CHAPTER TWO

Constructing National Culture

Italian Opera versus German Opera

Carl Maria von Weber’s appointment as Principal Conductor in Dresden heralded the emergence of a German branch of opera. His work as composer and conductor should not, however, be regarded as the fulfillment of nationalistic ambitions. To appreciate Weber’s understanding of nation and the political content of his operas, a distinction must be made between his Romantic nationalism and the ethnic nationalism of the subsequent generation, born in the 1810s.

Like most cultured people of the age, Weber believed that music bore specific national characteristics. But while he subscribed to the theory of different national styles, he did not link these with any notions of hierarchy. Weber especially admired French opera, regarding it as the model on which to base German opera. His programs, first at Prague’s Estates Theater and from 1817 in Dresden, were mostly made up of French operas which had been translated into German. But he had little alternative, since at this point there were not enough high quality German lyrical dramas (Singspiele) available to fill programs or theaters.

The first opera Weber performed in Dresden was a production of Joseph by Méhul (under the title Jacob und seine Söhne), which, with its gothic scenes and dramatic orchestration, was to have a considerable influence on his own Freischütz (The Marksman or The Freeshooter).1 Later he produced translated works by Boieldieu, Cherubini, Grétry and Catel—all French composers of international renown in the early nineteenth century. Thus Weber realized the maxim he had formulated in his unfinished novel Tonkünstlers Leben (“A Musician’s Life”), writing: “It goes without saying that I am speaking of the opera that the German and the Frenchman wants, a self-contained, complete art work, in which all the elements and influences of the relevant and employed arts blend into one, disappearing and thus, in a sense destroyed, forming a new world.”2 Although Weber favored German-language libretti for his own compositions, translated
French operas were as acceptable to him as German operas. He did not make it his task to establish a canon of “authentic” German works, or *Originalstücke* as they were called.

Weber was not, then, a specifically nationalist—still less nationalist—artist, as was widely claimed in the second half of the century. The enthusiastic reception of his opera *Der Freischütz* in 1821 was not sparked by any nationalist intentions of the composer but by the expectations and interpretations of the middle class public. It was the “springtime of nations” (*Völkerfrühling*) and the first phase of mass mobilization for the German national movement. In this spirit of early nationalist fervor, the public was craving to see and hear a German “national opera.” The wars against Napoleon had inspired a wealth of patriotic songs (some by Weber) but there had hitherto been no work placing this body of song in the respected and celebrated context of opera. In fact *Der Freischütz* is not unambiguously German in setting. The central scene of the action, the “Wolf’s Gorge” (*Wolfsschlucht*) is situated in a thoroughly Czech part of western Bohemia. Having worked as principal conductor at Prague’s Estates Theater, Weber was certainly aware of this, but he belonged to a generation with widely divergent views on where to locate the German nation. He apparently included the Kingdom of Bohemia in it. Unlike later “national operas” *Der Freischütz*, contained no clear reference to the nation’s history, no direct appeal to patriotic sentiments, and no battle scenes or comparable dramatic devices. The chief national element of Weber’s opera—a *Singspiel* containing a large proportion of spoken dialogue—was the language. Audiences delighted not only in the use of their native language but also in the emotiveness and spontaneity of the commoner protagonist Max, whose presence and addressed its hopes for political and social change on the stage.

After his premature death, Weber came to be erroneously regarded in Dresden and throughout Germany as the founder of German national opera. From a combination of popular reference points—*Der Freischütz* as the first supposed German national opera, the songs which Weber had composed during the Wars of Liberation, his work as director of the German opera in Dresden—he was posthumously stylized a national hero, an image which was reinforced by tales of his suffering at the hands of an unpatriotic court and Italian scheming at the royal theater. The role of villain was conferred on the hook-nosed director of the Italian opera, Francesco Morlacchi. Many accounts told of the Italian opera director putting obstacles in Weber’s path and begrudging him his success (similar narratives exist about the “evil” Salieri in Vienna, who supposedly opposed Mozart and German-language operas). However, recent research on the Dresden Opera in the nineteenth century has shown that the alleged rivalry between Weber and Morlacchi—between German and Italian opera—has been exaggerated. In
fact, the two chief conductors cultivated a generally supportive relationship and disputes were rare.6

Without Weber, the genre of German opera entered a crisis.7 The gothic romance of the kind portrayed in Der Freischütz became outmoded and the popularity of German operas, with their high proportion of spoken dialogue, began to fade in comparison to the melodious works of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti.8 Later, when “Rossini fever” and the fashion for Belcanto subsided, French grand opera arrived in Germany. La Muette de Portici was performed more than fifteen times in the year after its premiere. Richard Wagner was not entirely wrong when, in his essay “On the Nature of German Music” (Über deutsches Musikwesen), he categorically accused German composers of a “stupid lack of self-confidence.”9

