"Was deutsch und echt…": Articulating a German operatic identity, 1798-1876

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Citation for published version (APA):
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Articulating a German Operatic Identity, 1798-1876

English Summary

The main aim of this study has been to examine the ways in which a German operatic identity was articulated between 1798 and 1876, and to contribute to an understanding of the relation of German nineteenth-century music esthetics to national thought. This relation, long overlooked or deliberately obscured, turns out to be very strong indeed. German Romantic music esthetics generally seems to be governed by an outspoken disdain for politics as something mundane, and therefore irreconcilable with the metaphysical depths and spiritual revelations that music, particularly in its instrumental, most abstract, and thus most Romantic form, can engender. This apolitical interpretation has been applied to German Romanticism in general, but has been especially persistent in the field of music, generally considered to be the most abstract art form with the loosest connections to the everyday world.

Since the 1980s, American scholars such as Kerman, Hepokoski, Applegate, Rumph, and Pederson have argued that the detachment of music from mundane matters in German Romantic music esthetics was in fact fueled by a staunch national chauvinism. They have demonstrated that the idea of German music as something that transcends nationality was actually inspired by an utterly nationalist ideology. I take this notion of a strong entanglement of German Romantic music esthetics and national thought as a point of departure for investigating the relation between national identity construction and nineteenth-century German opera. Whereas these American scholars mentioned above generally discuss instrumental genres or church music, I have chosen to focus instead on German opera. German opera presents a highly problematic, and therefore fascinating realm within German nineteenth-century musical life and within the articulation of a German musical identity, as well as a unique case within the comparative study of national opera in nineteenth-century Europe.

The prominence of national thought during the nineteenth century triggered opera makers and critics to articulate a national operatic identity. I have characterized this operatic identity as complying with a more general cultural self-
image current in Germany while contrasting itself against the perceived operatic identities of other nations. The relation between nineteenth-century German opera and national identity construction is strong, but simultaneously problematic, especially in comparison to the national status of opera elsewhere in Europe. In the Introduction, I have signaled a German Opera Problem, revolving around the question of how to formulate an operatic national identity in a music culture that, as I have argued, in many cases was articulated in opposition to opera, as opera was associated with foreign, un-German musical identities. This question forms a thread throughout this dissertation, which chiefly investigates the answers and solutions formulated by composers, librettists, and opera critics in a vast array of nineteenth-century music journals, as well as in the creation of operas themselves.

The First Chapter discusses how German opera was conceptualized in early nineteenth-century music journalism, taking the first twenty-five volumes of the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung and Carl Maria von Weber’s writings as main sources. It discusses how a German operatic identity was formulated and how, according to the writers under scrutiny, German opera was supposed to complement or outdo the established Italian and French opera traditions. It is remarkable that this conceptualization of German opera often preceded the actual composition of works.

Within this conceptualization, Italian opera is often viewed as the malicious center, comparable to French culture in other realms of German culture at the time. Using the constellation of Tacitus’ Germania, Italian opera is presented as decadent and over the hill, whereas the still brittle German opera will gain ascendancy in the future because of its superior, ascetic virtues. The developmental tenor of this discourse displays a tendency towards historicism that is characteristic of German early nineteenth-century thought in general. The idea that German music holds the future of music in general was often combined with the notion of a German mission in the perfection of cosmopolitan causes. A third, less-widespread notion is the “Nazarene” approach to music. It presupposes that German and Italian music both have their individual merits, the former being profound and harmonic, whereas the latter is sensuous and euphonic. As such, they are complementary, and should engage in an ultimate symbiosis. This “Nazarene” attitude is often combined with a rejection of the rigid rules and unmusical nature of French music.

In many of the sources, one encounters the idea that a German opera composer is a profound thinker who adopts foreign influences to perfect them and take them to a next level. A second thesis is the emphasis on thematic, formal coherence associated with German opera composition. A third, less prominent but somehow related postulate is the ideal of multimedial coherence: a meaningful
integration and collaboration of the individual arts within an opera. This general
ideal of organic unity is arguably derived from contemporary German discourse on
instrumental music. Of course all propositions of this ideal conceptualization of
German opera composition involved a great amount of “wishful thinking”. Weber,
himself a staunch advocate of German opera, was very aware that this ideal,
rounded artwork was anything but realized in his own days, as is evident from his
fragmentary novel *Tonkünstlers Leben* (1809-1820).

