Introduction: Music for an Imperial Stage

In January 1775, Johann Gottlieb Bärstecher (1749–after 1802) began publishing a newspaper in Kleve dedicated to the theatrical arts. His Theater-Zeitung was designed to help ‘compensate for the lack of a central German stage’, something he believed the ‘patriot who values German theatre’ would support. Bärstecher elucidated that with his journal

the director has before him a critical index of the newest products for the stage; he will select the best ones . . . ; the actor receives treatises on aspects of his art, perhaps also encouragement to read his name in a newspaper that is everywhere, will reach every troupe, and want to ponder praise and criticism precisely; finally, the enthusiast can entertain himself not only with dramatic and critical news, but also poems and anecdotes if he prefers the tone of paperbacks and newspapers.

In combining systematic information, professional guidance, and lay content, the paper had the ability to connect theatre practitioners and audiences from across an expansive realm in a single space. Yet the newspaper could only achieve this if correspondents from far and wide regularly sent reports to Kleve and if it was able to reach areas well beyond the city’s boundaries once published. Bärstecher was keenly aware of this. He later wrote to a friend: ‘I have . . . come to an agreement with the Imperial Post under the guarantee of the Prince of [Thurn und] Taxis that allows me to send free of postage the next instalment of the Theater-Zeitung throughout the entire Holy Roman Empire.’


2 ‘Der Principal hat das kritische Verzeichniß der neuesten Produkte für die Bühne, vor sich liegen; er wird die guten wählen . . . ; der Schauspieler erhält Abhandlungen über die Theile seiner Kunst, vielleicht auch Aufmunterung seinen Namen in einem Blatt zu lesen, das allenthalben herum kommt, das ihn bey jeder Truppe finden wird, und das Lob und Tadel genau abwägen will: Der Dilettante endlich, wenn er mehr den Taschenbücher- und Zeitung-Ton liebt, kann sich ausser den dramaturgischen und kritischen Neuigkeiten, an Gedichten und Anekdoten erhöhlen.’ Ibid., [1].

feat, as postage-free shipping was typically reserved for the most important imperial missives.4

The Thurn und Taxis family began operating Europe’s first systematic postal network in the late fifteenth century.5 In so doing, they helped to connect Spain, the Spanish (later Austrian) Netherlands, and the expansive Empire in the centre of Europe. A kaleidoscopic realm of hundreds of territories, the Holy Roman Empire (or Reich) had necessitated the development of this information network, as it afforded rulers the ability to communicate efficiently with administrators in distant and discontiguous territories.6 Around a century later, the Thurn und Taxis were made postmaster generals of the Imperial Post and were entrusted with conveying ‘the outgoing dispatches of the Emperor, Imperial Chancellor, Imperial Vice-Chancellor, Imperial Privy Councilors of the Court, and other such high officers without tax or letter fees’.7 So crucial was the postal service to the political stability of the Reich that emperors elevated the Thurn und Taxis to barons (1608), made the position of postmaster general a hereditary fief (1615), and conferred their status as count (1695).8 Although the Taxis enjoyed in essence a private monopoly of the Imperial Post, the emergence of territorial rivals – especially during the Thirty Years War (1618–48) – caused disputes but did not hinder the Taxis, who continually expanded their network and struck agreements with local competitors. Available to anyone willing to purchase postage from about 1600, their system of hubs and relays was so effective that the time it took to cross the Empire went ‘from 30 to just 5 days; a speed not surpassed until the spread of railways and electric telegraph in the 1830s’ (see Figure 0.1).9 As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) would recall, ‘the Taxis postal system was reliably swift, the seal secure, and the postage reasonable’.10

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6 Peter H. Wilson, The Holy Roman Empire: A Thousand Years of Europe’s History (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 277.
7 As quoted in Siegert, Relays, 66.
8 Grillmeyer, Habsburgs Diener in Post und Politik, 39–64.
10 As quoted in Siegert, Relays, 64.
Introduction: Music for an Imperial Stage

centuries-old media empire was the conduit through which many commoners travelled – via post carriages – and through which most written communication was disseminated, including journals like Bärstecher’s, the written reports sent to him, and the musical performances and materials discussed in them.\textsuperscript{11} Travelling along ancient roads, people and their material objects criss-crossed the Empire one coach house at a time. At these important hubs, coachmen and riders would be changed, letters sorted, and fresh horses hitched to the wagons. Meanwhile, weary travellers could seek refreshment and overnight accommodation. They could even attend the theatre offered at the inn next to the coach house.

