Center Stage

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CHAPTER THREE

Europeanization and Musical Modernism

Dresden’s “Master Conductor” Ernst von Schuch

Conductor Ernst von Schuch (1846–1914) was the first person to leave a lasting imprint on the Dresden opera after Richard Wagner. Unlike his predecessors, he did not compose his own works and so broke with a long tradition of composer-conductors at German royal theaters. In confining himself to interpreting music, Schuch preceded Toscanini (1867–1957), to whom he is occasionally likened.¹

Schuch’s work and especially his cooperation with Richard Strauss are not only of interest for the study of music history. His activities at the royal theater highlight the link between its growing independence and its artistic blossoming. Dresden rose once again to prominence as an international center of opera. During this period of artistic achievement, the royal opera appealed to ever more social strata, even including members of the working class. Simultaneously, it followed a trend toward depoliticization. Psychological dramas replaced social and political subject matter—now the inner feelings rather than the collective fates of the protagonists were explored on stage.

Schuch’s career in Dresden began in 1872 when, aged only 26, he conducted Donizetti’s Don Pasquale for the guest performance of a touring Italian opera troupe. His performance so impressed General Director von Platen that he immediately offered him a permanent position. In his first years in Dresden, Schuch conducted mostly Italian operas, including five pieces by Verdi in 1876 alone and his Messa di Requiem. Although not as popular as Aida, this work carried significant weight in the conflict between Bismarck’s government and the Catholic Church (the Kulturkampf), proving a strong counterargument against the contention that Catholic culture and music lacked depth. The Catholics in the empire felt
empowered by Verdi and his *Requiem*, and it was especially warmly received in Cologne, Munich and by the Wettins in Dresden.²

Following his successes with Verdi, Schuch began to build a reputation as a significant conductor of Wagner’s work. The Dresden premiere of *Tristan and Isolde*—a piece that was considered too avant-garde and not performable for many years—was a particular triumph. The applause persisted well after the final curtain, demanding several extra bows from Schuch, and the critic writing for the *Dresdner Journal* noted: “The performance was an artistically accomplished one. The credit goes above all to the principal conductor, Schuch, his untiring tenacity in rehearsing the work together with his insightful knowledge and completely appropriate perception of the same, his sensitively invigorating and confident direction.” Even the Wagner-skeptic Otto Banck was deeply moved by the performance. He had witnessed, he wrote, “the freest unfolding of effusive sensation, wild emotion, and passion and sensuality, boundlessly intensified in joy and grief, breaking out as in fever or delirium.” This otherwise stern moralist even tolerated the infidelity in the plot and praised the “frenzy of love” in the second act.³

The love story of Tristan and Isolde struck a chord with the middle class of the late nineteenth century. A degree of political stability had been achieved by the mid-1880s. The *Kulturkampf* was resolved and fear of the labor movement drew the government and the former liberal opposition politically closer. Most members of the middle class had long since accepted the political and social status quo. Public interest now turned away from the sociopolitical subject matter of grand opera and toward private drama and psychological issues. Schuch recognized this paradigm shift and boldly took on Wagner’s most difficult work. Where the stage sets were concerned, however, he did not take any risks. These were commissioned from the Viennese studio of Brioschi, Burghart and Kautsky, which also provided the sets for the Dresden production of *The Ring* two years later.

Before opera direction came to be valued as an independent artistic discipline, it was normal for conductors, in Dresden and other German theaters, to oversee this and most other aspects of performances.⁴ Works were not interpreted as such, as the Dresden performance of *The Ring of the Nibelung* illustrates. Productions aimed mainly for historical authenticity with respect to the sets and costumes and a faithful rendering of the score and text or, in the case of *The Ring*, of the Bayreuth original.⁵ Consequently, successive productions often appeared identical for decades. Furthermore, up to the end of the century, the Dresden Opera was chiefly a “novelties theater,” serving a public with an appetite for new sensations. If a well-known opera was reprised, it was mostly to show improved sets and costumes or even more amazing technical illusions rather than different aspects of the drama.