Richard Wagner in Dresden

Shortly after Wagner had written this paper in Paris, his opera Rienzi, which Giacomo Meyerbeer personally recommended to the King of Saxony, was premiered in Dresden. With its many borrowings from French grand opera, it was favorably received, and soon afterward Wagner was appointed Principal Conductor. A good year after taking up his post, Wagner staged the most successful performance of his entire tenure in Dresden. This, however, took place outside the theater. Despite the skepticism of Weber’s widow and the resistance of Wagner’s superior, Lüttichau, he had Carl Maria von Weber’s remains transported back to Dresden from London. The ship entrusted with this task, strikingly decorated with black garlands, was met at the mooring by torch-bearers and an eighty-man brass and woodwind orchestra. They played two funeral marches, composed by Wagner of motifs from Weber’s opera Euryanthe, as they accompanied the coffin to the Catholic cemetery in Dresden’s Friedrichstadt district. A throng of black-clad ladies—singers of the royal theater—was waiting in the chapel “and, as the coffin was set down between them, silently, with tears in their eyes, [they] laid laurel leaves and everlasting wreaths upon the same.” The body was laid in state for a day to allow the dramatic tension to rise before the climax of the burial. In a speech given at the still open grave, Wagner called out, “Never has a more German (deutscherer) musician lived than you!”10

In this first step toward establishing a pantheon of dead national heroes, Wagner took the role of defender of a German music tradition11 which extended from Mozart and Beethoven to Weber and—he anticipated, with no false modesty—himself. In this capacity, he set about implementing changes which helped the German opera in Dresden reach new heights of popularity. By increasing the proportion of German works on the program and having the remaining Italian-sung operas translated and performed in German12, Wagner achieved the “nationalization” not only of the language of opera but also of the repertoire.
His own works, however, met with a subdued response. The Dresden audience found *Der Fliegende Hollaender* (*The Flying Dutchman*) too lyrical at the cost of drama and it was dropped after only four performances.\(^{13}\) *Tannhäuser*, with its subtitle evoking the legendary medieval minnesingers’ meeting (*The Singers’ Contest at the Wartburg*) seemed to hold more promise, suggesting parallels with the popular choral movement of the day. It also contained a number of patriotic songs, fulfilling a demand which Wagner had himself formulated in an essay.\(^{14}\) It portrayed the Germans as a nation of singers and brought the myth of the musical nation to life on stage. This work had the potential, then, to supersede *Der Freischütz* as the epitome of national opera. King Friedrich August generously supported the performance, donating 8000 talers for the stage sets by Parisian designer Édouard Déspléchin.

Much to the king’s and Wagner’s disappointment, however, the opera was not a resounding success. The Dresden public could not identify with the eponymous hero’s philosophical dilemma—torn between a virtuous life and sensual temptation—and viewed his withdrawal from the world in the third act with skepticism. The conventional scenes in the second act, however, featuring alternating solos, choral and orchestral parts, were warmly received.\(^{15}\) Contemporary audiences were accustomed to the emotional, romantic arias of grand opera and expected thrilling ensemble scenes performed against the background of social or national strife.\(^{16}\) They were not prepared for Wagner’s psychographic plot and music reflecting the sound of the German language. Consequently, *Tannhäuser* was dropped after a further five performances.

Wagner wasted no time in writing and composing his next opera, *Lohengrin*, while also writing the first draft for *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (*Mastersingers of Nuremberg*). Today *Lohengrin* is known as a Romantic opera with a fantastical love story. But this opera also contains a political element which is rarely appreciated today. When the action begins, King Heinrich is struggling to keep the German Empire together. He is supported by Lohengrin, acclaimed by the people as Heinrich’s potential successor. Audiences certainly read this as an allusion to the contemporary liberal demand for the democratic legitimization of the monarchy. Similarly, they might have seen the figure of Heinrich—historically, the first ruler of Saxony to also become German king, thus uniting a regional Saxon identity with a national German one—as a model for Friedrich August II. The hope that he would lead the individual states of the German Confederation toward unification was widespread among liberals at the time. *Lohengrin* portrays an imperial German nation\(^{17}\), with men of various German tribes swearing allegiance to Heinrich while “striking their weapons.”\(^{18}\) Although the focus then shifts to the tragic love affair between Lohengrin and Elsa, it remains within the context of a Saxon-German national opera, and Lohengrin prophesies a brilliant future for the German Empire before finally disappearing in his swan-boat. This work, then,
even better fulfilled the criteria of a national opera. Yet the increasingly bitter conflicts between Wagner and director Lüttichau and the events leading up to and following the revolution prevented *Lohengrin*’s premiere in Saxony. It was not until eleven years later, in 1859, when the circumstances of its performance and reception were very different, that it was performed in Dresden for the first time.

This opera looked both ahead to Germany’s future and back at the history of the nation in a dim and distant past. In the Romantic view of history held by Wagner, the *Lohengrin* myth was in some respect more authentic than positivist historical science as it stemmed from the heart of the people. Its claim to authenticity was reflected in the stage sets, which offered naturalistic views of the banks of the Scheldt and medieval Antwerp. In this way a medieval legend was blended with historical fact and presented as a tangible experience on the stage. Taking inspiration from an imagined national past, Wagner innovatively harnessed national subject matter for the opera. His “invention of tradition” was intensified by the very distinctive sound of his German language-orientated music (or *Sprachtonfall*).