One inn where theatre was performed was Das goldene Kreuz in Regensburg, at once the home of the Holy Roman Empire’s Reichstag and the Thurn und Taxis.\textsuperscript{12} As an Imperial City, Regensburg did not have a ruling prince. Yet that did not stop the Taxis, who had nevertheless attempted to act as one ever since establishing their primary residence there in 1748, when the prince was again made principal commissioner – the emperor’s representative to the Reichstag – owing to the family’s service as postmaster generals.\textsuperscript{13} Charged with communicating the emperor’s decisions, protecting his interests, and overseeing the ceremonial protocol of this assembly, the principal commissioners played a significant role in the political life of the city and Empire. They also shaped Regensburg’s cultural life. To entertain ambassadors during Reichstag sessions, the Thurn und Taxis rented the theatre building from the city magistrate and fashioned it into a Hoftheater that staged French (1760–74), Italian (1774–8), German (1778–84), and again Italian (1784–6) music and theatre.\textsuperscript{14} The chronological favouring of different theatrical traditions followed those supported by the emperor and were designed to project the Taxis’s political power before an imperial audience.\textsuperscript{15} Above all others, the Taxis Italian opera fused the spectacle of politics and theatre, for performances were held on

\textsuperscript{11} See ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{12} Parts of this section are based on passages from my article Austin Glatthorn, ‘In the Name of the Emperor: Representational Theater and the Princes of Thurn und Taxis’, \textit{Journal of Musicology} 35, no. 1 (2018).

\textsuperscript{13} The prince of Thurn und Taxis had earlier served as principal commissioner between 1741 and 1745. Grillmeyer, \textit{Habsburg Diener}, 111–63.

\textsuperscript{14} Because the Thurn und Taxis were not Regensburg’s rulers, they not only leased the theatre from the city magistrate, but also rented their palace. Glatthorn, ‘In the Name of the Emperor’, 8.

\textsuperscript{15} Christoph Meixner, \textit{Musiktheater in Regensburg im Zeitalter des Immerwährenden Reichstages} (Sinzig: Studio Verlag, 2008), 79–95.
Figure 0.1 ‘New and Comprehensive Post-Road Map through All of Germany’. Panelled engraving. Nuremberg, Homannischen Erben, 1786–96. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Mapp. VIII, 9 lt. Used with permission.
Introduction: Music for an Imperial Stage

Figure 0.1 (cont.)
the same evenings as Reichstag meetings. The price of attending the prince’s theatre was the acceptance of his cultural agenda: those deemed worthy to attend were invited at his expense. Yet the interrelation of political and cultural institutions was not always advantageous and not always appreciated. Having closed the German theatre and re-established his Italian opera, Prince Carl Anselm of Thurn und Taxis (1733–1805) began losing control of his audience in 1784. His decision incited a contingent of Reichstag ambassadors to organize a German-language ‘opposition theatre’ that was to be free from the prince’s cultural influence.

Carl Anselm should have seen it coming. When Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811) visited the city a few years earlier, he compared the physical state of the Reichstag with that of Das goldene Kreuz, leading him to accuse ambassadors of caring more about their entertainment than ‘the common good of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’. Indeed, not only did diplomats prefer German theatre, but – perhaps motivated by political reasons as much as cultural ones – a group of dissatisfied ambassadors also went as far as to boycott Carl Anselm’s Italian opera. On 16 July 1786, Carl Anselm expressed his frustration and warned the ambassadors diplomatically about the continued popularity of their theatre:

His Highness is well aware that several of these ambassadors enjoyed [the Italian opera], others have shown indifference, [while] few others expressed no amusement[..] Among the latter were those who had initially very much praised the Italian opera and deprecated the German theatre but afterwards changed their opinion[..] This is proof to his Princely Highness that, to his regret, it is not possible to please everyone, even with the best intentions. His Highness also maintains [unreadable]
that the excellent ambassadors’ position is not to replace the Italian [opera] by
organizing a German theatre, because his Highness is too assured of the intentions
of those ambassadors to really believe that they aim to eliminate something in
which his Highness finds enjoyment.21

