more for Ilia, a cry, desperation, hope and comfort as she relies on the power of nature and love to listen and give the message to her lover. Susanna's influence of care and understanding unlocked a true feeling within Ilia, of acceptance, love, yearning and hope. Ending with Ilia lying on the ground amongst the flowers as a sense of release embraces her – as she has declared her love, and now it's up for faith to decide her destiny.

## Conclusion

The outcomes of this project, particularly through performing and working with Ilia, have been profoundly rewarding for me as an artist.

### **Did I find tools and strategies to give Ilia willpower and agency?**

Yes, I did. By using Susanna as a primary source of influence and power, and by challenging myself to understand Ilia as a complex and multidimensional woman, I discovered new ways to approach a role that initially did not resonate with me. This process allowed me to create a deeper and more intricate storyline for Ilia, one that imbued her with meaningful and empowering drive throughout the opera—even when such qualities were not explicitly written

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<sup>6</sup> Recording from the Master's Performance, (A. Dos Santos 2026, 17:54), *if not to be found check the other links in the reference list.*

into the libretto. Ilia became more human to me, and her story intertwined with my own, enriching my personal and artistic interpretation of her on stage.

### **What did I learn from this project?**

I learned that to work effectively with challenging roles like Ilia, I need to draw inspiration and influence from other female characters and allow their stories to inform, influence and deepen my interpretation. By doing so, I can develop these roles into more complex and multidimensional portrayals—just as real individuals are multifaceted. The methods and strategies I used in this project will serve as a foundation for future work with similar roles. I believe that as I continue to apply these practices, the process of developing challenging characters with limited agency and drive will become more intuitive, precise and efficient over time.

Ultimately, the purpose of this project was to explore how the interpretation and understanding of two different roles can influence one another. This method offers a valuable tool for generating fresh and newer approaches to working with female roles that often lack agency or well-defined backstories. My hope is that this project will serve as a resource for singers, both aspiring and experienced, providing them with practical strategies for tackling complex roles in their careers.

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