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Introduction

We often judge as trivial that for which we have not yet found a context. The historian's duty in approaching neglected terrain lies far less in crying injustice than in seeking to provide such a context. In this spirit we ought to approach the variety of operatic works produced in North Germany during the last third of the eighteenth century. Scarcely a single opera from this time and place is known to any but the specialist by more than its name and certain historical truisms which have lent a few of them an inert, shadowy importance. Having little beyond this to rely on in the way of common ground, the historian faces a considerable gulf between him and his reader, and it is just as well for him to state at the outset how he intends to bridge it.

In his valuable study of Mozart's operas, Edward Dent dismissed the German operas we shall be discussing with sentiments that many other scholars have inclined to share: attempts at serious opera in German he called "abortive," and he saw even less merit in comic opera, "the triviality of which is for the most part beneath contempt."¹ To counter such received ideas by convincing the reader of North German opera's intrinsic importance in the scheme of eighteenth-century opera as a whole would be a hopeless task, as well as a misguided one. German-language opera of all kinds during the Enlightenment, although it absorbed many features from French and Italian opera, did not share in their international currency, but led a wholly insular existence, even after German *belles-lettres* began winning acclaim in other lands during the age of Goethe. Both as literature and as music, German opera – especially in the North – held interest only for a local audience of German theater-goers.

Not surprisingly, standard surveys of operatic history have not taken the music of North German opera very seriously, nor have literary historians taken much notice of its special literary character. Only in the fledgling discipline of theatrical history have scholars attempted to confront North German opera on its own terms – as a special idiom which blended musical and literary values under the compelling imperatives of the region's distinctive theatrical institutions. The present study, too, has taken as its point of departure the belief that a sympathetic and relevant understanding of North German opera is best arrived at if the traditional issues and queries concerning opera raised by literary science and musicology are considered within the

¹ *Mozart's Operas*, 2nd ed. (London, Oxford and New York, 1947), p. 30.