Stage sets were expected to be as true to life (*naturwahr*, as critics wrote approvingly) as possible, and faithfully portray the time and setting of the piece.
Naturalism in theater did not cause any fundamental changes in this respect, since it demanded the realistic portrayal of modern social miseries. Neither did its counterpart in opera—verismo—have any impact on visual design. It was not until the emergence of modernism and art nouveau in the 1890s that a new approach to stage design evolved. In this period, the first symbolist stage sets were created, in which settings and their content were interpreted and reflected in abstract designs.

These developments did not, however, impinge on Schuch’s work. To him, the music was key and not the text or plot or the themes that could be derived from them. Similarly, dramatic interpretation and visual design were secondary to opera conducting in Vienna under Gustav Mahler and at most other central European theaters. By exalting music in the sense of “art for art’s sake,” the Dresden opera took up a nonpolitical position, in contrast to the period before the 1848 revolution or before the founding of the German Empire. Even the works themselves contributed to depoliticizing opera. Wagner’s operas, especially, were overwhelming and absorbing sensory experiences. It was not possible to listen to this music and carry on a conversation at the same time. This was art that demanded one’s entire attention.

Furthermore, Schuch’s personal correspondence betrays his own disinterest in politics. He held his high position at the royal theater on account of his intensive rehearsing, convincing performance as musical director and incredible productivity, presenting a total of 51 world premieres and 117 premieres in his 42 years in Dresden. He became known as an eminent conductor throughout Germany and abroad and was acclaimed by public, composers and singers alike. Comparing him to Toscanini, Karel Burian eulogized: “In accompanying the singer, Schuch is unique. You just have to be properly indisposed and not able to move. He positively carries you to safety over dangerous obstacles on his baton, he breathes for you, with his miracle instrument—the orchestra—he dynamically compensates for your weaknesses—as where else is such piano played as under Schuch.”

Richard Strauss also praised the pianissimi and unusually dynamic orchestra in Dresden, which Schuch had gained complete mastery of over the years. It was thanks to the conductor’s exceptional command of the orchestra that expressive modern works such as Elektra or Salome could be performed without overtaxing the singers. From the early 1890s, Schuch also established an ensemble of soloists to compete with the star-studded theaters of Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. While these cities could afford the most fashionable singers, the Dresden ensemble’s teamwork achieved outstanding performances too, especially at premieres.

Theaters are susceptible to internal crises, but Schuch’s charismatic leadership ensured that any imminent conflicts were nipped in the bud. Aesthetic disagreements within the theater were rarely voiced and intrigues within the ensemble were kept in check. Meanwhile, the court provided the financial support
necessary to run a successful opera house and navigate times of transition or upheaval, such as when the first Semper Opera burnt down in 1869 and following Von Platen’s death in 1889. In short, ideal conditions prevailed during Schuch’s tenure for opera to flourish in Dresden. This is especially significant in comparison with Lemberg and Prague.

**Toward a European Repertoire**

In one central aspect, Schuch’s work was implicitly political: as director of music he internationalized the repertoire, long ahead of other German theaters. While performing works from all over Europe went without saying to Schuch, who had begun his career with Italian opera, other factors compelled him even more to broaden the program’s horizons. The intolerance of Wagner devotees, who timed the master’s operas and sneered if they were played too fast, was a thorn in Schuch’s side. Certainly, Schuch sometimes performed *Tannhäuser* and *Ring* cycle pieces twenty minutes faster than at Bayreuth. Wagnerians expecting Germanic profundity were outraged by this vivacious tempo. Schuch’s relationship to Wagner’s widow, Cosima, remained cool in consequence. In spite of the fact that some of his own singers, including Therese Malten and Heinrich Gudehus, performed at Bayreuth, Cosima invited Schuch only once to the festival, to hear *Parsifal*. He was nevertheless a regular visitor, despite the frequent jibes he faced there. An incident in 1902 moved him to write to Cosima Wagner to defend himself against “the grotesque slander” that he had allegedly strolled across the stage with a lit cigar. He took his revenge on the Bayreuth folk by refusing to stage a single piece by Siegfried Wagner, although he otherwise actively supported young German composers at the royal theater. The Wagnerians, meanwhile, did not stop hounding Schuch, even marking his death by claiming that he had had no “links to the intellectual heavyweights in music.”

