

# Artistic Characterization of the Song "Defying Gravity" in the Musical "Wicked"

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**Abstract:** "Wicked" is one of the most successful musicals in the world since this century, and there are a lot of classic songs in the show, among which "Defying Gravity" is one of the most colorful and emotional songs in the show. Therefore, this paper will analyze the artistic characteristics of this song in depth from the background of the story as well as the character image as a starting point.

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## 1. Background of "Defying Gravity"

### 1.1. Background of the creation of the musical "Wicked"

The musical "Wicked" Witch premiered on Broadway in 2003. Created by Stephan Schwartz and Winnie Holzman (writers) and their team, the show was based on a 1995 novel, "Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West", written by Gregory Maguire after he read "The Wizard of Oz". Although "Wicked" is often mentioned in the same breath as "The Wizard of Oz", the two are quite different. Unlike the children's show, "Wicked" Witch deals with a much deeper level. Gregory Maguire, the author of the original book, has asked the question, "Are people born innocent or are they born evil? Is there evil in the human body that has long been established?" I think you'll get your answer when you hear the song Defying Gravity from the musical Wicked.

### 1.2. Storyline

The story of the "Wicked" uses flashbacks. In the story the good witch Glinda falls from the sky and announces that the bad witch Elphaba is dead through and through, there are questions about whether Glinda's evilness is by nature or by circumstance and Glinda falls into memories of Elphaba.

Elphaba was born green and was subjected to strange looks and misunderstanding from her relatives. When she grew up, she attended the university as a chaperone for her sister, and was accepted as a student by the principal with the intention of introducing her to the Grand Wizard, the highest authority in Oz. In the course of her studies, she becomes roommates with Glinda, a rich girl, and gradually becomes a close friend from mutual dislike. After the incident of rescuing the lion cub, Elphaba and Fiyero fall in love with each other, but Elphaba suppress her feelings because Fiyero is the man of Glinda's dreams. Later, when Elphaba and Glinda seek the help of the Grand Wizard in defending the rights of the animals, they discover that the animals' anomalies were used by the Grand Wizard as a means to consolidate his power, and that the Grand Wizard doesn't know any magic at all, and only wanted to use Elphaba's talent for magic to cast the flying spell from the grimoire. Knowing the truth, Elphaba and Glinda have a disagreement, and the song "Defying Gravity" is sung during the argument, culminating in Elphaba leaving the Grand Wizard and Glinda submitting to him.

Afterwards, Elphaba continues to do justice to the animals

amidst the world's misunderstandings, while the conflicted Glinda works for the Grand Wizard and others as the Witch of Good: leading the people to believe that Elphaba is a bad witch who is evil to the core. When the angry people try to kill Elphaba, Glinda informs Elphaba and offers to justify Elphaba to the crowd, but Elphaba rejects the idea; Elphaba gives Glinda the spell book and fools everyone by "faking his own death" and goes into seclusion with his beloved Fiyero. Glinda tells the people that the Wicked Witch has been destroyed after Elphaba's "fake death," which is the scene at the beginning of the musical where the crowd celebrates the Wicked Witch's death with wild abandon.

### 1.3. Analysis of the main character in "Defying Gravity"

Although the whole play shows a clear dual female lead (Elphaba and Glinda) setting and both female leads are also involved in the song "Defying Gravity", this song, as the last scene of the first half, is one of the major turning points for one of the main characters, Elphaba. Therefore, this section is analyzed only with Elphaba as the subject.

Elphaba appears in the play as the "bad witch". Her green skin symbolizes her other differences from Glinda and the other students: she is independent, free-thinking, intelligent, progressive, strong at heart, and in addition she possesses magical powers and the ability to cast spells. By using other characters to emphasize her image over and over again, the musical shows her uniqueness and wants the audience to recognize and sympathize with Elphaba.