Despite the prince’s good intentions of providing for free Italian opera and
his tactful admonition (or threat), the enduring success of the German
theatre resulted in the dissolution of his court opera. Only days after
warning Reichstag officials, Carl Anselm dismissed his Italian actors and
dissolved the company.22 His decision to do so was not merely because
maintaining a court opera was incredibly expensive, as the family’s postal
monopoly made them among the wealthiest in the Reich.23 Rather, Carl
Anselm simply had had enough. The prince now purchased a subscription
to see visiting German troupes, as did the other representatives.24

The drama unfolding in Regensburg was part of a larger theatrical shift.
Beginning in the mid-1770s, courts and civic centres around the Reich had
established and hosted German-language theatre companies with increas-
ing frequency. Within a decade, even the most powerful princes who had
for years supported Italian and French operas began turning to German
theatres for entertainment and to fulfil their cultural and political
agendas.25 In so doing, they displayed their support of local culture and
saved significant sums of money, for German genres could be staged at
a fraction of the cost of foreign ones. Indeed, this shift was owing in part to
the influence of the public, which now compelled rulers to display fiscal

21 ‘Sr. Durchl. ist wohl bekannt, dass verschiedene dieser Herren Gesandten ein Wohlgefallen
daran [italienisches Schauspiel] gehabt, andere sich gleichgültig dabeys bezeuget, einige wenige
hingegen kein Vergnügen darüber geäußert haben, unter welchletztere sich jene befanden, die
anfänglich die Italienische Opera sehr erhoben, das teutsche Theater hingegen sehr
heruntergesetzt hatten, hernach aber ihr Meynung änderten, welches Se. Hochfürstl. Durchl. zu
Höchst Ihro nicht geringen Leidwesen einen Beweis gabe, daß es nicht möglich seye, auch mit
[unleserlich], daß die Meynung der fürtrefflichen Herrn Gesandten nicht dahin gehe durch die
Veranstaltung eines teutschen Schauspiels das Italienische zu verdrängen, denn Se. Durchl. sind
von der Denkungsart der zu Errichtung eines teutschen Theaters sich verbundenen
fürtrefflichen Gesandtschaften zu sehr überzeugt, um nur vermuthen zu kön[n]en, Hochdieselben würden etwas verdrängen wollen, woran Sr. Durchlaucht ein Vergnügen
finden.’ Ibid., 327.
22 Ibid., 327; and Färber, Das Regensburger Fürstlich Thurn und Taxische Hoftheater, 106.
23 Between 1784 and 1786, for instance, the emperor’s court spent around 38,000 florins on opera,
whereas the Thurn und Taxis invested about 33,000 florins. Meixner, Musiktheater in
Regensburg, 298.
24 For more on this episode of theatrical and political life in Regensburg, see Glatthorn, ‘In the
Name of the Emperor’, 1–41.
restraint as much as cultural taste and political power.\textsuperscript{26} It is possible that, as the emperor’s representative in Regensburg, Carl Anselm was politically obligated to appear fiscally responsible, and made the best of a precarious situation by fashioning the popularity of the opposition theatre as an excuse to close his own.\textsuperscript{27} But whatever his true motivation, what was clear was that Carl Anselm could not switch between his choice of theatrical spectacle and expect imperial ambassadors to simply accept it as he and they once had. In other words: he no longer controlled what was popular. The rise of the opposition theatre and the Thurn und Taxis’s subsequent abandonment of Italian opera signalled just how much and how quickly attitudes towards German-language music and theatre had changed since the Hamburg Enterprise – considered the first German Nationaltheater – failed after only two years of operation in 1769.\textsuperscript{28}

This book is about music for the German-language stage in the twilight years of the Holy Roman Empire. Although these contexts hardly earn a mention in scholarly narratives of music circa 1800, I posit them as crucial towards understanding the world of music and theatre during what has hitherto been labelled the ‘Classic Era’. The Holy Roman Empire was at the heart of political and cultural life in Central Europe for nearly a millennium; although German-language stage music was at the centre of musical life there for a mere fraction of this time, it would shape and dominate its final years. Focusing primarily on the period between 1775 and 1806, I explore the musico-theatrical practitioners, institutions, repertoire, and material objects that networked the Empire and brought music theatre to nearly every corner of its expansive territories. Thus, my task is that of Bärstecher. In a political and cultural domain with no single capital, he set out to share the stories of these theatres in a central space equally useful for the practitioner as the enthusiast. I aim to accomplish the same.

