

Introduction

Early in the nineteenth century, Hans Georg Nägeli made a promise. Writing in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, the Swiss pedagogue prophesied a coming “age of music,” one in which art becomes the “common possession of the people,” and “humanity itself is taken up in the element of music.” His vision was as simple as it was grandiose: he foresaw an age of choral singing.¹

Nägeli’s eager prognostication was to meet some stiff competition. The nineteenth century may indeed have been an “age of music,” but that laurel has typically been placed on the heads of virtuoso soloists, the instrumental sublime, and the galvanizing power of operatic rapture. At best, “humanity itself” figures into this musical world as the audience, where it spends a good portion of the century sitting down – a passive spectator to the music performed around it. But Nägeli’s promise amounted to more than high hopes. For the nineteenth century was also an age of music precisely according to his terms: an age in which “the people” participated in making music, an age in which the burgeoning middle class saw its collective aspirations embodied and envoiced in the music it itself sang. *Choral Fantasies* is concerned with this other side of the “age of music.” And while its focus is Germany, this book’s story is one of many that remain to be told about a nineteenth century whose aims, achievements, and practitioners reached well beyond the Germanic contours of Nägeli’s imagination – and well beyond the myopic generic frontiers that have frequently limited musicology’s engagement with music’s public spheres.

Nägeli’s invocation of music as a “common possession of the people” was a familiar theme in the nineteenth century, and as such it is easy to file away under any number of hyperbolic rhetorics; most obviously, the ownership trope would soon play a starring role at the intersection of German nationalism and nineteenth-century art religion.² But the kind of possession Nägeli had in mind is neither a cabinet of scores in the communal imaginary – in fact, it is not an object at all – nor a shrine for hushed, supine worship at the altar of musical transcendence. Rather, Nägeli’s possession is participation itself, the promise that music would belong to the people only through their own performance of it. And if choral performance is indeed

a kind of participatory ownership, nineteenth-century Germans would come to “possess” music on a monumental scale, as choral music and choral institutions proliferated virtually everywhere Germans came in contact with each other. From the beer hall to the bourgeois choral society, the private salon to the public festival, and the church to the concert hall, choral singing marked the contours of the burgeoning nation as perhaps nothing else could by grafting a rhetoric of communal participation onto the emerging notion that there was a unique bond between Germans and their music. After all, as Richard Wagner asserted, the “character of German art” was the “inclination of the people to song.”³

Never one to share the spotlight, Wagner later sought to attach some strings to his praise of choral singing.⁴ In 1851, on the lam from the Saxon police and trying to make a name for himself in Nægeli’s home town of Zurich, Wagner dutifully lauded the native son; he called the rapid spread of choral societies throughout German-speaking Europe “Nægeli’s extraordinarily commendable work.” Only one thing, Wagner thought, was missing: drama, without which choral singing could not contribute to the “general education of the people.”⁵ But Nægeli had already anticipated Wagner’s argument. He allowed that theater, in earlier times, may have served as the focal point of the arts; but in the age of “humanity” Nægeli saw before him, that focus was now choral singing – for the simple reason that, unlike theater, choral music was not performed by “representatives.” Not just one artistic genre among many, choral music was in fact the “sphere in which musical greatness expresses itself most perfectly” because of its lack of representation, because it was the people themselves who stood at the heart of the genre. Seen “humanistically,” Nægeli concluded, choral music was above all comparison.⁶

It was this irreducibly participatory nature of choral singing that fueled Nægeli’s choral fantasy, which is to say that he promoted not only a fantasy of and for the chorus – as something granted from without or above – but also a fantasy *by* the chorus, the hope that the chorus itself, as participants, would be part of the music and not simply the vessel of its performance. This elision of performer and musical content emerged as a consensus among writers in the numerous lexica appearing throughout the century, virtually all of whom stressed that a chorus should be understood not in terms of notes or sounds alone, but also as an expression of the people.⁷ Gustav Schilling, for instance, proposed that the chorus is the “expression and demand [*Anspruch*] of the mass, of the *Volk*.”⁸ Not just a performer (“representatives,” in Nægeli’s dismissive locution), the chorus as Schilling understood it was also a kind of co-generator, if not exactly a co-composer,

of the music itself. What emerged in choral performance was more than a composition alone; it was a document of the people's own *Anspruch* – its demands, claims, and entitlement to take part in public discourse. At its heart a deeply optimistic belief that the chorus's very presence conferred a political and moral authority on the music it performed, this choral fantasy would soon play a significant role in the public life of nineteenth-century Germany. And it is the measure of this fantasy – the difference between a mere genre, with mere performers, that Nägeli rejected, and the inherent “demand” of the people that Schilling detected within choral music itself – that is the focus of this book.