In Western mythology, witches are the face of evil, but when you watch the entire musical, you'll realize that the "evil" witch, Elphaba, is not evil at all. As a "bad" figure, Elphaba's character is undoubtedly eccentric, having been associated with "badness" from the moment of her birth when she was disliked as a monster because of her green color. Inherent thinking dominates our perceptions. After isolation, misunderstanding and betrayal, the audience suddenly realizes that the Archmagi seems to be the one who has done all the bad things, while Elphaba, who is declared a "bad witch" in the opening scene, has never done a single bad thing, has always been kind at heart, loves animals and has never harmed anyone. The image of "beauty" also appears in the main character Elphaba. This creates an extremely dramatic perception, overturning the fixed thinking of "good" and "bad". It makes people rethink about "good" and "evil", "good" and "bad" at a deeper level than the simple appearances.

In the song "Defying Gravity", the definitions of good and bad seem to blur, Elphaba refuses to go along with it because she realizes that the Archmagi is the source of the animals' disaster, and Glinda instead tries to persuade her to compromise with the Archmagi as a way of getting rid of Elphaba's identity as a bad witch. There is an important twist in the plot and in the audience's perception of Elphaba. The ugly "bad" witch is more firmly on the side of "justice" than the beautiful "good" witch. This song establishes Elphaba's true characterization with a powerful and unmistakable vocal.

## 2. Artistic Features of "Defying Gravity"

### 2.1. Music Ontology Characterization

Like many mid-twentieth-century musicals, "Wicked" employs the convention of introducing each character in terms of musical stylistic traits, so that many of the songs in the musical also hint at the main character's personality traits as well as internal choices in terms of the musical ontology.

The song "Defying Gravity" is one of the more classic duets in the play. In order to better portray the characters' characteristics as well as the development of the plot, the author arranged the form layout meticulously, i.e., a return to tonality is used (from  $bD$  major to  $\sharp F$  major and back to  $bD$  major), and this layout sets the tone of the plot's development - the protagonist will return to his own heart in the end, no matter what. the protagonist will return to his own heart no matter what. In form this song is a compound ternary form, consisting of Introduction (1-5), A (6-61) [ $A^1+A^2$ ], B (62-81) [ $c+b^2$ ], A' (82-83) [ $a^3+b^2$ ]. The specific structure is as follows:

The introductory section ranges over the first five bars and stays in the key of D-flat major, and the harmony is repeated over the three chords I, IV, and V. The tonal nature is also emphasized.

The A part is a binary form with recapitulation and includes two periods,  $A^1$  and  $A^2$ , still in the warm, bright and quiet key of D-flat major. The  $A^1$  period can be divided into two contrasting phrases ( $a^1$  and  $b^1$ ). The  $a^1$  phrase uses mostly bright dominant and dominant chords with a bright harmonic effect of the protagonist's mood of wanting to break free and longing for freedom. The melodic and harmonic parts that immediately follow are extremely propulsive, expressing Elphaba's calmness of mind after reflection and epiphany. The overall direction of the melody fluctuates according to the mood of the characters, such as the main character Elphaba's lyrics, "Something has changed within me", "I'm through with playing by the rules", where the words "changed" and "rules" are emphasized as melodic highs. "and "rules" are emphasized as melodic high points. Meanwhile, the accompaniment of a phrase uses a major triad chord at the intersection of the fourth and fifth bars, which has a bright harmonic effect that, combined with the lyrics, maps Elphaba's desire to be free. The  $b^1$  phrase, to emphasize the contrast and to echo the song title "Defying Gravity", chooses a very dynamic second progression in the harmony and the pitch stays up throughout the twists and turns. The  $A^2$  period ( $a^2+b^1$ ) is a derivation of the  $A^1$  period, in which the melodic pitch of the  $a^2$  phrase remains unchanged, with only a derivative contrast of rhythmic changes, and the  $b^1$  phrase is reproduced exactly, still as an expression of Elphaba's determination to resist.