As far as the German music press was concerned, no Italian composer could be counted among the above. But Schuch did not heed such bigoted opinions. Having concentrated on Verdi early in his career, he became one of the first to perform verismo operas in the 1890s, and later directed Puccini’s *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, and *Madame Butterfly*. The composer traveled especially from Italy to attend the German premiere of *Tosca* in Dresden, and was called before the curtain no less than ten times, to the chagrin of the Wagnerians. The *Dresdner Nachrichten* rightly identified this as the beginning of an empire-wide wave of “neo-Italianism.” No other prominent conductor in the German Empire did as much for Italian opera as Schuch.

He also introduced Czech, Polish, and Russian operas to Germany. In 1882, Schuch discovered Antonín Dvořák and mounted the first German performance of his opera *The Peasant Rogue* (Šelma sedlák). By doing so, he was taking
something of a risk, as Dvořák was known only for his instrumental compositions. But the opera, a rustic romantic comedy, was positively received and its composer, who attended the premiere in Dresden, received several ovations. It was an immediate success, not least thanks to Schuch’s wife, Viennese-born Klimentine Procházka, who sang the lead role of Regine (Bětuška in the original). The only obstacles to its enduring popularity were the mediocre libretto and its weak translation with many wrongly placed stresses. For this reason, the opera remained in the repertoire for only one year, but it opened the public’s eyes and ears to Czech music. Smetana’s sensational popular success in spring 1892 at the International Music and Theater Exhibition in Vienna finally marked the breakthrough of Czech opera in Saxony. The Dresden-based periodical Der Kunstwart published a several-page article on “Czech music” extolling Smetana’s operas in particular: “The Czech opera of the Prague National Theater achieved quite extraordinary successes recently with a series of guest performances at the Music and Theater Exhibition in Vienna. Each review outshines the next in terms of enthusiasm and praise. Incredulity and regret that, in our music-hungry time, works of such great artistic significance and unique appeal, as especially the operas of Friedrich Smetana, are only now becoming known by a wider public.”

In 1894, an acclamatory review by Eduard Hanslick of Smetana’s The Kiss (Hubička) at the Vienna court theater appeared in the Dresdner Journal. Thus endorsed by one of the best-respected German-speaking critics of the day, Smetana became a permanent fixture in repertoires across Saxony. The Bartered Bride was performed in Dresden’s Residenz Theater in late 1894 and in 1899 at the Royal Opera. The Leipzig Municipal Theater staged even more pieces by Smetana. Meanwhile, the royal orchestra in Dresden performed Czech instrumental music. In 1891, Schuch conducted two symphonies and a number of overtures by Dvořák as well as Smetana’s major instrumental works. Outside Bohemia, only the Viennese court opera under Gustav Mahler staged close to the same number of Czech operas as Leipzig and Dresden. The well-known Dresden critic Ludwig Hartmann displayed an even deeper interest in Czech music than Schuch. He translated many Czech (and Italian) libretti, making it possible for these operas to be performed at all in neighboring Germany. Hartmann was a regular visitor to the Prague National Theater, where he attended performances of all the latest works, and a tireless promoter of Smetana, Dvořák, and the new generation of Czech composers. The directors and assistant conductor in Dresden also traveled regularly to Prague to attend premieres. In 1899, the National Theater sent the costume designs for the Viennese production of The Bartered Bride to Dresden to facilitate a faithful rendition of the “Bohemian national opera.” Conversely, the director of the National Theater, František Adolf Šubert, traveled to Dresden in 1893 to see a new production of The Mastersingers of Nuremberg and staged a Czech version some months later in Prague.
Dresden hosted successively more guest performances by Czech soloists and in 1900 the royal theater even persuaded Director of Ballet August Berger to leave the National Theater for Dresden. Berger launched a new trend in Dresden with adaptations of folk dances.22