Wagner applied his creative energy not only to the art form of opera but also to the institution of the opera. Although the royal theater had moved to the new site of the first Semper Theater in 1841, its internal organization remained the same. The royal family and Lüttichau, who was addressed as His Excellency, still held the reins of power. Wagner began directing his efforts toward freeing the orchestra from its many sacred duties at court to allow it to concentrate on the theater. Although he argued plausibly that this would improve the orchestra’s performance, Lüttichau flatly refused to even listen to Wagner’s suggestions as, in his view, the principal conductor—one of the lowest ranks at court—had no place devising plans for one of the most distinguished royal institutions.

Undeterred, in 1848 Wagner wrote a “proposal for the organization of a German national theater for the kingdom of Saxony.” In it, he argued once again for the separation of court and theater which, he insisted, should be the responsibility of the ministry of education and the arts. But Wagner did not confine his plans to Dresden. He envisioned an association of state-subsidized national theaters throughout Saxony which would have a monopoly on theater performances. Dresden was to lead the association, while the Leipzig Theater would be run as a subsidiary. In short, he was proposing the establishment of state control over theaters in Saxony—literally nationalizing them—to the detriment of independent theaters and especially the Leipzig Municipal Theater.

Furthermore, Wagner proposed turning the royal orchestra into the German National Institute for Music, Dresden, no longer to perform works by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Auber, or Adam, which Wagner regarded as the root of “effete, frivolous taste,” but operas by “more contemporary and lesser known composers” who would join together in a Society of all Composers of the Fatherland.
This society would negotiate the price of new operas with theater directors, resulting in a national cartel and a national repertoire, cleansed of all Italian and French competition. Wagner supported the nationalization of opera not only on patriotic grounds but also to protect his own interests. His ideas were later echoed by developments at Prague’s Provisional Theater and National Theater.

Soon Wagner was being drawn ever more into the maelstrom of the revolution. At a meeting of the “fatherland society” on June 14, 1848, he made an inflammatory speech in favor of revolution while also extolling the monarchy as the best system for Saxony. Lüttichau would have dismissed him immediately but Wagner wrote directly to the king appealing for clemency, which was granted. That summer, however, Wagner requested leave and traveled to Prague where his associate at the Estates Theater, Jan Bedřich Kittl, had set *Bianca und Guiseppe oder die Franzosen vor Nizza* to music. In an example of the close cooperation between Prague and Dresden, Wagner had supplied the libretto for this “revolution opera,” which was performed at the Estates Theater from February 1848. From Prague, Wagner traveled to Vienna where he tried to disseminate his ideas on national theater. But shortly after the Viennese newspaper *Wiener Abendzeitung* of July 20, 1848, mockingly asked: “Is there nothing to reorganize in Dresden?” Wagner returned, frustrated, to Saxony. While his position there was already threatened by growing debts and Lüttichau’s hostility, it was the revolution that brought his tenure to an abrupt end. Spurned on by the anarchist Bakunin and music director Röckel, Wagner took part in the May Uprising of 1849 but managed to flee just as the Prussian troops moved into Dresden to suppress the insurgency.

Legend has it that Spontini, former director of the Berlin Opera, on hearing of Wagner’s involvement in the revolution, called out in dismay “What ingratitude!” Indeed, King Friedrich August had generously supported Wagner in times of personal need and as an artist. In the king’s eyes, Wagner was a traitor who deserved to be punished. King Johann, who succeeded Friedrich August after his death in 1854, continued to bear deep resentment toward the former revolutionary. And Count Friedrich Beust, the longstanding Prime Minister of Saxony, not only disapproved of Wagner’s politics but also had an “unconcealed aversion to Wagnerian music,” as he wrote in his memoirs.

The ambitious young composer clashed with the haughty court officials, especially Lüttichau, to some extent due to personal differences. But conflicting interests within the organization of the royal theater and other court institutions caused additional tension. The Wettins relied on experts to run their theater effectively but demanded that they submit to the strict court hierarchy. The royal orchestra was expected to maintain the highest musical standards and be able to perform any given opera yet at the same time forced to devote much time to routine duties in the royal chapel. Wagner attempted to break these chains with
his proposals for reforms. By calling for the royal theater and orchestra to be released from their courtly functions, and for music to be free to serve itself, he was anticipating later concepts of “art for art’s sake.”

Conflicting ideas of nation widened the gulf between the court and Wagner along with other artists and academics in the service of the royal family. Although Wagner certainly had a sense of allegiance to Saxony, he welcomed the prospect of a unified German nation. Turning the royal theater in Dresden into a “German national institute for music,” and the royal orchestra into a nationalized music institution, was not, however, in the Wettins’ or Lättichau’s interests. To them, these institutions were the proud achievements of their dynasty and state alone.

The progressive visions for the royal theater, moreover, encroached directly on the political sphere. Saxony, where there was a limited degree of public participation in politics thanks to the constitution of 1831, may have seemed liberal compared to Prussia or Austria. But had the Wettins actually handed over control of the royal theater to Wagner, Devrient and Gutzkow, and dismissed the court officials, it would have had repercussions for the power structure of the entire state. The Wettins were not ready for such far-reaching changes in cultural policy. Wagner’s futile attacks on the status quo, which climaxed in his active involvement in the revolution, illustrate the fate of a generation of intellectuals who began their careers working for the state and royal institutions but later turned away from them. Nevertheless, Wagner left a lasting legacy in Dresden by “nationalizing” opera in terms of singing language, repertoire and especially by his “invention of tradition.”