The urge to articulate a German operatic identity becomes evident from the
way in which the adjectives “German” and “national” obtain the status of an
esthetic criterion in early nineteenth-century opera criticism. Reviews of
Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, Hoffmann’s *Undine*, and Weber’s *Der Freischütz* in the *AMZ*
illustrate this. Amadeus Wendt’s 1815 review of *Fidelio* lifts out the profound and
elevated character of German opera, a grandness that makes Italian singing no
longer appropriate or necessary. In a comparison to Paër’s *Leonora*, Wendt
emphasizes Beethoven’s *German* capacity to fully grasp the dramatic atmosphere.

Carl Maria von Weber’s *Undine* review is crucial to the articulation of a German
operatic identity, as he emphatically judges the opera from an ideal type: “the
opera that the German wants; a closed artwork, in which all individual
contributions of the single arts are molded together, finally to dissolve and create a
new world.” Weber indeed recognizes these virtues in Hoffmann’s work.

Despite Weber’s enthusiasm for *Undine*, it turned out that he himself
would compose “the opera that the German wanted” with his *Der Freischütz*
(1821). The national framing of this opera was partly the result of Weber’s
commitment to the national cause and the premiere’s status as a commemoration of
Waterloo. Moreover, its depiction of rural life in a hunter’s society, its Faustian
struggle between good and evil and the encounter between humans and spirits all
tallied with notions of German national identity. Musically, Weber realized a
symbiosis between catchy folksongs and a more elevated, *German* “symphonic”
style, and reviewers praised the organic unity of the work. Although some critics
felt that the folk tone of the music was inappropriate for an elevated, national
opera, *Der Freischütz*, more than any other artwork, became the symbol of German
pride and hope for the future in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. The fact that
a German opera could actually fulfill this national function firmly underlines the
eventual success of the genre’s advocates.

In the sources discussed in the first chapter, the idea that German opera is
or should aim to be more elevated than other national traditions was frequently
addressed. The second and third chapter investigated the potential of
“Romanticization”, as Novalis defined it in 1798, as a way to realize both a higher
level of elevation and a distinctive German operatic identity. The second chapter discusses Romanticization within the Singspiel constellation of musical numbers and spoken dialogues, whereas the third chapter is concerned with attempts to move beyond the Singspiel. One of the premises of this investigation is the idea that, more than in any other art form, Romanticism in nineteenth-century opera was strongly associated with German works. Following Dahlhaus’s dramaturgical definition of Romantic opera as governed by the co-existence of and oscillation between everyday reality and a supernatural world, I argue that German Romantic opera is essentially different from French or Italian operas of the same period that are often characterized as Romantic.

As the writings of Franz Horn and E.T.A. Hoffmann make clear, the distinction between high and low forms of Romanticism – for example between “silly spirits” and “miraculous apparitions of the spirit realm” (Hoffmann) – was a crucial aspect of early nineteenth-century German opera theory. Furthermore, in these writings we find a clear desire to elevate contemporary (German) opera into a truly Romantic, elevated art form. However, in many cases, it is difficult or even impossible to distinguish trivial from elevated manifestations of Romanticism in German opera. No oeuvre highlights the dual nature of Romantic opera better than that of Carl Maria von Weber, who, up until Der Freischütz, preserved elements of the popular Viennese romantisch-komische Volksmärchen, while simultaneously innovating the musical language of German opera with unprecedented audacity.

Although Hoffmann’s music in Undine is far less bold, it nevertheless offers novelty in what Miller has called verklärte Volkstümlichkeit, an idiom that is apparently demotic but nonetheless elevated and ingenious. Nowhere in German opera do we find a deliberate attempt to divorce high Romanticism from its trivial counterpart as in Undine, but the work’s exalted tone and complete elimination of comedy eventually threatens to “deprive it of its theatrical lifeblood (Schläder)”. Apart from the exceptional character and particular merits of Hoffmann’s Undine, the work underlines the fact that early-nineteenth-century German opera was in many cases burdened by its own Romantic ambitions.