Around the turn of the century, Schuch’s attention turned to Polish opera for the first time. Rather than choosing a piece by the relatively well-known composer Moniuszko, he premiered the opera Manru by Jan Ignacy Paderewski. As in the case of the young Dvořák’s work, the opera was a daring choice as its composer was known only as a concert pianist who had written a few instrumental pieces. Polish opera was, moreover, unfamiliar territory for the German public. Manru was about a doomed relationship between a Polish girl, Ulana, and her gypsy husband, Manru, who is torn between love for his wife and yearning for the open road. Despite bearing him a child, Ulana struggles to remain loyal to the eponymous hero in the face of her mother’s insistent disapproval and the villagers’ collective opposition. Thus the plot centers less round external factors than the inner conflicts fought by the two main protagonists, who cannot escape the character that their culture and society has imprinted upon them. The opera complied, then, with the fin-de-siècle taste for psychological drama and pessimistic view of human nature. The libretto23 was written by Jewish author Alfred Nossig, who came from Lemberg and later rose to prominence as a writer, philosopher, and Zionist activist in Vienna and Zurich.

Once again, taking a chance on a hitherto unknown composer paid off. Dresdner Nachrichten acclaimed the “tremendous achievement” of the composer Paderewski, who was called on to the stage at the end of every act and fêted with “enthusiastic exuberance” when the curtain fell.24 The audience particularly enjoyed the dual exotic appeal of the opera, which mixed the dances and music of the Gorals, Polish mountain dwellers, with those of the gypsies, and the dream scenes exploring Manru’s inner conflict. The set painters, costume designers, and ballet master had just a few sketches of Zakopane on which to base their portrayal of the Tatra mountain setting, but it was enough to conjure up a colorful, unfamiliar world on the stage. Like the music, it constituted a fanciful interpretation rather than a realistic portrayal of Tatra culture. Although it was Paderewski’s first opera, he was familiar with contemporary composition techniques and knew how to express different psychological and dramatic nuances in music, using modal harmonies, various easily interpreted “floating” chords, and a similar chromaticism and leitmotif technique to that of Wagner. Indeed, Dresdner Nachrichten criticized the number of stylistic borrowings, identifying influences as diverse as Wagner, Bizet, and the “Young Italians.”25 But with its strong song-like element and ear-catching rhythms, it delighted the public.
Following Manru’s success in Dresden, it was quickly exported to other theaters, first in Poland, where the premiere caused quite a stir, and later to the Metropolitan Opera in New York as well as to Zurich and Cologne. Political antagonism since, however, caused Manru to sink into obscurity in Germany. In late 1901, Paderewski gave a concert in Posen and donated some of the proceeds to the children of Września, who were holding a school strike in protest against the Prussian ban on the use of Polish, even in elementary school religious instruction. In counterprotest, audiences in Cologne and other German cities booed performances of Paderewski’s opera and it was dropped. This was reason enough for the composer to break all ties with Germany and especially with Berlin, where the press had published anti-Polish comments following a concert he gave in 1893. Even the support of the comparatively Slavophile Dresden public and the high regard which Paderewski and the “genius” Schuch—in the words of the composer—had for each other could not smooth over the rift.

After the 1901 summer break, Schuch gave the stage to another internationally unknown composer, Karel Weiss of Prague. His opera, The Polish Jew (Der polnische Jude), also reflected the prevailing mood at the turn of the century. Like Manru, it contains several dream sequences and is composed of floating harmonies and long, lyrical passages. The plot uses the device of a dual timeframe, with the inner turmoil of a conscience-stricken Alsatian innkeeper who has killed a Polish Jew for his money juxtaposed against the account of his trial in court. The Jew, symbolizing eternal justice, haunts the innkeeper’s dreams, tormenting his murderer until he is compelled to confess. It was another intense psychological drama, albeit with a political message, condemning greed, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. Despite some criticism of the sets and details of the plot, the Dresdner Nachrichten’s reviewer praised the opera as “a work of noble, artistically considered structure; as an art work in the higher sense.” Schuch and Weiss received several ovations after the final curtain and the opera held its position in the repertoire until early 1902.