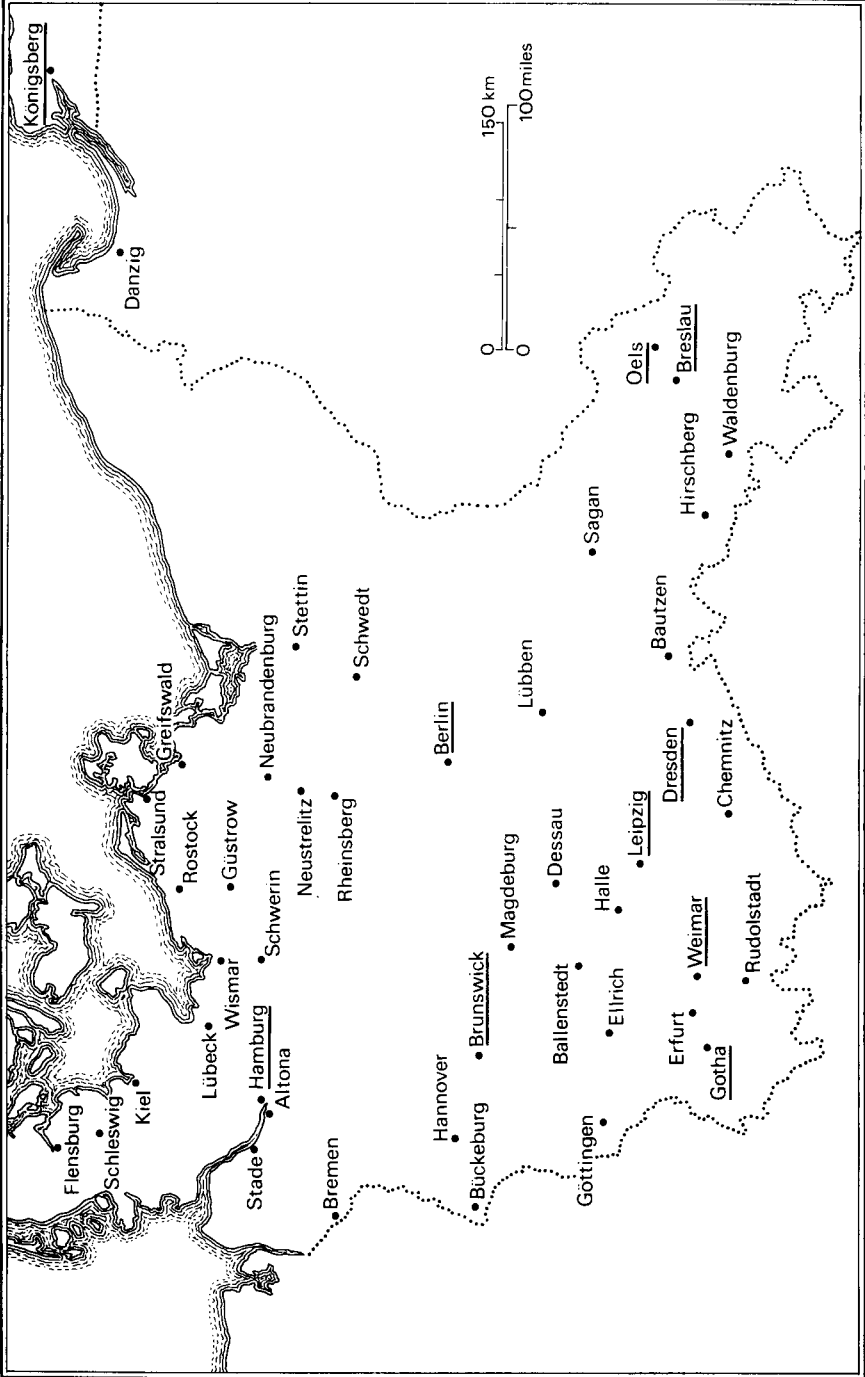


Figure 1 Map showing the location of North German operatic centers

framework of the theatrical world which so decisively shaped operatic activity in North Germany during the last third of the eighteenth century.

North German opera from the end of the Seven Years' War to the Napoleonic era began, but did not end, with the simple, rustic comic operas of Christian Felix Weisse and Johann Adam Hiller. At its very birth the genre embraced far less German musical traditions than it did those of a young, struggling German theater, and this was to be the source of all its diversity and uniqueness. Soon German opera grew from a fairly homogeneous conception – one of rustic comedy or farce peppered with relatively modest musical items – into a multivariate, complex activity. Experimentation and adjustment touched on literary, musical, and dramaturgical aspects. Not only did the weight of each of these vary from work to work or year to year, but in addition each factor absorbed and transformed elements of other traditions.

If we devote some preliminary attention to the environment in which librettists, composers, and performers worked, the recombinant character of North German opera becomes apparent at once. After taking up these three occupations in the following sections, we shall be in a position to grapple with the problem of generic labels for North German opera's many guises in this period, and to offer a brief preliminary survey of the next seven chapters.

But first, what do we mean by "North German"? Culturally and politically we are speaking largely of three areas: (1) Saxony and the Thuringian States, (2) Prussia, including its possessions Silesia and East Prussia, and (3) the kingdom of Hannover and adjacent lands to the north, most in Lower Saxony. In large part we shall be occupied with only a few important cities and courts within this region: Leipzig, Berlin, Hamburg, Weimar, Gotha, Dresden, Breslau, and Königsberg. In these centers the great majority of all the operas we are studying were first produced.

Figure 1 presents a map of the region to which our study has limited itself. It locates all the major and minor operatic centers we shall be discussing in the coming chapters. The physical bounds chosen here do not correspond to the more restricted notion "North German" evokes as a purely geographical concept of, roughly speaking, Berlin and points north. A more accurate designation for our region would have been North and Central Germany and Prussia's eastern possessions, an ungainly label we have streamlined to "North German." Institutional, political, stylistic, and to an extent denominational factors distinguish operatic activity in this area from that in the German-speaking lands we are excluding – Austria, South Germany, and the Rhineland.