To German opera composers such as Spohr and Weber, attempts to move beyond spoken dialogue went hand in hand with an ambition to elevate the genre and to leave behind the apparent marginality of a Singspiel esthetic. These attempts generally materialized in a form akin to the French model of grand opera. Along with the through-composed nature of this French-inspired genre came a shift from ideal to realistic characters, a move from a cosmic drama to an intrigue and from simple plots to a grandiose action entailing ballets and massive crowd scenes. Not only did this grand opera esthetics lead away from assumed German virtues such
as simplicity, naturalness and Innigkeit, it also proved difficult to retain the
dramaturgical antagonism of the otherworldly and the earthly that had defined
Romantic opera up until then. Works such as Euryanthe or Heinrich Marschner’s
Der Templer und die Jüdin (1829) can still be characterized as Romantic in a more
general sense, but this defining marker of German operatic Romanticism is poorly
developed or entirely absent in these operas.

From the perspective of musical style, the move towards grand, through-
composed opera also compromised the German identification of these works. The
Singspiel constellation had offered an overarching structure in which a typically
German stylistic eclecticism (according to Tusa) could be implemented, a structure
that was closely associated with the German character, since German opera
without spoken dialogue was rare. By entering the cosmopolitan opera world after
1821, German opera left its infancy behind, but simultaneously gave up its most
distinctive feature.

The status of Der Freischütz as a beacon of “innocence in a disenchanted
world” (Henderson) also holds true on a more stylistic level. Its Singspiel structure
and folk nature stirred nostalgia among German audiences and provided it with an
aura of innocence exactly because of the fact that it is unburdened by the overt
nationalist ideology that rose to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth
century and which is often associated with the immensely influential work of
Richard Wagner. Paradoxically, what once started as a cosmopolitan move beyond
the stylistic and thematic confines of German opera became an ideologically
problematic heritage in the hands of Wagner, the greatest composer of German
through-composed opera. Although Singspiel may have been a dead end within the
development towards a more elevated German opera, it has remained one of the
most popular and harmless manifestations of Romanticism and German nationhood
on the operatic stage.

An important aspect of having an identity is its acknowledgement by
others. Moreover, an elevated national opera gains relevance when it reaches an
international audience. Therefore, the fourth chapter traces the history of German-
language opera performances and companies abroad, taking Russia (Moscow and
St. Petersburg), Paris, and London as case studies. The analysis focuses on matters
concerning repertoire and audiences – for example the popularity of these
companies as well as the question of whether these performances mainly attracted
German immigrants or natives as well – but also local responses to German opera
performances, either critical or artistic. At the same time, the foreign reception of
German works had repercussions for the way German musicians and critics
perceived their own operatic tradition.
The case studies discussed in this chapter reveal some remarkable similarities between the international dissemination of German opera and the function it fulfilled in different cultural contexts. Despite some early, isolated phenomena, Weber’s *Freischütz* clearly marked a turning point. This work was the entrance ticket for German opera performances and original-language companies and launched the vogue for German operas from 1824 onwards. Sometimes, especially in London, this vogue was preceded by an increasing interest in German instrumental music, but German opera proved to be a powerful attraction in its own right.

The popularity of German opera from this moment onwards is clearly related to the European spread of Romanticism in the 1820s, but also to a growing unease about the hegemony of Rossini and Italian opera in general, both incited by an upcoming national conscience and a deliberate bourgeois campaign to counter aristocratic taste. Especially in Britain and Russia, German opera in these years was often perceived to be of use as an ally in the battle against Italian operatic hegemony. German operas presented an inspiring example from the point of compositional technique and subject matter, while simultaneously, German discourse on opera provided ammunition for a domestic national campaign. Around 1840, however, we do witness a shift in attitude, partly caused by the fact that the German opera source had run dry during the 1830s. During this period, no significant new works were composed, consequently no significant new works could be performed, and ultimately the interest and support for the genre vanished. This process was intensified by the fact that German opera companies were now increasingly believed to occupy the space that native opera should have, or at least obtain in the nearby future. German musical culture was now felt to be hegemonic itself, partly due to the dominance of German (chiefly non-operatic) musical culture throughout Europe.