Nowhere was this demand more insistent than at public festivals, those occasions where an emerging German nation celebrated itself, its past, and its ambitions for the future. Choral participation at these festivals was ubiquitous, ranging from formal performances of new works written specifically for the occasion – the subject of this study – to informal, even impromptu, singing of chorales or national melodies by the gathered crowds.⁹ Of course, festive culture has often involved choral singing, and as Germans themselves boasted, the connection went back to the ancient Greeks.¹⁰ In this sense, the festive chorus was timeless, a proud point of comparison for the neo-Hellenistic aspirations of nineteenth-century Germans.¹¹ But it was also timely, an embodiment of the people in a time and place where the idea of the *vox populi* carried a particular resonance, and festivals served to focus and intensify these participatory ideals of the chorus on a large public stage. As we will see, both choral singing and festivity itself were endowed with similar credentials, both invested with the symbolic power to create a nation from bottom up.

This specifically national (and nationalist) component to the chorus's identity emerged more clearly as the choral movement, and German national politics itself, developed throughout the century. Nägeli's program of choral singing is not explicitly concerned with state-building, and in fact nationality as such – the push for a unified German state – was relatively far removed from the everyday concerns of the first choral societies.¹² But starting with the Napoleonic invasions, and certainly by the 1840s, when the drive for unification laid claim to an imagined German *Volk* and the participatory practices that bound it together, choral singing and choral institutions had become one of the markers of an emerging nation.¹³ To be sure, the role of the chorus in articulating German national identity was hardly limited to brash exercises in propaganda or spectacle.¹⁴ The intractable question of German nationhood was both subdivided and supplemented by a wide range of related societal issues in which the chorus took on a prominent

public role: choral institutions and performance also promoted musical education, kindled religious sentiment, and created a space of sociability and self-rule for a rising bourgeois public.¹⁵ Yet if the milieu of choral music was not exclusively or reductively national, it was a prominent part of the national imaginary all the same. The festivals and concert halls where it was performed helped constitute a growing national public sphere, and much of the century's choral music, from drinking songs to Brahms's *Requiem*, is explicitly concerned with national themes.¹⁶ Above all, though, the chorus was national by definition insofar as critics such as Schilling saw it as embodying the people itself. In a Herderian nineteenth century that frequently viewed the *Volk* as ineluctably national, indeed as the basis of any legitimate nation-state, the question was not so much whether the chorus was national, but rather what kind of nation might emerge out of it.¹⁷

The answers to this question – the kinds of national communities that public festivals promoted, and the choral fantasies that gave voice to these communities – were rarely subtle in their political content. In taking this music seriously, in asking what the compositions written for public festivals tell us about the aspirations and limitations of an emerging German nation, this book's focus on avowedly political music both builds upon and short circuits much of the recent musicological treatment of music and politics. This scholarship has typically relied on a methodology of excavation seeking to expose how even – and especially – allegedly apolitical music is irreducibly ideological.¹⁸ But the unveiling of hidden meanings has much in common with the formalist agendas it claimed to replace (it is a relatively smooth transition from Hunt the Motive to Uncover the Covert Politics), and especially since this work has tended to focus on the same, canonic compositions that earlier analytic studies did, the “political turn” in musicology has generally reinscribed the very canon it sought to interrogate.¹⁹ This book, by contrast, is concerned largely with non-canonical works (albeit works stemming from the pens of the most canonical of composers), works that are not shy in announcing their politics. Admittedly, I will also engage occasionally in some hermeneutic digging, particularly in discussing buried political references in two Brahms pieces – although these are instances where the composer marked the grave, as it were, by asking his friends if they had unearthed his clever sleights of hand. For the most part, though, this study is focused on music whose political and social resonance is hidden in plain sight. *Choral Fantasies* insists that we look not only at those repertoires and those institutions where interactions between music and society were subterranean provocations, but also those where these interactions were an acknowledged precondition and goal.