The popularity of Czech and Polish operas in Dresden was due not least to Schuch’s sensitivity to the music of these countries. His treatment of Smetana’s music, especially, earned him a reputation that endured beyond his lifetime. The music critic of the Münchner Zeitung, Alexander Berrsche, wrote in his obituary of Schuch: “But how the man could interpret the Bohemian! Smetana by other conductors means dash, swing, fine entertainment. Smetana by Schuch was a frenzy, a whirl, an orgy. When it was over, it was surprising to find that the auditorium was still in one piece and everyone was sitting quietly in their seats.” After the turn of the century, the Saxon public’s passion for Smetana gradually faded and Dvořák’s major work, the opera Rusalka, was strangely overlooked. Nevertheless, Czech, Polish, and Russian composers had gained a firm foothold in the repertoire and in the minds of Dresden opera lovers.
Richard Strauss and Modernism in Dresden

The name of this Bavarian composer appears at a surprisingly early date in the repertoire of the royal theater: in 1884, Strauss’s *Concert Overture in C minor* was performed as part of a symphony concert. Strauss was only twenty years old at the time and thanked Schuch exuberantly for the “endearing encouragement” which, he declared, he would not forget for the rest of his life. After this early collaboration, Schuch did not forget Strauss, giving occasional performances of his orchestral works and even requesting the score of his first opera—a “Germanic” piece entitled *Guntram*—despite its failure in Weimar in 1894.

Some years later, Dresden was to host the world premieres of most of Richard Strauss’s operas. In Berlin, where Strauss was engaged as principal conductor from 1891, theater director Bolko von Hochberg prevented the performance of his second opera, *Fire Famine* (*Feuersnot*), on account of contractual disagreements as well as an earthy bed scene in the final act. This marked the climactic triumph of the loner Kunrad, descendant of an ancient family of sorcerers, who is first lured by the mayor’s attractive daughter Diemut, then publicly humiliated. Resorting to his gift of magic, Kunrad takes revenge on Diemut and the entire town by extinguishing all lights and fires. The only release from the “fire famine” is if Diemut gives herself to Kunrad in her room. She does so, spurred on by the townsfolk, who quickly sacrifice their moral principles in their desperation to be relieved of the darkness. The scene culminates in the choir singing “All warmth springs from the body/All light comes from love—From your virgin body/Alone the fire inflames us” (*Alle Wärme quillt vom Leibe/All Licht von Liebe stammt—Aus Deinem jung-fräulichen Leibe/Einzig das Feuer uns entflamm*). This passage sparked outraged protests in Berlin and Vienna. Instead of bringing a Wagnerian message of hope for salvation, the baroque South German composer was celebrating physicality. With this opera, Strauss repaid the petit bourgeois, conformist elements of Munich society, for making not only his own life so difficult but also Richard Wagner’s in the 1860s.

In view of the troubles he had encountered in Berlin, Strauss offered his opera to Schuch, imploring him to leave it unabridged: “Please, do not moderate anything: to reduce the opera’s biting sharpness would only achieve success ‘under false pretences.’ I can well do without that: rather a good sound failure and the knowledge that a few hearty indecencies and brain-and-blood-clearing impertinences have been flung in the face of that Philistine rabble.” Not only was it performed in its entirety, but Schuch and Seebach also managed to persuade King Albert to attend the premiere in 1901, raising Strauss’s status in the eyes of the public.