The viability of German-language opera performances was obviously greatly enhanced when the city concerned hosted a German-speaking minority, as was the case in St. Petersburg, Paris, and London. But the share of non-German spectators must have been considerable too, given the extent to which the performances sparked critical responses in the press, and the rapidity with which the German performances came into and went out of fashion within short stretches of time. The attendance of regular, indigenous theatregoers seems to have been absolutely necessary, since less successful performances or a gradual loss of novelty immediately led to financial fiascos. If a company had been chiefly attended by a German minority, one might expect a smaller, but certainly more
stable fan base, such as that of the German theater of St. Petersburg in the early decades of the century.

When we look at the pieces performed, the repertoire appears to have been fairly comparable to the common fare on German stages, with the works of Mozart, Beethoven, and Weber clearly the most popular, followed by composers such as Spohr, Marschner, and Kreutzer. Whereas German companies sometimes tried to adapt to local practices, for example in the case of Haitzinger’s “show aria” in his Paris and London Freischütz, audiences seem to have longed for the works in their original form, after having become acquainted to them in mutilated versions. In general, German opera and its performance seem to have adumbrated a new, upcoming ideal of fidelity towards the composer’s creation and focus on the work rather than the performing singer. Wilhelmine-Schröder Devrient embodied this attitude, as she was arguably the first internationally-acclaimed diva of German opera, but one of whom it was said that she put all her vocal and histrionic skills at the service of the work in question. Moreover, the German opera companies’ shows revealed to non-Germans that even an ensemble without stars could be highly impressive if it worked collectively. This unprecedented collective effort turned the choir into the true star of the German stage, as many press reactions confirm.

Apart from the fact that German opera was considered, even expected to have a Romantic character, seriousness was another returning topos. In many reviews of London performances, seriousness was used as a kind of self-evident, gratuitous compliment for music that was, in fact, often considered hard to digest and not particularly enjoyable. Yet French critics often accused German operas of lacking seriousness, thereby hitting back on the dominant elevated self-image of German composers. For the esteem of German opera in the homeland, the performances abroad presented a clear win-win situation: foreign success affirmed the idea that this national art form was gradually taking over the world, whereas foreign maltreatment – such as the pasticcios of Die Zauberflöte (Lachnith’s Les Mystères d’Isis, 1801) and Der Freischütz (Castil-Blaze’s Robin des bois, 1824) – or indifference from local audiences towards German-language companies reinforced feelings of cultural superiority. At the same time, as the international focus of the fourth chapter reveals more than a rendition of domestic performances could have done, by 1840 German opera was seriously in need of fresh blood in order to secure its institutionalization in the future.

The fifth chapter discusses another possible field where opera and national identity construction could merge, examining attempts in German opera to address outspokenly political nationalist subjects, mainly in the first half of the nineteenth
century. Through a comparatist approach, it aims to expand the scope concerning the special relation between German opera and other national operas elsewhere in Europe, in which political subjects appear to be more prominent. This theme is illustrated by discussing the creation and reception of operas on the story of the German liberation hero Arminius/Hermann, focusing on August von Kotzebue’s libretto *Hermann und Thusnelde* (1813) and the grand opera *Die Hermannsschlacht* (1835), composed by the Frenchman Hippolyte Chélard on a libretto by Carl Weichselbaumer.

The chapter reveals that, as a subject for the German operatic stage, the story of Arminius’s liberation of Germany has remained at least as problematic as it was inspiring. Particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century, it therefore could not gain a foothold in the repertoire. First of all, the militant warrior did not correspond to the idyllic self-identification of the Germans as being an apolitical, peaceful nation of *Dichter und Denker*. Due to this, Hermann could initially only be mobilized at moments of great national distress, such as the Napoleonic Wars. The example of Kotzebue and Weber’s *Hermann und Thusnelde* (1819) reveals that soon after the defeat of Napoleon, the militant chauvinist tone of the work was already perceived as outdated and inappropriate. Of course this was also a consequence of Kotzebue’s anti-chauvinist reputation, which made his work appear peculiar or even insincere to many spectators.