Each court or municipality shown in Figure 1 had its own personality in the eighteenth century, with direct and important consequences for the cultivation of opera and drama. A strong university community (as at Göttingen, Halle, or Leipzig) usually offered a hostile interest group, as did a vocal clergy or Pietistic city council. Some courts (notably Weimar, Gotha, and Oels) reflected very faithfully the cultural interests of their sovereigns and their élite

coterie of noble advisers and administrators. Those at which Italian opera was strong (Hannover, Brunswick, Berlin, and Dresden) mostly looked on German opera as a concession to a cultural sphere external to the court itself. Commercial interests, particularly at towns such as Leipzig or Hamburg, often proved conducive to the flourishing of theatrical and operatic activity. Yet, in any one of these local environments, the decisive role in theatrical life was played by the organizational system of the theater which served the community's needs.

Theatrical organization in Germany

Throughout the last third of the eighteenth century, three concepts dominated theatrical enterprise in North Germany – patronage, *Prinzipalschaft*, and the national theater. They are by no means mutually exclusive. The system of pure court patronage, for example, is relatively rare for German opera, though common at courts such as those at Brunswick, Dresden, and Potsdam for Italian opera. More often one finds a court extending its protection or a “privilege” granting exclusive rights to perform within its lands to a private entrepreneur, or *Prinzipal*, usually with an annual stipend and access to certain court facilities. Let us consider, for example, the Hannoverian court. With only 15,000 inhabitants in the capital city, it could in no way support a standing theater of its own – all the more so since its titular head, King George III of England, was absent. In 1769 the court contracted with the principal Abel Seyler to perform not only at Hannover but at other cities and towns throughout the realm. He was granted 1,000 Reichstaler and free use of the court theater. He also received for his performances at Hannover “free music from the royal Hofkapelle for a *douceur* to be paid them yearly by Abel Seyler.”² Contracts with succeeding principals such as Friedrich Ludwig Schröder were similar.

A few courts did establish standing German theaters of their own. They seldom lasted more than a few years, and often had a theater- or opera-loving patron to thank for their existence. An example is the court theater of Duke Friedrich August at Oels in Silesia, where Dittersdorf worked from 1793 until 1797. The court theater at Weimar under Goethe's direction is perhaps the most familiar and long-lived example. The first court theater for German-language productions wholly under the control of the court itself had been established at Gotha in 1775. Four years later, however, Duke Ernst II shut down the enterprise in disgust at the laxity of the court company.

German principals were delighted to be taken under the wing of a court, even if only for a brief series of performances. The best alternative to such an appointment was permission to perform at a major municipality, and if that was not to be had there was nothing to do but to travel from place to place,

² Quoted by Heinz Rahlfs, *Die Städtischen Bühnen zu Hannover und ihre Vorläufer in wirtschaftlicher und sozialischer Hinsicht* (Hannover, 1928), p. 5.

staying only as long as repertory and public interest allowed. In many smaller towns such troupes might well be refused permission to perform on the grounds that they were drawing local money away from the town; often the clergy took an active role in condemning the character and morals of itinerant actors. Traveling left little time for preparing new works, and in general it constituted such a hand-to-mouth existence that it is exceptional to find the better performers in such troupes.

But whether established in one or two cities or forced to travel frequently, such companies inevitably had to compete with one another for their survival. Not surprisingly, their mortality rate was high. Even the best, most tenacious troupes had to suffer occasional reorganization and changes of leadership. It was into this situation, more than into the system of court theaters, that German opera first entered with the comic operas of Hiller and Weisse in the 1760s. From then until the end of the century, we witness nearly universal popular preference for German opera (as well as French and Italian operas in translation) over the spoken repertory of many troupes. Schröder twice attempted to eliminate both opera and ballet from his company's repertory at Hamburg, and each time he was forced to reinstate them. The very first German comic operas of 1766 and 1767, as well shall see in the next chapter, rescued the shaky enterprise of Heinrich Gottfried Koch at Leipzig.