Singing for National Unity

With no one to fill the creative void he left, Wagner’s exile put an end to this flowering of German opera. Other prominent composers in Saxony, such as Albert Lortzing and Otto Nicolai, had passed away, Heinrich Marschner had past his peak and Count Friedrich von Flotow wrote mainly comic operas. While the Beust government maintained a firm stance against Wagner, issuing a renewed warrant of apprehension in 1853, on a cultural level it was increasingly difficult to suppress him. In the mid-1850s Lohengrin was performed regularly in Breslau, Leipzig and other major cities with a strong civic identity. Prague’s Estates Theater mounted the first Wagner cycle in 1856. News of the success of Lohengrin in neighboring cities reached the Dresden public, partly via the flourishing music press, and the Semper Opera could no longer ignore Wagner’s work. Lohengrin was finally performed in Dresden in 1859. The pro-government newspaper Dresdner Journal marked the occasion by devoting an entire page to the piece and its composer. While the article criticized Wagner’s personal conduct and especially his Zurich publications, it praised his music for its “truth of expression, inward-
ness of feeling and rich description in detail, the powerful atmosphere and romantic musical artistry with particular sensory appeal, surprising innovation and force of instrumental shading.”

Dresden’s now positive reception of Wagner’s work was aided by a new wave of German national sentiment. To retain their position in spite of this, the Wettins ensured they were involved in celebrations of German culture and unity. King Johann personally welcomed participants to the national choral association festival of 1865, presenting himself to the thousands as a “friend of the arts” and “supporter of German unity.” One of the main speakers, Professor Fricke of Leipzig, took the opportunity to declare that “German song” held the essence of the German nation: “Blessed be you, the German people, thanks to your German song . . . O, protect, purify, gain command of this sacred gift. Celebrate all your high days as this day, in joyful, unshaken reverence. They are a part of your innermost, god-given being.” All five days of the choral festival were permeated with religious symbolism. Fricke even concluded his address with a pious “Amen.” The Dresdner Journal described a solemn procession, moments of reverent silence, choral fervor and songs as “gifts from God.” The German middle class—the predominant social group in the choral association—had found a substitute religion in music. All that was missing was an exalted figurehead.

German unity was a central concern at the festival. Fricke declared: “And yet, friends, it is the crowning glory to our festival that with every song we play our part in helping to sing together the hearts of Germany toward a greater, much-longed-for unity.” The pan-German unity the professor spoke of was reflected in the composition of his audience. As well as many German choral society members from nearby Bohemia, there were a number of Hungarian and Tyrolean choir enthusiasts, and a special train service brought participants from Vienna. The strong Austrian presence would seem to contradict Dieter Langewiesche’s view that Austrians played a negligible part in the German process of cultural nation building. In Professor Fricke’s words, by singing together, “all classes and levels of society without exception, yes, all those often so bitterly divided denominations take shelter under the consecrating, peace-making, unifying power of art.”

According to the Dresdner Journal, on the third day of the choral festival, “over 200,000 people” from Dresden and the surrounding area were joined by 20,000 guests from abroad. Although these figures may have been exaggerated in the prevailing mood of euphoria, few other public events in Germany in the nineteenth century approached these dimensions. It was certainly the largest public gathering in Dresden before the First World War. The Sängerbundfest, as it was known, presented an outlet for political expression, especially the demand for German unity, through music. Furthermore, singing in unison with tens of thousands of others proved a deeply enthusing experience, moving many partici-
pants to spontaneously embrace their neighbor, openly weep, or break into other shows of emotion, with a contagious effect on those who had only come to watch.

After the opening procession, participants gathered in the festival hall where the second, official part of the program began, featuring songs by well-known composers. There were no works by Wagner on the festival program but demands to rehabilitate this best-known—and most controversial—German opera composer were increasingly being voiced in Dresden. Crown Prince Albert liked his music, and Wagner insisted in his various pleas for clemency that he had fallen under a corrupting influence during the revolution. The balance finally tipped in his favor when productions of Tannhäuser in Paris in 1861 were repeatedly disrupted by organized French hecklers, causing the opera to be dropped from the repertoire. When it was premiered in Dresden a short time later, audiences eager to defend their countryman demonstrated their support with deafening applause. Wagner was finally pardoned by King Johann in 1862 and permitted to return to Dresden.

Figure 5. Realistic stage sets for Tannhäuser in 1866.

In the years that followed, the royal theater performed ever more Wagner operas. In January 1869, it was the second theater after Munich to produce The Mastersingers of Nuremberg. With its majestic music, call for national unity and portrayal of the Protestant middle class as the real bearers of German culture,
this opera was rapturously received.35 The singers, stage designers and conductor took several curtain calls as the applause persisted after the premiere. Even King Johann, robed and ready to leave after the final chord, stopped for a moment to applaud. *Mastersingers* was performed a further fourteen times in the eight months before the first Semper Theater was destroyed by fire. It was a triumphant return for Richard Wagner, and with him German opera. Subsequently, *Mastersingers* played to record audiences in Leipzig, Berlin and other major German cities.