The critic writing for the *Dresdner Nachrichten* reported “jubilant applause” and celebrated “the invention of an inspired artist.” Here was a major success for Richard Strauss some years before his generally acknowledged breakthrough
as an opera composer with \textit{Salome}. \textit{Dresdner Nachrichten} admired the music’s expressivity, whether conveying the blazing summer solstice fires, the sudden, alarming darkness falling, or the shimmering sound of the light reappearing. Like his earlier symphonic poems, the opera featured Strauss’s hallmark expressionism, and made impressive use of an extended orchestra of over 100 musicians, performing skillfully placed dissonances and sudden changes in tempo and instrumentation. The \textit{Dresdner Nachrichten} commended Strauss for having finally confronted Wagner, against whom all composers of his generation were measured. Indeed, Strauss’s treatment of his idol was positively postmodern. While showing posthumous solidarity with Wagner—one scene actually protests “You are driving Wagner away” (\textit{Da treibt ihr den Wagner aus dem Thor})—and quoting \textit{The Mastersingers of Nuremberg} in several places, it rose above the master by way of a collage technique which Strauss later perfected in \textit{Der Rosenkavalier}. No other German opera composer of the late nineteenth century had so elegantly quoted and distanced himself from Wagner at the same time.

Most significantly for Strauss, the success of \textit{Fire Famine} increased his confidence as an opera composer. While another failure after \textit{Guntram} would have considerably undermined his self-belief, he now felt emboldened to forge ahead with \textit{Salome}. Appreciating Schuch’s role in this, he thanked his mentor warmly. This marked the beginning of the self-proclaimed “artistic alliance” (\textit{Künstlergemeinschaft}) between Richard Strauss and Ernst von Schuch.36

\textit{Salome} was based on the play of the same name by Oscar Wilde, which ends with the murder—for rejecting Salome’s sexual advances—of the only person of any moral integrity. It can be seen to address a number of different issues—for example, society’s moral decline and the abuse of power37—but for the fin-de-siècle public the most important aspect was the psychological drama. \textit{Salome} offered insight into the darkest depths of human nature. The eponymous heroine’s seductive veil dance conjures up a potent image of untrammeled desire which culminates in the spine-chilling finale when Salome kisses the severed head of the prophet Jochanaan. This story, with its themes of love, loneliness, sensuality, violence, and death, corresponded exactly with Carl Schorske’s definition of the fin-de-siècle zeitgeist as characterized by a skeptical view of the world and human nature and a vague premonition of the end of society as it was. But it would be wrong to reduce \textit{Salome} to a mere product of its time. Technically, the opera broke new ground. The plot did not follow a conventional progression and the characters did not go through any inner process of development. The action took place at one intense point in time, detached from any kind of temporal continuity or psychological logic. The music broke rules of harmony and was fragmentary, situative, and sometimes violent.

The first protests were voiced during rehearsals. As a “decent woman,” Marie Wittich, prima donna of the Dresden Opera and wife of a respectable Saxon
mayor, objected to the role of Salome.\textsuperscript{38} She even complained about it to Cosima Wagner, with whom she had a longstanding working relationship. Rumors of a coming sensation began to emanate from Bayreuth and circulate the city, intensifying the “feverish excitement”\textsuperscript{39} which gripped the royal theater and the whole German opera scene. Although the drama was not new, but borrowed from Oscar Wilde’s play, the opera caused a scandal. The press spoke unanimously of “perversion” and the conservative \textit{Dresdner Journal} was especially severe in its criticism of Strauss’s choice of subject matter.\textsuperscript{40}

More interesting than these predictable criticisms were the press’s attempts to retrieve the composer’s honor and maintain the construct of “German music.” Both Dresden newspapers blamed Oscar Wilde for the unacceptable aspects of the piece while portraying Strauss as an inspired musician. In this way, the “perversion” was externalized and the music embraced as brilliant and German. While the critics downplayed Strauss’s provocative intentions—he had, after all, consciously chosen to base an opera on this play—they highlighted his “portraiture of the horrific,” “blazing instrumental color,” “brilliant treatment of moods,” and his “masterful art” in general.\textsuperscript{41} Indeed, the cold desire expressed by Salome’s clarinet motif, the foreboding sound of the bass ensemble indicating the prophet Jochanaan’s execution, and the dissonant C sharp major/D minor chord conveying Salome’s subsequent emotional turmoil are still considered seminal today.\textsuperscript{42} A shocked silence greeted the final curtain at the premiere. When the applause finally broke out, it lasted more than a quarter of an hour.\textsuperscript{43}