At the same time, however, the compositions I investigate emerge from, and speak to, many of the same issues that have long interested musicologists in nineteenth-century composition more broadly. Most notably, the “War of the Romantics” will emerge with particular force in the latter half of this book. Traditionally, discussions of the New German School pit Brahms and his “rational” approach to composition – understandable to anyone with a musical education – against the “irrational” cult of inspiration preached by the nominally populist, Wagnerian avant-garde.²⁰ That much is well established, indeed shopworn, in accounts of nineteenth-century German music. But these debates are refracted in new light when viewed through their manifestation in choral song – especially choral song written for festivals where the articulation of a communal identity assumed a central role. Precisely because the Wagnerian side channeled its ethos of musical inspiration through the figure of a singular, prophetic artist, its choral music challenged the ideal of a collective utterance voiced from bottom up. Liberals like Brahms, on the other hand, continued to cultivate historical forms and a musical language that were long part of the public domain, and thus theoretically open to all. (In light of this familiar lingua franca, it is hardly a coincidence that Brahms’s music provided the backbone of many bourgeois choral societies throughout Germany.²¹)

These two competing aesthetics, particularly in their choral manifestations, suggest that questions of form, genre, and harmonic language were also questions of communal inheritance and symbolic ownership, as well as the fragile balance between prophet and populace in articulating a collective identity. As Nietzsche recognized, even before his public split with Wagner, the politics of musical “progress” were never limited to the prophets themselves:

The progress from one level of style to the next must be so slow that not only the artists, but also the listeners and spectators participate in it and know exactly what is taking place. Otherwise, a great gap suddenly forms between the artist, who creates his works on remote heights, and the public, which can no longer climb up to those heights.²²

The stakes for choral singing could not be clearer: at issue was a kind of disenfranchisement, severing the reciprocal identity between artist and public that, for Nägeli, Schilling, and most famously Nietzsche (in *The Birth of Tragedy*), had provided the people with its own, figurative voice in musical composition. To leave the public behind was to render its symbolic participation impossible, and in the case of the chorus, to reduce it to the status of a mere performer or vehicle.

On this count, it would appear that the Brahmsian side occupied the moral high ground. But in fact its elevation was more socio-economic than ethical. Although liberals' rhetoric was self-consciously universal and inclusionary, liberal politics rarely were, and by the end of the century the realization that Brahmsian composition required a degree of education (and for this, property) that most of the population could not, by definition, achieve, put a severe dent in liberals' claim to speak for anyone other than themselves.²³ The choral fantasy of Nägeli, Schilling, and Nietzsche thus encountered obstacles on both sides of the Brahms/Wagner debates: between a New German populism whose messianic rhetoric threatened to disempower the very populace it professed to envoice, and a liberal ethos whose claims to universality were undermined by the formidable education its values demanded. As we will see in later chapters, the utility of choral singing itself – the fantasy it rewarded – was called into question in the years following unification, as both parties in the New German polemics seemed to introduce significant restrictions on the kind of choral community the new nation might embrace. At the same time, however, the fact that both sides still tried to imagine a choral community, and remained engaged with a culture of public festivity throughout the century, indicates that some kind of choral fantasy, however limited or disingenuous, retained a central role in the German public imaginary. I will propose at the end of this book that the early twentieth-century embrace of choral singing by workers and other groups long denied a participatory voice in public culture is a sign that this choral fantasy had a resonance far beyond the immediate aspirations, and significant limitations, of its early architects.

The end of the century was not the first time that Nägeli's choral ideal was contested. In fact, it was clear from the beginning that other choral fantasies were possible. One of them, Beethoven's *Fantasy for Piano, Chorus, and Orchestra*, provides a starting point for Chapter 1, which juxtaposes the 1808 composition with a range of contemporary texts explaining who – or what – a chorus is. Whereas Beethoven's work assigns the chorus little more than the role of cheerleader, a growing number of writers praised the benefits of choral singing and attributed a more active, Nægelian role to collective song. An essentially liberal consensus emerges among these texts by the *Vormärz*, and it is this milieu of the bourgeois, national opposition that provides the context – and, one could argue, the text itself – for Mendelssohn's 1840 *Lobgesang*, the focus of Chapter 2. This composition, written for the Gutenberg celebrations at Leipzig, might be taken as the *locus classicus* of a liberal, festive choral work, particularly in its

seemingly limitless endorsement of a participatory German nationhood that is undergirded by the practices of everyday bourgeois life.