Wagner took advantage of his popularity to strike an even more nationalist tone during the war of 1870–71, writing satirical verses against the French, a poem entitled “To the German Army outside Paris” (*An das deutsche Heer vor Paris*), and a bombastic Emperor’s March. He hoped that his festival theater project in Bayreuth would be supported by the new state. But neither Bismarck nor the emperor offered much encouragement as culture was the responsibility of the individual states in the new German Empire. The newspaper *Norddeutsche Zeitung* commented in 1871 that Wagner should not think he owned a monopoly on the German spirit.36

For many years, Wagner’s radical views on art, too, provoked opposition, especially his Zurich letters, written after fleeing Dresden. In “Opera and Drama” and a number of other essays, he called for the total abandonment of contemporary opera conventions.37 He condemned opera’s fixation with arias, which to him had degenerated, like Rossini, into a “fragrant substratum for . . . the luxury class,” and demanded an end to number operas; in his view, a pointless stringing together of popular hits. He also rejected multivocal ensemble scenes which, he felt, just created pleasant harmonies but made the text incomprehensible. Wagner bluntly claimed that in contemporary opera the means of expression (the music) had become the purpose, while the purpose of expression (the drama) had become the means.38 He called for operas to be arranged around a well-devised dramatic plot. In his view, then, the story and the language of operas were of primary importance, and the music should transport the sound of the language.

Although the search for a “German spirit” and “German essence” preoccupied him all his life, Wagner’s nationalist motivations have hitherto not received the attention they deserve.39 Yet his activities in Dresden and his Zurich letters on art are evidence of his determination to promote the nation on a political and on a cultural level. The question is, then, why was he not regarded as the paragon of German music sooner, in the 1850s or 1860s?

The public and many critics in those years were taken by surprise by Wagner’s music. Conventional listening habits did not prepare them for the strong orchestration, expressive musical landscaping and highly varied chromatics—for which Wagner’s œuvre was later admired—and they were perceived as more challenging than enjoyable. The extent of controversy surrounding Wagner can-
not, however, be attributed only to aesthetic disagreements. His uncompromising personality also provoked resistance. Some of his contemporaries—Ludwig II of Bavaria is one famous example—were enthralled by him, while others, such as the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, were so repelled that they refused to agree on any level.

As the public’s various negative opinions on Wagner converged, anti-Wagnerism mounted. Criticisms of his music were often confused with disapproval of his theories. One example of this is a skeptical review of Lohengrin in the Dresdner Journal of 1859, which opens with a lengthy critique of Wagner’s errant writings, only mentioning in an aside that, in his Romantic phase, Wagner had not always worked according to his own later theories. Wagner contributed to this confusion himself, disseminating theories that did not necessarily correspond with his musical work. He was, therefore, vulnerable to attack both as a writer and as a composer.

For this reason, it is not surprising that of all his works created after 1848, The Mastersingers of Nuremberg remained the best loved. As well as its nationalist and middle class content, its relatively conventional compositions found broad approval. Mastersingers contained several arias which quickly gained independent popularity as sheet music arranged for piano and vocal parts. Critics admired the many ensemble and mass scenes and choral parts; in other words, all the aspects that corresponded more with conventional contemporary opera than with Wagner’s concept of “music drama.” While Mastersingers, Lohengrin and Tannhäuser were also very popular, excerpts from The Ring of the Nibelung, which were performed in Dresden in 1875 and 1876 at a number of privately organized concerts, met with a considerably more subdued response.

Germanic Opera

The war of 1870–71 and the founding of the German Empire were accompanied by a groundswell of German nationalism. After the heady mood of victory had subsided, however, Germans still questioned what made up their specific national identity. Bismarck offered the “blood and iron” on which his empire was built. But the liberal bourgeoisie did not identify with Saxony’s reactionary government, and the German Empire had no positive founding legend to invoke besides military victory over France. The country’s democratic spirit was undermined by the dominance of Bismarck, the Hohenzollerns and influential conservatives. Denominational differences made a religious identity for the nation and state unfeasible. And there was considerable antagonism between the middle class and the working class, especially in Saxony. Bismarck sought to overcome these inner divisions by a strategy of “negative integration.” This involved channeling hostility toward Catholics, Poles, the working class, western and particularly French civilization and Jews, at first on home ground and soon also abroad.
In the cultural sphere, Germanic myths and Norse sagas provided one common point of identification. Saxony, Dresden and the royal court especially delighted in the mythical Germanic past. The first opera to take up a Germanic-Norse theme, *Die Folkunger*, was staged at the Dresden royal court in 1874—a year before the Monument to Hermann was completed in the Teutoburg forest near Detmold and Felix Dahn’s bestselling novel *Ein Kampf um Rom* (“A Battle for Rome”) was published. But the success of *Die Folkunger* was far from certain. Composer Edmund Kretschmer was unknown outside Dresden and librettist Salomon Mosenthal had not had a success for two decades, since Otto Nicolai’s popular opera *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1849. Nevertheless, *Die Folkunger* was enthusiastically received at the premiere and went on to become one of the most successful operas in imperial Dresden.