The Dresden public supported Strauss, the agent provocateur, partly out of a sense of local honor. The \textit{Dresdner Nachrichten} insisted that the royal opera had not seen such a sensation since Wagner’s later works and declared it “a masterful achievement by a premier theater, which can not be surpassed by any theater in the world.”\textsuperscript{44} Saxony’s cultural mission was revived once again, this time in a global context. Dresden’s pride in hosting the most spectacular world premieres was also palpable at the premiere of \textit{Elektra}. Professional critics, meanwhile, displayed an almost lascivious fascination with Strauss’s subject matter. Despite claiming to disapprove of the sexual energy in \textit{Salome} and its offending of all moral standards, they were clearly engrossed by its portrayal of the dark side of human nature.

The same combination of pointed disgust and pleasurable interest in psychological depths fostered the fashion for psychoanalysis. In the same year that \textit{Salome} premiered, Sigmund Freud published his “Three Treatises on Sexual Theory” in which he identified the libido as the most significant motivating factor in human behavior. Hugo von Hofmannsthal incorporated this idea into his libretto for \textit{Elektra}. Both Freud’s publications and \textit{Salome} were huge popular successes in fin-de-siècle Dresden. The opera was performed 24 times in 1906 alone.\textsuperscript{45}
Music example 2. The dance of the seven veils in *Salome*.

The resounding success of *Salome* in Dresden stood out in stark contrast to how it fared in Vienna and Berlin. The censors prevented the opera from being performed in Vienna until 1918, and in Berlin the Hohenzollern rulers insisted on an incongruous addition to the finale in which the morning star announces the arrival of the Three Wise Men, thus attaching a Christian message of salvation to the story. Cosima and Siegfried Wagner issued an icy wind of disapproval from Bayreuth. The opera was only unhesitatingly adopted in German cities with a strong civic identity such as Breslau, Cologne, Nuremberg, and Leipzig. Strauss had not only Schuch’s directing to thank for the opera’s success in Dresden and elsewhere, but also his tenacity in the face of internal critics and the censors. In this instance, King Friedrich August’s lack of interest in the theater was an advantage. He did not attend the premiere—in itself a gesture of disassociation—but raised no objections to it either. General Director Seebach’s campaign for autonomy for the royal theater was bearing fruit.

Having achieved a second collaborative success, the alliance between Strauss and Schuch grew even closer. Strauss began signing his letters to Schuch, “Your loyal, very own composer” (*Ihr getreuer Leibcomponist*) and Schuch responded with “Your own true conductor” (*Ihr Leibdirigent*). Both from the South of the German-speaking lands, they shared a similar temperament, sense of humor, and dialect, and spent many evenings joking and playing cards. Their correspondence
provides a satirical survey of the contemporary opera scene. Schuch was sympathetic toward Strauss’s jibes about the German *haute bourgeoisie* and court society and took the role of servant to Strauss’s creativity, subtly influencing the composer by his estimations of the singers’ abilities and limits.

A short time before the world premiere of *Salome*, Strauss came upon the material for his next opera, which he was also to offer to Schuch. It was Hugo von Hofmansthal’s play *Elektra*, based on the tragedy by Sophocles, which was

Figure 6. Caricature of Richard Strauss’s orchestration of *Elektra*. 
premiered in Max Reinhardt’s *Neues Theater* in Berlin. Hofmansthal and Strauss went on to coproduce the Dresden-premiered operas *Der Rosenkavalier* and *The Woman without a Shadow (Die Frau ohne Schatten)*, cementing a creative axis between Berlin, Dresden, and Vienna. Like *Salome*, *Elektra* is a one-act opera exploring the destructive force of the human psyche. The plot revolves around the motif of revenge, which the eponymous heroine takes on her father Agamemnon’s murderers. Again, it shows a society in demise. Only one figure, altruistic Orestes, provides a flicker of hope in an otherwise gloomy view of human nature. Based on a classical drama, it undermined one of the cornerstones of bourgeois society: ancient Greece had been extolled throughout the nineteenth century as the ideal on which to base contemporary society and culture, not least by Wagner and Nietzsche in their writings on ancient music drama. In terms of composition, *Elektra* outdid *Salome* in expressiveness, psychological precision, and force. For many years it was considered the ultimate opera house experience owing to the sheer size of the orchestra.

