



REVIEW: BOOK

Music Theatre and the Holy Roman Empire: The German Musical Stage at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

Austin Glatthorn

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As Austin Glatthorn argues in a ground-breaking new book, music historians tend to construct political boundaries ‘that did not necessarily exist at the time’ (30). Much of Europe’s political map throughout the period Reinhart Koselleck has called the *Sattelzeit* (1750–1850) was characterized politically, culturally and economically by polities that were not nation states, and where political statehood was not based on a sense of ethnic or national belonging (Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Einleitung’, in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, eight volumes, volume 1 (Stuttgart: Klett, 1972), xv). In teleological fashion, political commentators of later periods have presented this fact as an abnormality: a barrier against modernization and an anachronistic relic of medieval times. A particular target of their ire has been the Holy Roman Empire, the main subject of Glatthorn’s book, which, according to them, had long lost its right to exist.

The problem with this argument is that most contemporaries, the people living within the borders of the Holy Roman Empire, had never known and experienced a different form of statehood, and they were thus far from abandoning their empire. Obviously, forces undermining existing political structures have always marked public debate; and, as in the case of nationalist ideologues in the twentieth century or the populist propagandists in the twenty-first, we find even in the eighteenth century voices that tried to impose a political future by manipulating the political past and present. These forces notwithstanding, most inhabitants of the Holy Roman Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century associated their empire with a millennial history, reflecting religious beliefs and forms of political legitimacy that in many respects determined their lives. A powerful symbol of this sense of allegiance to the empire were the celebrations accompanying the election and the coronation of emperors, especially those of Joseph II, Leopold II and Franz II. These ceremonies constituted forms of political communication, the musical components of which Glatthorn discusses in a masterpiece of political anthropology, showing how pomp and glory were able to renew political legitimacy. Within the context of such political events, Glatthorn sees music-theatrical productions as ‘registers of imperial identity and belonging’ (262). In moving words, the elderly Goethe recalled the imperial celebrations he witnessed during his youth in Frankfurt in his autobiographical *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1808–1831). Less emotionally inclined commentators saw in the empire’s constitutional structures a path into the political future. For instance, Montesquieu admired the empire’s division of powers, and Benjamin Franklin recognized in its federal structure a constitutional basis for the North American Republic.

To return to the initial quotation from Glatthorn’s book, music historians need to take account of political structures of statehood before classifying music according to categories that historically

meant relatively little: it was not nationality that defined types of music. Glatthorn's volume exemplifies such a critical approach, making his study of music theatre in the late Holy Roman Empire important reading for musicologists and historians alike. For the author, the Holy Roman Empire was an 'Empire of Theatres' (the title of his first chapter), based on complex networks of impresarios, composers, theatrical troupes and stages that were not necessarily attached to court theatres – an idea that often springs to mind when talking about music theatre in the early modern period – but to public stages of different sizes, sometimes even just simply located in an inn. This network of theatres mirrored the empire's decentralized structure and its long tradition of travelling courts.

The empire supported the theatre industry as an imperial institution, in so far as it was able to rely on other imperial institutions such as the Thurn und Taxis system of coach houses and postal stations. As the author shows in chapter 3, communication was key to the maintenance of such theatre networks. Correspondence relating to these networks not only helps us to understand how theatres and different troupes collaborated, but also teaches us how particular works were staged and adapted to changing circumstances. A remarkable number of women were involved in maintaining these networks, often as independent agents. A good example of the kind of information Glatthorn examines in order to reconstruct these networks is the correspondence relating to Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Großmann's company, which toured the empire between 1778 and 1796. Glatthorn contrasts the activities of Großmann's changing troupes with the theatre of an ecclesiastical court, the Mainz Nationaltheater, and that of a theatre affiliated with a secular court, the Theater zu Mecklenburg-Schwerin. Although these companies catered for different publics in different parts of the empire, in their work they relied on the circulation of the same information and repertoires. Responses by the public, disseminated through periodicals and correspondence within these networks, often determined the success of a particular work or the ways in which it was staged.

While Italian music theatre still dominated the empire's stages up to the mid-eighteenth century, alongside some French and German productions, during the empire's denouement (with the curtain falling in 1806) German-language music theatre, which was cheaper to produce, became the main focus. As Glatthorn shows, the emergence of this form of *Nationaltheater* was not the product of a centralized nation state, but rather the fruit of the empire's polycentric structure of communication between different agents, emerging and flourishing as a consequence of the exchange of information across the empire's internal borders. Through his study, Glatthorn directs us to the importance of German music theatre, a repertory that dominated the stages for decades, but which has been largely forgotten today and would often sound rather foreign to modern ears – operas like Dittersdorf's *Der Apotheker und der Doktor* (1786), or works by Hiller, Benda and Neefe, which were produced alongside translated works of Italian and French composers. As Glatthorn explains, this music 'has suffered due to national discourses as well as canonic sympathies and anxieties' (34). Despite the growing popularity of German music theatre in the empire, a sense of national belonging usually played a secondary role in the development of this repertory. Non-German speakers regularly contributed to the German repertory, while German composers also wrote works in other languages. Translations also made up an important part of the repertory. For instance, Benda's *Ariadne* was translated into French, Danish, Hungarian, Russian, Polish, Czech, Italian and Swedish.

Glatthorn's main source for reconstructing this repertory is a detailed, digitally supported analysis of the entries contained in the annual *Theater-Kalender*, turning his monograph into a methodological model for similar projects. The *Theater-Kalender* first appeared in 1775, one of about 450 periodicals concerned with what was happening on stage at the time. In the *Kalender*, readers could learn about where companies performed, who directed them and of whom their casts were composed, but could also learn about the repertory they performed, how it was received or what different companies planned for future seasons. All this information shows that the *Kalender* was a periodical for the industry itself, making available the kind of information that a network of

theatres required. Its editor was Heinrich August Ottokar Reichard, co-director of the recently founded court theatre in Gotha, which belonged to Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg. The periodical's aim was not to draw attention to Gotha's new stage, but to bring together information on countless theatres that might collaborate with Gotha. These stages were distributed over a huge polycentric area, the German-speaking lands, which is why they were dependent on forming a network of communication to facilitate their exchange of information. In order to do so, the journal's editor maintained a network of correspondents, reporting from all over the empire on the movement of troupes, their repertory and its reception. The journal survived for twenty-five years and was so successful that the editor created several related ones.

An interesting aspect of the *Theater-Kalender* is its very early inclusion of engravings of actors, beginning with the periodical's second issue in 1776. The first feature of this kind was a tableau depicting Esther Charlotte Brandes as the title character of Benda's *Ariadne*, which had been premiered in Gotha the previous year. Glatthorn uses Benda's work to introduce his chapter on melodrama, a genre described by commentators at the time as 'Germany's daughter'. As a typically German form of music theatre, almost every German theatre around the turn of the century produced melodrama, often featuring the most famous actors active in this genre. Glatthorn traces the changing incarnations of melodrama and how they tried to respond to Gottsched's and Rousseau's critique of different genres of music theatre.

Perhaps the most revealing section of the book, especially from a historian's point of view, is its final chapter. It explores music theatre as an expression of imperial identity or a way of celebrating this polity. Through different genres, composers and their librettists responded to particular historical or current events, or provided a stage for political and symbolic messages and commentary. As the revolutionary period began, music theatre provided a sense of community and continuity in times of uncertainty. As Glatthorn demonstrates convincingly, despite this challenge of changing times, there is little to suggest that people had written off their Empire of Theatres.

This review was commissioned before the current reviews editor assumed his post and was edited by others on the ECM team.

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