Alternating between a wild, lonely landscape, a royal castle and a bustling town square which lent itself well to mass scenes, the opera fulfilled all the requirements of an opulent grand opera. It was set in Sweden, which could be perceived as a further-flung site of ancient Germanic history. The plot focused on the conflict between Prince Magnus and his usurper Bengt, who is brought to justice in the wake of a national uprising. At the outset, the evil antagonist Bengt makes Magnus, the last of the Folkunger line, swear an oath that he will renounce his claim to the throne and live forthwith in isolation under a new name, never to reveal his true identity. Magnus duly retreats to the remote Swedish mountains leaving the throne to Bengt, whose position, however, is dependent on the support of the Danes. Meanwhile trouble is brewing among the people. Men rebelling against Bengst’s tyranny elect—surprise, surprise—Magnus as their leader. Magnus is reluctant to lead the uprising because of his oath. But when Bengt prepares to marry Maria, the putative last descendant of the Folkungers, in Uppsala, Magnus and his followers march on the city. Still incognito, he is arrested as an impostor. In the castle, he is looking on a portrait of his mother when he hears the strains of a familiar nursery song being played and is moved to reveal his identity. He makes his escape by jumping off the castle balcony and, miraculously, survives unharmed. In the meantime, in Uppsala, there is open fighting between the Swedish people and the Danish troops. Maria and the last of Bengt’s allies desert him and he is thrown into the sea. In a monumental mass scene, Magnus is declared king and all’s well that ends well.\(^{43}\)

Like the story, the music also obeyed grand opera conventions. The critic writing for the *Dresdner Journal* praised the ensemble movements, the rich orchestration and the skilful use of instruments, the lively dances and especially the coronation march, acknowledging them as the work of a “talented, technically accomplished, intellectually assiduous musician.”\(^{44}\) The only criticisms were aimed at the drawn-out plot, the tendency to “broad lingering” in the music and the lack of originality in the piece as a whole. Eduard Hanslick more acerbically
commented that it cooked up a pot pourri of Weber, Marschner, Meyerbeer and Wagner together with a “sing-along style and amateur male choir sentimentality.” But it was precisely the trivial, heavy-handed and unambiguous that the public loved most in the early days of the German Empire, and *Die Folkunger* continued to play to full houses even after the turn of the century.

Music example 1. *Die Folkunger* by E. Kretschmer.

An important element of the work’s appeal was the set and costume design. The performers’ appearance corresponded exactly with the popular image of Norse warriors: stout-hearted and brave, ruggedly dressed, with swords at the ready. Nevertheless, some critics remained unimpressed and complained that the opera and main character, Magnus, were not heroic enough. The *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* felt that Magnus vacillated too long between whether to keep his oath or act patriotically. But Edmund Kretschmer, a now obscure com-
poser, was able to follow up this success with *Heinrich der Löwe*, which premiered in Leipzig in 1877 before showing at the Saxon royal theater and several other German theaters.

At the height of this fashion for all things Germanic, Felix Dahn, the author of *Ein Kampf um Rom*, wrote the libretto for Berlin composer Heinrich Hofmann’s heroic opera *Armin*. The action begins with the subjugation of the Germans by the Romans and goes on to focus on the differences between Fulvia and Thusnelda, Varus and Armin, and culminates in the battle against the Romans in the Teutoburg forest. The *Dresdner Journal*’s correspondent complained that the plot was not as tight as that of Kleist’s *Die Hermannsschlacht* (*The Hermann Battle*) but felt this was more than compensated for by some rousing singing on the approaching liberation of Germany, the summer solstice festival in the third act and other impressive ensemble scenes. The journalist praised the music’s “dramatic temperament, scenic life, dynamic progress,” although the arias were so intense that they often ended in screams. As in *Die Folkunger*, the lavish production and painstaking “realization of time, place and nationhood” captivated audiences.48

The term “realization” is a key to understanding the significance of Germanic operas for contemporary German audiences. Critics blithely confused the time in which these operas were set with their own time. Formally speaking, *Armin* takes place around the year 9 A.D. but reviews frequently referred to the characters as “Germans.” Modern Germans and ancient Germanic peoples were blended into one ethnically defined *Volk*. In both *Armin* and *Die Folkunger*, the lovingly detailed, naturalistic stage sets and costumes seduced audiences into feeling this was part of their own national history. They so enjoyed the heroic deeds of their Teutonic counterparts that they were prepared to overlook weaknesses in the libretto and the music.49 As Rainer Kipper noted in his book on Germanic myth in the German Empire, the contemporary bourgeoisie had a taste for “historically mediated self-reflection.”50 On a dramatic level, greater artistic license could be taken with ancient Germanic plots and characters than with those from more recent history or the present.

The popular tradition of Germanic operas played a key role in aiding the reception of Wagner’s difficult *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Records of the Dresden premiere of the cycle show that it was staged in a similar manner to other Germanic operas, with naturalistic stage sets, based on those of the original Bayreuth production. Whatever Wagner’s intentions were, *The Ring* thus became a part of the Germanic cult that drew a line of historical continuity from the ancient Germanic peoples to modern Germans. This Germanic interpretation of *The Ring* predominated until 1945.