The third form of theatrical organization mentioned earlier, the "national theater," placed a public stage in the service of elevating theatrical standards and taste without regard to profit, this by means of court or private subvention. The phenomenon occurs at the beginning of the era with the Hamburg National Theater, immortalized in Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, and in the century's last decade with the national theater instituted at Berlin by Friedrich Wilhelm II. The Hamburg enterprise, which lasted from April 1767 to March 1769, looked with suspicion on opera as a blight on good theatrical taste and practice, and rejected anything but spoken drama from its repertory. Probably this decision played a part in the collapse of the experiment. No such exclusion was entertained by the Berlin National Theater in the later 1780s, which at one point went so far as to engage two music directors to oversee its operatic activities.

The composers

Composers of German opera during the last third of the century show a wide spectrum of experience and inexperience with the stage. Some of North Germany's most prominent composers of the era had literally nothing to do with German opera – Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach is an example. Many others wrote only one or two works, including some which were apparently never performed. Most, however, had some connection with a particular stage, and more often than not this influenced the shape their scores took. The com-

pletely untrained singers in Koch's troupe in the 1760s are often cited as a decisive element in Hiller's utterly simple, popular vocal style in his first comic operas. This deficiency of skill was quickly remedied, however, and by the mid-1770s nearly every troupe seriously engaged in performing German opera had at least two or three trained singers, a few of whom yielded to no one in virtuosity.

Germany had no conservatory system such as existed at Naples and Venice, and until German opera became an accepted part of theatrical life, offered little opportunity for composers to serve any kind of meaningful apprenticeship in dramatic composition. The better composers seem to have either served for a time at courts where Italian opera was performed or become attached to theatrical companies as music directors. Dilettante composers were usually blessed with a musical education involving some compositional instruction, and they sometimes gained direct experience with the theater at the courts to which they were attached. Baron von Kospoth, for instance, acted as *maître des plaisirs* at the Prussian court beginning in 1776, journeyed to Italy in 1783, and returned to become music director of the stage at Weimar in 1785. Baron von Lichtenstein managed the theater at Dessau from 1797 on. Karl von Seckendorff, after years in Austria and Sardinia, returned to Weimar as *Kammerherr* in 1775 and until 1784 was in charge of the Hofkapelle. He collaborated with Goethe on two operas, some occasional pieces with music, and a melodrama.

Travel was a part of the education as well as the administrative duties of many courtier-composers, and opened new musical vistas to them. Most other composers saw no such opportunity come their way, unless they were attached to a court which put sufficient store in the musical advantages to be gained from sending a promising young composer to Italy. Duke Friedrich III of Gotha sent Georg Benda to Italy in 1765 for just such reasons. Johann Gottlieb Naumann took his pupils Joseph Schuster and Franz Seydelmann from Dresden to Italy about the same time (much as Gluck had gone with Dittersdorf in tow in 1763). Anton Schweitzer was sent to Italy by the court at Hildburghausen for three years, but unlike the others mentioned here never wrote an Italian opera, the fruits which the princes funding such trips expected.

Many of the most important composers of German opera, however, learned their trade wholly at home. Johann Friedrich Reichardt as a young man had planned a trip to Italy, but could not carry it out. Johann André was content with the exposure that Frankfurt and Offenbach afforded him to opéra-comique. Hiller was introduced to the beauties of the Italian opera scores of Hasse and Graun at Dresden, and these were all he wanted to know. Johann Kaffka, Christian Gottlob Neefe, Carl David Stegmann, and Ernst Wilhelm Wolf – each of whom contributed importantly to German opera – never left Germany.

Increasingly, major composers of German opera during this period had at least some direct practical contact with a traveling company or a court or

municipal stage. Early on, in the 1760s and 1770s, lack of such contact was seldom a significant handicap. Hiller, for example, wrote nearly all of his comic operas before he became attached to the Seyler company briefly in 1776, and his pupil Neefe wrote many of his most popular scores before serving as music director first with Seyler and then with Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Grossmann. In the last two decades of the century, for reasons which will become clear when we examine the changes in operatic style during these years, an intimate knowledge of the mechanics of operatic dramaturgy became essential.