The B part consists of two phrases ( $c$  and  $b^2$ ), and the tonic shifts to F sharp major. Here, direct transposition is used, and

the harmony shifts from the original D-flat major tonic (omitting the tritone) to the ascending F major subdominant chord, which is superficially a far cry from the original, but acoustically the transposition belongs to the near-relative transposition of the upper fourth. At this point the dominant  $bD$  of the original key becomes the dominant  $\sharp C$  of the new key, the harmony is in the ascending F major subdominant chord for the bass, and the high voices are sustained in the dominant to clarify the tonic. The  $b^2$  phrase uses the musical material from the  $b^1$  phrase of the A section, and in conjunction with the lyrics, it also embodies the emotion of "Defying Gravity", with the mood shifting to a bright, high-pitched one that speaks of a strong belief in getting out of a difficult situation.

The A' section shows Elphaba's failure to persuade Glinda and his decision to leave on his own, at which point the tonality returns to D-flat major, but the melodic range is shifted upwards and the mood is more agitated than before. The song picks up with a coda at the end, and after a quick downward spiral of the melody, a big octave jump pushes the music to its final high point and closes it out, and meanwhile Elphaba has flown off into the sky in her long dress, as the song "Defying Gravity" suggests.

### 2.2. Musical images

In a musical, a character's song is extremely important and essential and has a deep meaning, while a reprise (a form of performance in which two characters sing on stage at the same time) plays a more important role in bringing about a dramatic conflict, so the musical image of "Defying Gravity" will be analyzed in detail in this paragraph.

The song "Defying Gravity" is a duet between Glinda and Elphaba. But in a way it's a duet between the two main characters and the audience, using the song to make the audience revisit the two protagonists. After Elphaba discovers the conspiracy of the Archmagi, Elphaba and Glinda, who is pursuing power and popularity, have different choices. She wants to pursue her own heart, to defy the Archmagi, i.e., "Defying Gravity", and to become her true self without anyone's help. "Defying Gravity" is a metaphor for a girl's quest for her true self, which is gained at the cost of loneliness, but the protagonist is rewarded - freedom. Before Elphaba jumps into the air alone, Glinda reminds her that it's not too late. Elphaba can still be forgiven by the Archmagi as well as enjoy everything she wanted before, granting her power and the adoration of her people. But Elphaba is not willing to do so at the cost of giving up her ego. So, unlike Glinda who wanted to remain silent about the truth, Elphaba revolted - as expressed in this song.

As the final act of the first half, the song reveals the values that the music gives to Elphaba: independence, kindness, determination, and the justice hidden within. On the whole the song shows the conflict between the two female leads, the song starts with Glinda arguing with Elphaba, Glinda: "Why couldn't you have stayed calm for once, instead of flying off the handle! I hope you're happy, I hope you're happy now, I hope you're happy how you, Hurt your cause forever, I hope you think you're clever." Elphaba: "I hope you're happy, I hope you're happy too, I hope you're proud how you, Would grovel in submission, To feed your own ambition." Here it actually shows that Glinda actually understands Elphaba's dream very well. In the middle part of the song, Elphaba says, "Glinda, come with me. Think of what we could do - together. I'm Limited, Together we're unlimited, Together we'll be the

greatest team. "Both of them proudly and proudly sing the chorus, "There's no fight we cannot win." it seemed they could fly together as a team toward the sky. Eventually however Glinda decides to obey the archmagi and backs away from Elphaba.

The scene ends with Elphaba rising high in the spotlight, surrounded by a massive burst of witchy magic, preferring to be misunderstood as an evil witch and defying the scheming Archmagi. Despite having Glinda's support lyrically at this point, she is visually isolated, and Glinda looks on admiringly. This scene also confirms that these two protagonists represent not only differences in personality and style, but also a relationship that is the opposite of power.

### 3. Conclusion

Musical theater is a comprehensive performance art form, the most important form of expression is to use music to shape the characters, narrative, and promote the development of the story, and singing to express the psychology of the characters and explain the plot, The purpose of the characters is reflected in the singing and acting.

The musical "Wicked" in Elphaba and Glinda's characterization contains character image and character psychology, especially in the song "Defying Gravity" is the most profound, according to the plot with artistic treatment to show them, so the author in this paper on the song "Defying Gravity" to analyze from the story background, Character several aspects, in-depth analysis of the artistic characteristics

of the song, in the hope that the singer to shape a more accurate character image.

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