Political interpretations of *The Ring* were rare until World War I. Allusions to the demise of the bourgeoisie, the peril of unbridled power hunger and the dangers of capitalism, which George Bernard Shaw saw in the cycle as early as
1898 and which inform most of today’s productions, were absent from the work’s performance and reception.\textsuperscript{51} This was partly a consequence of Wagner’s own newly apolitical course, having distanced himself from his revolutionary activities in 1849 and politics in general. The \textit{Dresdner Journal}’s best known critic, Carl Banck, thus confined himself to discussing the emotional ties between the opera’s main characters.\textsuperscript{52}

Since the political aspects of the \textit{The Ring} were largely ignored, other aspects of the cycle took the foreground. The stage sets and technical effects, which Wagner had devoted much attention to in Bayreuth, fascinated both the public and critics alike. The dragon emerging from the mists in \textit{Siegfried}, the forging of the sword and the blazing fire around the eternally sleeping Brünnhilde were truly sensational. The \textit{Dresdner Nachrichten} enthused that “rainbows, thunder, lightning, the wonders of Nibelheim could not be more excellently conveyed.”\textsuperscript{53}

Not only were technical trickery and the newly invented electric light put to great effect, but human and animal performers also created stunning imagery. During the “Ride of the Valkyries,” Brünnhilde, performed by a rather corpulent Therese Malten, galloped across the stage on a live horse and even leapt over a burning bonfire, which lent an olfactory element of authenticity. The three spectacular \textit{Ring} cycles of summer 1886, which took a record 46,524 marks\textsuperscript{54}, restored the royal theater in Dresden to its former high rank among theaters in Saxony. Once again, Dresden was the leading light ahead of Leipzig, where standards had begun to drop since the departure of the impresario Angelo Neumann.

With \textit{Lohengrin}, \textit{Tannhäuser} and \textit{The Mastersingers of Nuremberg}, Wagner completed a historical tableau spanning ancient Germanic history, the High and Later Middle Ages and the early modern period. Audiences perceived these as portrayals of their perennial national German history and the characters in them as the actual forefathers of the nation. Wagnerian myths were popularly understood not as abstract tales or parables, as they are today, but as aspects of history which, thanks to dramatic illusions, could be seen, heard and even smelled.\textsuperscript{55}

The success of these Germanic operas demonstrates the enduring influence of the Romantic view of history, which Wagner shared, that historical myths were an integral part of national history. While Kleist’s focus on the ancient Germanic struggle for freedom had promoted the notion of an essentially democratic German character, the Germanic cult in Bismarck’s empire stressed the idea of ethnic continuity and especially exclusivity.

The overwhelming success of \textit{The Ring} in Dresden finally cemented Wagner’s reputation as a hero of the native opera scene. In 1887 the Dresden journal \textit{Der Kunstwart} published a lengthy leading article on “Richard Wagner’s national significance.”\textsuperscript{56} It declared the former principal conductor of the royal theater to be a “genius” and the embodiment of Germanness, and his music to be the “quintessential product of Germanic spirit.”\textsuperscript{57} The well known music critic Otto Schmid,
however, observed a “dark side of the Wagner cult that is raging here.”

He rightfully asked whether a balance was still being maintained in a season (1889–90) featuring six Mozart operas and fifty seven performances of Wagner operas. Contemporary composers also stood little chance of breaking Wagner’s dominance. Although Ernst von Schuch tried to support artists from Saxony, performing operas by Karl Grammann, Felix Draeseke and other relative newcomers, apart from a few exceptions—most notably Kienzle’s Evangelimann and Humperdinck’s Hänsel und Gretel—new German operas failed to make an impact.

The popularity of Carl Maria von Weber’s work, by contrast, experienced a new upswing. In 1886 the royal theater presented a five evening-long Weber cycle and in May 1894, it marked the 500th performance of Der Freischütz with a gala complete with requisite festival prologue, written by councilor and playwright Franz Koppel-Ellfeld. It began with the words “Oh, German forest!” and went on to stylize the composer as a hero of the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon: “You boldly awoke the ancient saga/Soaked in your fount of melodies/And in the fierily kindled songs of heroes/Sounded your knight’s golden wonder-horn/How brightly the fresh hunting tunes ring out/Which praise the noble huntsman’s work pure and free/And ha! How proudly the lyre then resounded/To the sword that the German warrior brandished . . . In times when the credo was to assail strangers/You gave us this work—and we were silent/Every leaf of the forest would speak/And call out aloud: Hail to the Liberator—Thee!” This was, of course, bombastic nonsense. The forest of Der Freischütz was Bohemian, Weber lived in Prague at the time of the wars of liberation and the volunteers who fought against Napoleon would hardly have been familiar with Weber’s work. Yet Koppel-Ellfeld, a Rhinelander of Jewish descent, was prepared to overlook such details as long as he could increase the fame of a “national composer” and be seen to champion tradition. The wave of nationalism at the royal theater ebbed somewhat when Koppel-Ellfeld was convicted of plagiarism and dismissed from royal service with a “mercy pension,” providing the biggest scandal at the royal theater since Wagner’s involvement in the revolution.