The same problem of credibility arose with Chélard’s attempt to write a Hermann opera, at least by the time he performed it in Weimar, when he was by definition deemed incapable of writing a German national work because he was French. The fact that the most ambitious early nineteenth-century Hermann opera was indeed composed by a Frenchman points to a stylistic problem with ideological implications, and epitomizes what I have defined as the *German Opera Problem*. Grand liberation opera was a French invention par excellence, which made the appropriate style for the Hermann subject irreconcilable with the quest for a genuinely German compositional style, which to many contemporaries was crucial for the creation of a German national work. In that sense, the atypical story of Hermann touches upon the main dilemma of German opera in the early nineteenth century: the question of how to create a distinct, national style in a genre that was thoroughly cosmopolitan. A final reason for Hermann’s failure on the operatic stage may well lie in the nature of the story itself, which Carl Montag properly called a poor subject [ein dürftiger Stoff]. The epic nature of the story and Hermann’s lack of a tragic dilemma obviously made it difficult to forge a complex and captivating operatic drama. In that sense, it is hardly surprising that Hermann,
this monolithic German hero, lives on in the form of a pompous monumental statue, and not as a celebrated opera character.

As the title of Chapter Six, “Ich bin der deutscheste Mensch, ich bin der deutsche Geist,” makes clear, no opera composer associated himself as closely with both German national identity and German operatic identity as Richard Wagner, and this self-stylization has indeed found its way into the communis opinio. It felt natural, therefore, to conclude this study with a discussion of Wagner’s relation to the German opera tradition and to German nineteenth-century nationalism. Wagner, more than anyone else, has shaped the public image of what both German opera and a German operatic identity are. The way Wagner altered and appropriated notions of German operatic identity in his stage works and writings is complex, not only because of his enigmatic and controversial nature, but also because he worked in an era in which German nationalism, according to many commentators, gradually changed from a progressive, emancipatory movement to an increasingly rightist vindication of a unified nation-state. Through his works, Wagner arguably played an important role in this transformation.

Wagner’s early writings, such as Die deutsche Oper (1834) show that he was highly aware of the German Opera Problem. Wagner diagnoses the stagnation of German opera after 1830, criticizes his German colleagues’ reluctance to adopt elements from established foreign traditions and mocks the learned self-image of German composers as their main obstacle, speaking of an “unfortunate learnedness, root of all German evil!” In this period, Wagner praised German composers who used their universal talents in non-German operatic genres, and desired to follow in Meyerbeer’s footsteps by succeeding in the opera capital of the nineteenth-century world: Paris.

Wagner’s failed attempts to conquer the Parisian opera world between 1839 and 1842 led to a radical change in direction. He discovered his German identity and started a life-long campaign against French culture, Parisian opera practices, and his former idol Meyerbeer. Through short stories, newspaper articles and speeches, Wagner stylized himself as a German composer by appropriating the legacy of Beethoven and Weber. The premiere of Rienzi – originally composed for Paris – in Dresden in 1843 launched Wagner’s career in the German opera world. At the same time, many critics accused him of writing in a French, grandiose and noisy style.

Wagner countered these charges by intensifying his campaign against Meyerbeer and French grand opera. In Der fliegende Holländer (1843), Tannhäuser (1845), and Lohengrin (1850), he resuscitated Romantic opera, a genre that the Young German had previously rejected as reactionary, old-fashioned,
trivial, and Biedermeier. In these works, Wagner on the one hand appeals to the common glorification of the Romantic Middle Ages as a utopia of prosperity and German unity, while on the other using this milieu to voice a Young German critique of contemporary society. More than any German opera composer before him, Wagner managed to use compositional techniques derived from French and Italian opera in works that display several carriers of German nationhood and operatic identity despite moving beyond the Singspiel constellation. Wagner’s incessant emphasis on his identity as a sincere and serious German opera composer certainly aided in obfuscating the foreign roots of his music-dramatic style.

The period of Wagner’s exile after his participation in the 1848-1849 revolutionary upheaval is often presented as a period in which Wagner abandoned the German cause, focusing instead on the Universally Human, as embodied by Greek Antiquity. This move away from overt markers of German national identity is deceptive, as Wagner substituted these for covert carriers of a less obvious, but similarly potent chauvinism. This covert chauvinism is based on the notion of what I would like to call the “Universally German”; the prominent idea among German artists and thinkers that, like the Ancient Greeks, they possessed an exclusive capacity to address the core of human existence. I argue that in Oper und Drama (1851), Wagner’s esthetic magnum opus, many of his outlooks that appear to be transnational or universal often actually dovetail with existing German operatic values. Oper und Drama thus reveals, in spite of its universal pretense of overthrowing the entire opera genre along with the society that accompanies it, a staunch German chauvinism.