By placing into dialogue scholarship of German music traditions around the year 1800 with recent historical work on the Holy Roman Empire, I argue that this long-marginalized polity helped foster the proliferation of hundreds of German-language theatres that were collectively understood as Nationaltheater. The Empire not only served as the precondition for the rise of such theatres, but also facilitated communication and cooperation between them. Just as the Holy Roman Empire’s disparate territories were bound together by a common imperial political system, so too were its

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 38.  \textsuperscript{27} Ibid.  \textsuperscript{28} On the Hamburg Enterprise, see Michael J. Sosulski, \textit{Theater and Nation in Eighteenth-Century Germany} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 16–20.
varied theatres linked to one another by a shared musico-theatrical culture. This book thus posits the Holy Roman Empire as a common framework in which German theatres operated and were connected across – and by – vast geographic distances, political boundaries, and musical repertoires.

The ‘Emergence’ of Singspiel, ‘Wandering’ Troupes, and the Nationaltheater

The story of shifting aesthetic preferences towards German music theatre in Central Europe typically goes something like this: in Leipzig, Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–66) sought to reform German theatre. To do so, he turned to foreign practices. Although Gottsched was a proponent of the French neo-classical style, he was critical of performances of opera staged by the Northern Italian acting companies that crossed the Alps to perform in Leipzig and other German centres during the mid-1700s.

According to Gottsched, opera played no part in a German theatre, as he found both its dramaturgy and the fact it was delivered entirely in song unnatural and irrational. He contended that the ridiculousness of operatic action and continuous singing rendered the display unintelligible and the didactic maxims wasted, for audiences could not grasp what they could not understand. While intellectuals contemplated practical solutions to Gottsched’s critiques of opera, German civic theatres were forced to close owing to economic difficulties. Lavish opera – including those by dramatist Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782) – as staged at Europe’s most prestigious courts thus remained Central Europe’s principal musico-theatrical genre. But the Seven Years War (1756–63) placed even greater financial constraints on courts and disrupted the tours of Italian opera companies. This allowed German troupes to fill the void. In Leipzig, the company of Heinrich Gottfried Koch (1703–75) began staging a new genre of comic opera known as Singspiel during the 1760s. Dramatist Christian Felix Weiße (1726–1804) and composer Johann Adam Hiller (1728–1804) created works for Koch’s troupe that contained dialogue and simple song,

29 On Gottsched, see ibid., 45–7; Martin Nedbal, Morality and Viennese Opera in the Age of Mozart and Beethoven (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 3–8; and Francien Marks, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Cosmopolitanism, and the Struggle for German Opera (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 21–5.
31 Nedbal, Morality and Viennese Opera, 3–6.
while their plots concerned the lives of commoners rather than the mythological and heroic topics commonly found at court. In this regard, Singspiel can be considered a German version of French opéra comique, which similarly comprises spoken dialogue and musical numbers. The music of such early Singspiel abandoned the technical displays of virtuosity characteristic of Italian opera that had attracted much criticism in the 1760s. This new ‘German’ version of music theatre was practical. Hiller’s music was accessible to a range of performers, as many companies independent of a court could not afford trained, experienced singers. His songs were easily sung by actor and audience-member alike. As Estelle Joubert has argued, the dissemination of songs from Hiller’s Singspiele throughout the public helped to foster a common cultural identity.

The rise of the public sphere – a virtual realm of communication fuelled by print media that emerged as a private social space distinct from the authority of the state – simultaneously began to shift the locus of music production from private courts to public theatres. Traditional narratives trace these developments – Gottsched’s discourse on Italian operatic models, the court preoccupation with foreign-language opera, the rise of German-language theatres, and the formation of a genre that German actors could perform – from the ‘emergence’ of Singspiel in the mid-1760s throughout the nineteenth century, when German music theatre reached its zenith with the operas of Richard Wagner (1813–83).

Studies of German opera and the theatre companies that performed it often begin precisely at this moment, circa 1765. Thomas Bauman employs Hiller’s works for Leipzig as a point of departure in his history tracing the development of specifically ‘North German opera’. Focusing on court, touring, and national theatres, Bauman’s work then progresses chronologically to different centres. The study begins in Weimar and Gotha for the

55 Joubert, ‘Songs to Shape a German Nation’, 214–16.
56 Thomas Bauman, North German Opera in the Age of Goethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).