In contrast to the insistent “everydayness” of the Gutenberg celebrations, the Beethoven festivals examined in Chapter 3 strive to escape the everyday with their emphasis on Beethoven as a savior figure. But Liszt’s cantatas for these festivals (Bonn, 1845, and Weimar, 1870) suggest that the participatory practice of commemoration became increasingly difficult to harmonize with the emerging prophetic aesthetics of the New German School. If in Liszt’s 1845 cantata Beethoven’s memory and his music’s meaning were the province of the collective, by 1870 they had become hermeneutic objects, ossified into citation at the service of New German manifestos. This shift in commemorative practice – away from an idealized populace, and towards a singular prophet – replicated the vexed question of whether the German nation was to be formed from bottom up or top down.

It is this very question of the German nation’s origins that takes center stage in Chapter 4, which focuses on the choral works written to celebrate German unification. After 1871, singing societies and composers alike faced the challenge that choral music – now shorn of the oppositional force previously accorded to public singing – was no longer endowed with the agency it had earlier enjoyed. Celebratory works such as Brahms’s *Triumphlied*, Karl Reinthaler’s *Bismarck-Hymne*, and Wagner’s *Kaisermarsch* all reflect this ambivalence in their uneasy mixture of *völkisch* and authorial voices. By 1888, however, Brahms’s *Fest- und Gedenksprüche*, the subject of Chapter 5, appear to reaffirm some earlier, liberal ideals of a participatory nationhood. Both the work’s text and its musical construction, which symbolically locates the motets’ generation in their own performers, seek to re-voice the German public from bottom up. In particular, Brahms makes programmatic use of the double chorus to illustrate processes of unification, narration, and historical continuity as crucial strategies in the attempt to buttress Germany’s new political identity with mnemonic supports. In many ways a return to Mendelssohn’s idealized collective in the *Lobgesang*, Brahms’s late motets seem to commemorate the chorus itself as much as they do the German nation. But such a distinction was minimal at best; at once a musical and social agent, the chorus offered an extraordinarily potent symbol to articulate changing visions of nationhood, collective autonomy, and communal identity. At stake, it appears, was nothing less than the idea of Germany itself.

1 | Choral fantasies from Beethoven to the *Vormärz*

We begin our discussion about choral song in general with one song in particular: Ernst Moritz Arndt's 1813 poem "Des Deutschen Vaterland." One of the most popular song texts in nineteenth-century Germany, Arndt's poem was soon set to music by countless composers. But the text also generates a kind of music of its own, one that resonates strongly with the choral fantasies at the heart of this book. "Des Deutschen Vaterland" imagines a music that is endowed with the ability to conjure up the German nation:

Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?	What is the German's fatherland?
Ist's Preußenland?	Is it Prussia?
Ist's Schwabenland?	Is it Swabia?
Ist's, wo am Rhein die Rebe blüht?	Is it where vines blossom on the Rhine?
Ist's wo am Belt die Möwe zieht?	Is it where seagulls roam on the Little Belt? ¹
O nein, nein, nein!	Oh no, no, no!
Sein Vaterland muß größer sein!	His fatherland must be greater!
Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?	What is the German's fatherland?
So nenne mir	Name for me
das große Land!	the great land!
Ist's Land der Schweizer? Ist's Tirol?	Is it the land of the Swiss? Is it Tyrol?
Das Land und Volk gefiel mir wohl!	The land and people are really to my liking!
O nein, nein, nein!	Oh no, no, no!
Sein Vaterland muß größer sein!	His fatherland must be greater!
Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?	What is the German's fatherland?
So nenne endlich mir das Land!	Name for me at last this land!
"So weit die deutsche Zunge klingt und Gott im Himmel Lieder singt."	"As far as the German tongue sounds and sings songs to God in heaven."
Das soll es sein, das soll es sein, das soll es sein!	That is it, that is it, that is it!
Das, wackrer Deutscher, nenne dein!	Call that, valiant German, your own!