The same counts for Wagner’s turn to myth in Der Ring des Nibelungen (1848-1876), which should not only be understood as a turn towards the Universally Human, as he would like us to believe. By writing a music-dramatical work on the Nibelungen story, Wagner chose a subject that in the course of the nineteenth century had grown to be the German national epic par excellence. Despite the socialist, anarchist and esthetic agenda of his Nibelungen project, Wagner was aware of its status as a national treasure, and he held on to its intellectual ownership like a Nibelung.

The necessity to claim his intellectual ownership of the Nibelungen myth in 1863 by publishing the libretto was all the more pressing for Wagner, as political developments were starting to make German unification more probable than ever. He had abandoned his Ring project in 1857, but in the new political climate, Wagner’s dream of having his Ring performed in a theater specifically designed for this task became more plausible. When King Ludwig II of Bavaria offered support in 1864, Wagner’s dream was closer than ever.
In the years after 1864, Wagner’s German chauvinism reached new heights, as the German national cause and a narcissistic cult merged in his imagination. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868) functioned as a vehicle for Wagner’s national-cultural agenda, as it combines three markers of German national culture: Protestantism, middle-class culture and the German musical past. *Die Meistersinger* turned out to be an enormous success throughout the German-speaking world, putting Wagner in the center of the national movement. The work’s success, as well as the euphoria after the defeat of France and the German Unification in 1871 paved the way for the premiere of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in Wagner’s Bayreuth Theater in 1876. Despite Ludwig’s financial support, Wagner needed additional funding from wealthy sponsors and committed middle-class citizens. This turned the Bayreuth Festival into a collective, perhaps even national enterprise.

Reports of the laying of the foundation stone and reviews of the first *Ring* cycle in 1876 show that, whereas some admirers hailed Bayreuth as a national achievement, many others denied Wagner’s project this status. Their main arguments were the private, isolated nature of the festival, Wagner’s narcissistic cult and his controversial status among the German public, unlike undisputed national heroes of the past, such as Goethe, Mozart, or Beethoven. In its embrace of the future, the Bayreuth Festival obviously conflicted with the widespread tendency to canonize and “musealize” artefacts of the national past. But this situation soon changed. Already in 1876, some commentators characterized Wagner’s *Ring* as “a monument to a bygone, Romantic age that strove for total art” (Lehmann), the conclusion of a past artistic development, and an amalgam of German music history. As a monument to German music in general and nineteenth-century German Romantic opera in particular, Wagner’s art could indeed be canonized and musealized.

Wagner also became the greatest musical export product of the Wilhelmine era, spurring music-dramatic explorations of native myths elsewhere in Europe, often with a marked cultural-national imprint. At the same time, Wagner’s incredible influence on the course of European opera and music history became a symbol of the increasing power of the Wilhelmine Empire. The drumroll of German national politics has never abandoned Wagner and the Bayreuth Festival. As much as this applies to the darkest days of German national history, Wagner’s art continues to be associated with positive values of German culture as well, such as the cultivation and preservation of art, the ideal that art must strive for more than merely trivial entertainment, and the idea that opera, in its ultimate merging of music and the other arts, can be a transformative experience. In short,
Wagner’s operas and the festival he designed for them have institutionalized many of the elements of “the opera that the German wants”, the opera to which Carl Maria von Weber, and many other German opera makers and critics with him, have so long aspired. It has clearly granted these ideals a permanent, prominent place in German culture.

Wagner is of crucial importance to the complex of problems I have addressed in this thesis. His outlooks and achievements are unthinkable without a thorough understanding of the previous campaigns for German opera and of nineteenth-century German identity construction on a more general level. I hope to have contributed to this necessary contextualization. On top of that, I hope to have demonstrated that to shape or conform to a presumed German operatic identity was an important goal to many nineteenth-century opera makers and critics. Ultimately, I hope that my emphasis on the articulation of an operatic identity will provide a new and enriching perspective on the fascinating field of nineteenth-century opera.