Several crucial differences between theatrical life in Germany and that in France and Italy made the professional careers of German operatic composers fundamentally different from those of composers abroad. First, the diffuseness of German culture – the so-called *Kleinstaateri* – prevented the rise of one or a few urban centers with competing theaters demanding new works each season. Though performances were routinely forbidden during Lent in most places, nothing like the *stagione* system in Italy can be said to have existed anywhere in Germany. Second, competition between rival troupes tended to involve the spoken as much as the musical repertory. In some places, pressure from wandering companies of French and Italian operatic artists encouraged German troupes to adopt a significant number of foreign musical works, limiting the demand for domestic production. Third, successful older works tended to remain in repertories longer, especially those of companies who moved from place to place. Finally, institutional arrangements did not always favor the production of German opera. A Kapellmeister to a court involved himself with operatic productions as a primary duty only if this were Italian opera (Reichardt at Potsdam, Naumann and others at Dresden, Schwanenberger at Brunswick). Where a German theater was established at a court, it usually had its own music director.

The music director, in fact, represents the German operatic composer in the purest form. This position alone offered a musician the combination of practical dramaturgical experience in selecting, preparing, rehearsing, and conducting opera; of constant contact with new works, both domestic and imported; and of a ready-made forum for his own endeavors.

The librettists

Only a few of the important librettists of German opera were primarily men of the theater and, in line with traditions in other nations, they seldom set great store by their librettos. Nearly all of them wrote for the spoken stage as well – Weisse, Goethe, Kotzebue, Grossmann, Gotter, Schiebeler, Schink, and Wieland, to name the most prominent. A fair number of composers in North Germany wrote or translated many of their own librettos: Kaffka, Dittersdorf, André, Baron von Lichtenstein, Reichardt, Wagenseil, and Hensel.

For nearly all librettists, the production of texts for German operas was a secondary activity at best, although some fairly prolific writers such as Christoph Friedrich Bretzner, Carl Alexander Herklots, and Gottlob Ephraim Heermann are chiefly remembered today as librettists. Several distinguished poets who otherwise were not very active as dramatists lent their skills to opera (Carl Wilhelm Ramler, Johann Georg Jacobi, Johann Benjamin Michaelis). Although most of the librettists had little direct connection with the theater, a few were actors (such as the composer-librettist Kaffka) or were otherwise connected with a stage (Goethe and his brother-in-law Vulpius at Weimar). Early in this period the principal Seyler created a new position in his troupe, that of Theaterdichter, for which he hired Michaelis in 1769. Several other librettists acted in this capacity, which more often involved the writing of poetic speeches to open or close a series of performances than the production of new dramatic works.

Many North German librettos were to some degree translations of French, English, Italian, and occasionally Spanish works.³ Of Weisse's dozen-odd librettos, for example, only two full-length comic operas are original. The norm in translating or adapting was also to transpose the scene, usually to somewhere in Germany, and with concomitant changes in characterization, tone, and topical references. Such alterations were called "nationalization" at the time, a process already common in translations of spoken drama for the German theater.

The attitude of librettists toward opera and toward their own contributions to the genre changed considerably during the last third of the eighteenth century. Throughout this period, to be sure, librettists were uniformly apologetic about their wares, but the reasons for this shifted as North German opera adopted a less literary and more frankly musical stamp. Early on librettists passed off their texts as harmless depictions of rural life enlivened with simple songs, but later on they pointed to the restrictions of writing for the composer and the singers as handcuffs on any pretensions to literary merit they may have entertained.

The practice of translating Italian and French works with retention of the original music was far less common than in the Rhineland and Southern Germany, where libretto mills for opéra-comique became especially notorious. Some Northern examples of this art – Eschenburg's *Robert und Kalliste*, for instance (based on Guglielmi's setting of *La sposa fedele*) – were praised for their felicity. The efforts of Vulpius for Goethe's stage at Weimar were not so lucky.