These excerpts form the core of Arndt's poem, in which a series of questions points to the heart of the dilemma facing German nationalists in Napoleon's wake. Arndt's compatriots knew that something one might

call Germany had been invaded, and they were certain that a people one might call Germans had fought back (and won).² But such certainty just begged another question in turn: what, exactly, was Germany, if it did not yet exist as an actual nation state? Arndt finally answers the question not by recourse to geographical or political borders, but rather to the imagined ones of language and custom. A German's homeland, he decides, is one where "the German tongue sounds / and sings songs to God in heaven."³

Such sentiments are a familiar refrain in nationalist texts written prior to unification, whereby linguistic identity operates as a central determinant of cultural nationality – the result, the so-called German *Kulturnation*.⁴ And while Arndt's poem does not fail to take swipes at the French, it is rather more the cultural construction of Germany than it is the political demonization of France that forms the core of Arndt's message. For many historians, that message has been linguistic; it lies in the German language, the words Arndt's text imagines. But Arndt's tongues do more than speak German: they *sing* it. In this fatherland, German nationality is not just a linguistic inheritance but a musical performance. The German nation is not simply something that is, or in 1813 is not yet, but also something that is *done*. Both noun and verb, Germany is sung into existence.

Such a notion of song (not to mention nationhood) may come across today as a quaint hermeneutic proposition. But the push for German nationhood before unification consistently relied on acts of collective participation, such as communal song and festivals promoting the German *Volk* as an active, sovereign participant on the world stage. To sing in a choral society or to participate in a festival was not simply a matter of being German: Germany also came into focus as the product of public conjuration. As Arndt imagines the songs marking Germany's borders, nationality emerges as a distant sound, even as a trope of Romantic longing; it is a kind of sonic *Fata Morgana*, one made all the more tantalizing by the ease and the familiarity of its vocal construction. Thus it is hardly surprising that Arndt's poem was to enjoy a prominent place in German nationalism throughout the century, both on its own and in numerous musical settings.⁵ Well after the Napoleonic wars, it served as a virtual anthem of the 1848 revolutions, and its widespread dissemination by choral societies in the years leading up to unification ensured its popularity. Looking ahead, we might say that Arndt's song became witness to – and agent in – the very phenomena it describes, its own performance marking precisely the participants, practices, and institutions that outlined the new Germany. How Arndt's program got off the ground, and what stood in its way, is the subject of this chapter.

The choral fantasies of Beethoven and “Kuffner”

Shortly before Arndt wrote his ode to vocal nationhood, and just a year before Nägeli was to prophesy a new age of choral singing, a poet believed to be Christoph Kuffner was called upon to provide a text for a new composition by Ludwig van Beethoven. The occasion was the famous (and famously long) academy in December 1808 that also premiered the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. As Czerny tells the story, Beethoven decided to write a “magnificent finale” to close the program, and his method was as simple as it was unusual: he took note of all the musicians that would perform that night – a pianist, vocal soloists, orchestra and chorus – and combined them into one festive ensemble.⁶ It is not clear whether the music was composed entirely before the text was written; nor is it unambiguously clear whether Kuffner was in fact the poet charged with the task.⁷ Regardless of the circumstances, however, the final product – the *Fantasy for Piano, Chorus and Orchestra*, Op. 80, commonly known as the *Choral Fantasy* – contains a text remarkable not only for its cloying sentiments but also the surprising proximity of these sentiments to those of Arndt:

Schmeichelnd hold und lieblich klingen
 unsers Lebens Harmonien,
 und dem Schönheitssinn entschwingen
 Blumen sich, die ewig blühn.
 Fried' und Freude gleiten Freundlich,
 wie der Wellen Wechselspiel.
 Was sich drängt rau und feindlich,
 ordnet sich zu Hochgefühl.
 Wenn der Töne Zauber walten
 und des Wortes Weihe spricht,
 muß sich Herrliches gestalten,
 Nacht und Stürme werden Licht.
 Auß're Ruhe, inn're Wonne
 herrschen für den Glücklichen.
 Doch der Künste Frühlingssonne
 läßt aus beiden⁸ Licht entstehn.
 Großes, das ins Herz gedrungen,
 blüht dann neu und schön empor,
 hat ein Geist sich aufgeschwungen,
 halt ihm stets ein Geisterchor.

Caressing, fair, and lovely sound
 the harmonies of our life,
 and from the sense of beauty spring
 flowers that bloom forever.
 Peace and joy flow delightfully,
 like the alternating play of waves.
 What were harsh and hostile pressures
 are transmuted into elation.
 When music's magic holds sway
 and word's devotion speaks,
 glorious things must take shape;
 night and storms turn into light.
 Outer calm and inner bliss
 prevail for the lucky one.
 But art's springtime sun
 causes light to emanate from both.
 Greatness permeates the heart,
 then blooms forth, new and lovely;
 once a spirit has soared aloft
 a chorus of spirits always resounds for him.