Center Stage

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Foreword

Philipp Ther’s *Center Stage: Operatic Culture and Nation Building in Nineteenth-Century Central Europe* is a most welcome addition to the series, Central European Studies. In 2006 Oldenbourg/Böhlau Verlag in Vienna published a book in German as Ther’s *Habilitation* thesis that was based on the same initial body of research. He then revised the study for publication in Czech by Dokořán in Prague in 2008. Both these versions drew much praise in scholarly reviews. Now with this newly revised and expanded English version, a broader English-reading public will gain access to Ther’s work, which adds important new dimensions to our understanding of middle-class public life in nineteenth-century Central Europe and the development of modern opera theaters during a critical phase.

Ther’s thoroughly researched and perceptively argued study examines the evolution of opera theaters as major cultural institutions in three important regional capitals during the late nineteenth century: the Royal Theater (Semper Opera) in Dresden, the Czech National Theater in Prague, and the Polish Theater in Lemberg/Lwów/Lviv. He describes in vivid terms how the rise of modern social structures, particularly those of the urban middle classes, and of nationalist cultures and public life altered the character, repertoire, and public functions of these theaters. In the process Central European opera houses were transformed from institutions where aristocrats and the wealthiest of the middle classes went to be entertained by mostly imported Italian or French works to typically larger and technically more sophisticated theaters with more diverse although still stratified audiences and with mixed repertoires which included elements of native national opera and theater.

Ther’s study demonstrates tellingly the centrality of the opera theaters to cultural, social, and political life in their cities and the surrounding territories during the late nineteenth century. In a carefully nuanced account he argues convincingly that none of the three cases saw a simple linear development from royal or aristocratic sponsorship to bourgeois domination. Moreover, no matter how strong and assertive nationalist political and cultural activists may have become in each community, they did not succeed in the long run in making native or “national” pieces dominate the opera and theater repertoire in these houses. Theater managers, artists, and audiences proved to be more committed to diverse reper-


toires that would include, they hoped, the best of both the national and the cosmopolitan. Ther also looks beyond the three culturally significant regional capitals to take into account the cultural life in imperial capitals such as Berlin and Vienna and offers stimulating insights about the development of the broader social, economic, and cultural circumstances of European and transatlantic opera theaters. One gains from this study a deeper understanding of the dynamics of changing sponsorship and the changing mix of international and national repertoires.

Scholars and students who are interested in modern Central European cultural and social history or in music history and members of the broader reading public who are interested in the development of the modern performing arts and the great Central European opera theaters will surely welcome this book as a volume in the series, Central European Studies.

Gary B. Cohen
Series editor