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### **Transcending Centuries with Italian Opera**

After a day of exhaustion, I often find myself under a blanket on my bed, tuning out the world with an Italian aria performed in an opera from the Baroque era. With eyes closed, the sound of the opera singer's voice conjures images of European cathedrals and theaters during the time period when classical music flourished. In recent months, my shallow appreciation for opera transformed into a deep passion after receiving a greater exposure to it in my voice lessons. After coming home from my classes every week, I found myself going down a spiral of videos and recordings online. I couldn't believe how much I had been missing out on before, and it quickly occurred to me that most people I know are likely still oblivious to the world of opera that is waiting to be discovered. Unfortunately, it seems as though opera is widely considered an art form buried in the past. My revelation is that it shouldn't be, and its essence is much closer to our lives than we may think.

Upon first glance at operas performed in theaters and auditoriums, they seem utterly extravagant and far-flung from the world we live in today. This had always been the notion that I carried, and in every book I read or movie I watched, it was something that catered exclusively to high society. I would see how aristocrats went out at night dressed in evening gowns and precious jewelry, listening to operas in Italian, German, or French. The performers themselves played the parts of melodramatic characters acting in whimsical stories, and their costumes and sets were beyond elaborate. The song lyrics described death, torment, or dazzling professions of love. Expressions were extreme and, compared to modern-day life, completely unrealistic. The only value that I really did understand lay in the visual appeal of the performances and the skill and vocal artistry of the singers. Only now have I been able to grasp the essence of the songs and the depth of the emotions they carry. The physical appearance of classical operas may seem antediluvian, but the heart of the opera is something intangible that can never fade with time. Just as the themes of books remain relevant for all times, the spirit of opera can impact people at all times.

Given the turmoil caused by the pandemic over the last couple of years, opera has helped me put life as a whole into perspective. The entire world seems imprisoned, in a sense, by COVID-19—regardless of switches between lockdowns, reopenings, and changes in protocol. Our lives are not as they were before, and we are anxiously waiting for the day when we can be liberated from the shackles of COVID-19. Whenever I contemplate our current situation, I often grow distraught wondering how long we will be stuck. Arias, such as “Lascia ch’io Pianga” by Handel, have had their way of offering consolation. The music’s emotion is so poignant that it can pierce the hearts of all who hear it, regardless of whether they understand the language. “Lascia ch’io Pianga” itself is one of the most enchanting pieces I have come across. After much

time educating myself about its context, I felt more enlightened about life itself. Initially, its message seemed depressing and rather hopeless as it told the story of someone feeling imprisoned by their fate.

However, it still pulled me in, and as I listened to the piece more and more, I interpreted it differently each time. I realized that feeling trapped and distressed is an inevitable part of life, notwithstanding its vicissitudes. This pandemic has been the most obvious source of it in my own life, but hardship has existed and will exist in everyone's life in some shape or form. I ultimately took comfort in this because I realized that people from 300 years ago faced personal conflicts and struggles similar to those we face today, but the darkness does not last forever.

Besides "Lascia ch'io Pianga," nearly all arias I have listened to have thus far had their stirring impact on me. And, somewhat counterintuitively, I have learned that listening to songs in their original language can often be more touching than listening to them in English. I have had exposure to archaic Italian, and I believe it expresses concepts that may not even exist in the English language. As a result, listening to the original Italian can evoke emotions that are impossible to describe fully. I can feel the opera in my heart while simultaneously not understanding it in my mind, which I think is opera's greatest beauty. It remains a mystery to me, but I can continue to explore its depths for the rest of my life.