There was never a concerted movement to reform the Northern libretto, since literary considerations were seldom thwarted by musical exigencies until late in the era. And, anyway, Italian and Viennese specimens which ever threatened to crowd German operas out of most companies' repertoires were

³ In Part II of the Catalogue appended to this study we have attempted to identify as many such dependencies as possible, although of course no claim of completeness can be made for this scantily studied area.

always considered far worse. One of the principal ambitions of many idealistic librettists was to establish wholly composed, serious opera on the German stage, an endeavor which began with Wieland's *Alceste* in 1773 and continued to the end of the century. The Viennese reform operas of Gluck and Calzabigi were both known and admired in the North, but like North German serious operas after *Alceste* they were seldom performed and even then usually only in concert format. Vienna's true legacy to the North, first apparent in the mid-1780s, lay in the overwhelming popularity of the comic operas of Mozart, Dittersdorf, Wranitzky, and Wenzel Müller.

North German librettos enjoyed favor among composers from other German lands. In South Germany and the Rhineland in the last third of the century there were well over fifty settings of Northern librettos, mostly those of the most prominent writers – Weisse, Heermann, Gotter, Goethe, Bretzner, and Kotzebue. At Vienna Bretzner in particular came into vogue in the early 1780s, a phenomenon culminating in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. This literary commerce tended not to be bilateral: during this period there were few settings by Northern composers of South German, Rhenish, or Austrian librettos.

The problem of genre

A first, sweeping look at German opera from 1766 to 1799 involves us in problems of definition and nomenclature. The reader may perhaps already have wondered why the term "Singspiel" has not yet occurred as even a loose synonym for North German operas. Two strong arguments can be made against its use. First, it had no clear and precise meaning in the eighteenth century, being neither widespread enough to merit the right of universality, nor precise enough to be attached to a specific genre. Second, nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship and journalism have invested it with a clear modern meaning, a German comic opera with spoken dialogue – a "play with singing" rather than a "sung play," in other words. Still, we are today reasonably comfortable with the tandem labels in Italian for serious and comic opera in that language, which have just as little contemporary justification in usage (as distinct from practice). Similarly, we usually refer to French opera with spoken dialogue as *opéra-comique*, although contemporary labels for genres here were even more diverse than in Italy. Why not continue to use "Singspiel"?

The reasons lie squarely in eighteenth-century terminology and the repertory it sought to describe. Table 1.1 lists the common generic descriptions used on the title pages of eighteenth-century North German librettos. While a table such as this cannot show the degree of stylistic unity among works which bear the same designation, it does suggest that librettists tended to prefer four distinct categories.

Table 1.1. *Designations in printed North German librettos, 1767–1799*

<i>Designation</i>	Years: 67–69	70–72	73–75	76–78	79–81	82–84	85–87	88–90	91–93	94–96	97–99	Total
Oper	6	5	8	5	1	2	2	1	1	3	4	8
Komische Oper			1		3					4		36
Romantisch-Komische Oper											2	4
Operette	4	3	5	2	6	3			3		1	24
Komische Operette	1	1	4		1	2						12
Singspiel			1	4		6		6	3	3	5	28
Komisches Singspiel			1					1	2	5		8
Romantisches Singspiel												1
Singschauspiel					1	1						2
Tragisches Singspiel				1								1
Lustspiel mit Gesang			1	1	1	2	1					6
Trauerspiel mit Gesang				1				2				3
Schauspiel mit Gesang			1	3	7	2	2			1		16
Posse mit Gesang				1	1		1					3
Nachspiel mit Gesang				1	1							2
Lyrisches Drama									2	1		3
Lyrische Posse										1		1
SUMMARY:												
Oper	6	5	9	5	4	2	2	1	1	7	6	48
Operette	5	4	9	2	7	5			3		1	36
Singspiel			2	5	1	7		7	5	8	5	40
— mit Gesang			2	7	10	4	4	2			1	30