The near total nationalization of opera since the late 1860s is especially remarkable considering that Dresden had possessed an institutionalized Italian opera after the Congress of Vienna. Even in the 1850s, Italian and French operas were performed far more frequently than German works. But the national movement of the 1860s, Wagner’s success and the Germanic cult attending the founding of the empire all promoted the development of German opera.

Changes in performance practice had as far-reaching effects as changes in the repertoire. Imported works were generally performed in translation from the 1840s and German became established as an hegemonic opera language. In comparison to Berlin or Vienna, Dresden was relatively quick to nationalize the once so international world of opera. Performing operas in the audience’s native
language not only made the plot and its significance easier to understand but also invited greater personal identification with them. Yet this process of nationalization had reached its peak by the late 1880s, after which new innovations were introduced to the royal theater. One person was largely responsible for this: the principal conductor and later general director of music, Ernst von Schuch. He had a greater influence on the Dresden Opera than any other conductor before or after him, and therefore deserves his own act in this book.

Notes

3. E. T. A. Hoffmann took a similar view, setting a number of his stories in Bohemia.
5. This view is given in Prölls, *Geschichte des Hoftheaters*, 394–97, as well as in countless newspaper articles and the journals of the royal theater.
7. See also the pamphlet *Das königl. Hoftheater zu Dresden, in künstlerischer und administrativer Hinsicht; beleuchtet von einem Kenner der Kunst und Freunde der Wahrheit*, Leipzig, 1838.
8. In the 1820s, the Dresden Opera had no less than six operas by Rossini on the repertoire and rehearsed three new works by him in 1827 alone. See *Tagebuch 1827*, 55. On the royal theater’s repertoire between 1814 and 1832 see Fambach, *Das Repertorium des königlichen*, 185–316. In Leipzig’s Municipal Theater, German operas, especially those by Marschner, retained some of their popularity.
11. Although Wagner gives no indication in his letters of the origin of his idea for Carl Maria von Weber’s ceremonious burial in Dresden, it is likely that he was inspired by Napoleon’s burial at Les Invalides in Paris in December 1840. Significantly, this was not a political or military leader, but a cultural agent being publicly honored in Dresden.
12. Under Wagner the number of imported operas premiered fell to about a third of the total number. For more statistics on the theater under Wagner, see also Prölls, *Geschichte des Hoftheaters*, 541, 644–46.
16. Crossing political with private drama was one of the innovations and conventions of the grand opera. See also Döhring, *Oper und Musikdrama*, 144–63; Fulcher, *French Grand Opera*, 36.
20. Lütichau waited a year before responding—negatively—to Wagner’s first major reform proposal.
22. Ibid. 269–70.
25. See also Tyrell, *Czech Opera*, 67. Subsequently, this opera was reportedly staged in several German cities, including Hamburg.
33. Ibid.
36. “... er habe den deutschen Geist für sich gepachtet.” Citation from Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, 640.
39. An exception is the research by Finnish cultural historian Hannu Salmi. See Salmi, *Imagined Germany*. On Wagner’s preoccupation with the *deutsche Geist* and *deutsches Wesen* see also Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner*, 765–76.
41. See Schmid, *Richard Wagners* 37 onward. Significantly, King Albert attended these concerts, thus giving his seal of approval to Wagner’s later work.
42. On this concept see Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich*, 96–98. On problems of integration in the early days of the empire see Groh, Brandt, *Vaterlandslose Gesellen*, 20–26.
44. See the review in *Dresdner Journal*, March 24, 1874, 1–2.
45. Citation from Heinemann, *Alternative zu Wagner*, 299.
46. The reviews also remained very positive. See the article on its 93rd performance in *“Kunst und Wissenschaft,” Dresdner Nachrichten*, April 27, 1905, 4.
49. Quite a few more Germanic operas were performed in Dresden, such as *Thusnelda und der Triumphzug des Germanicus* by Karl Grammann, which have all been forgotten and are too numerous to discuss here. See on these operas a very recent book by Barbara Eichner, *History in Mighty Sounds*. Another significant event of the time was a guest performance by the Meininger Theater of *Die Hermannsschlacht* by Kleist at the royal theater. On this performance see *Dresdner Journal*, Sept. 22, 1877, 1–2.


52. See *Dresdner Journal*, May 16, 1885, 1. On Banck’s and contemporary music critics’ relationship to Wagner, see Kirchmeyer, *Drei Jahrhunderte*, 77.


54. On the theater’s takings see SHAD, MfV, no. 14430, 22. This source is one of the few to contain a precise record of daily takings.

55. On the view of myths in Wagner’s work as part of history, see Wilberg, 149–80.


57. Ibid., 122.

58. Quoted in Schmid-Dresden, *Bunte Blätter*, 84. On public demand for more Wagner operas on the program see also SHAD, MdKH, loc. 43, no. 11, 26–27.

59. Citation from *Tagebuch 1894*, 89.

60. The proportion of original German works on the opera repertoire amounted to 58% in Dresden in 1894; a level which among all the major opera theaters was only topped by Munich (69%) and Leipzig (62%). See *Opernstatistik für das Jahr 1894*, 6–30.