The words used by contemporary opera-goers and even professional critics to describe their reactions are strikingly emphatic: they were enraptured, overcome, exhausted, shocked, and shaken. An unprecedented number of people went to see and hear these two tragic works by Strauss. In the first year after its premiere, *Salome* drew roughly 50,000 visitors to the Dresden royal theater. Even taking into account the fact that some might have attended several times, and many came from out of town, this figure certainly included a considerable percentage of Dresden’s adult population of roughly 300,000.

Despite the challenging nature of these performances, emotionally and intellectually, the royal opera began to interest ever broader sections of society, including members of the labor movement, who could afford the cheaper standing room tickets. In the 1890s, Dresden’s working-class press began publishing in-depth theater reviews, at first of mostly naturalist pieces in smaller theaters. In 1900, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* ("Saxon Workers’ Newspaper") introduced an “Art—Science—Living” section to the front page on alternate days, featuring extensive coverage of opera productions at the royal theater including news of reprises and guest performances. The placement, number, and quality of these articles suggest that the newspaper’s main critic, “Dr. S,” who never missed an opportunity to allude to his visits to the Bayreuth festival, was not the only music lover—or opera-goer—in the newspaper’s circles or among the readership. Remarkably, the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* stopped covering working men’s choir events and drama evenings hosted by the society for adult education. After the turn of the century, a look at the week ahead at the royal theater replaced working class events in its program highlights for Dresden.

This newspaper, published by the later Saxon Prime Minister Georg Gradnauer, adhered to the national stereotypes in music assumed by the middle class,
according to which Richard Wagner was the touchstone of opera, Meyerbeer the negative model, and French “formalism” was opposed by a “German style” that “worked with the forces of an internal, spiritual art.” The royal theater promoted the embourgeoisement of the working class by agreeing to stage a “people’s performance” (Volksvorstellung) once a month starting in 1902, for which the cheapest tickets cost a mere 20 pfennigs. In addition, in 1910, the royal theater pledged to supply the city council with cut-price tickets for companies and trade unions. The Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung suggested that cheaper tickets for The Ring of the Nibelung be provided in this way. Although the Semper Opera was not opening its doors wide to all—the Czech National Theater went much further in this respect—it was nevertheless making a notable political gesture.

The broader social significance and popularity of opera was reflected in the level of public interest in the world premiere of The Knight of the Rose (Der Rosenkavalier). The commotion surrounding this fourth and last Strauss premiere in Dresden under Schuch’s direction eclipsed all others. Weeks before the event in January 1911, the Dresden newspapers were reporting even the most minor details of the coming performance. The rehearsals provided material for in-depth reportage, hotels were booked-up well in advance, and the town was teeming with autograph hunters, ticket seekers, artists, singers, writers, and stage designers trying to make contact with the theater directors arriving from all over the world.

Der Rosenkavalier was less avant-garde than Salome or Elektra, causing some music critics to accuse Strauss of abandoning the path of modernism and progress. As Michael Walter has set out, however, analyzing Strauss from a postmodern perspective, a different picture emerges. Many sections of Der Rosenkavalier are collages of existing sonic images and musical styles, which Strauss sampled and adapted, thereby creating something new. Strauss’s intention was to compose an opera in the style of Mozart, using waltzes to recreate the lightness of baroque-era Vienna. Whether the mood at the court of the arch-Catholic Queen Maria Theresa was really so cheerful and light is questionable, but Strauss and his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal managed to conjure up a convincing image of a friendly and joyful, mythical old Vienna. The stage design and direction were of a quality and level of innovation seldom seen in Dresden. Richard Strauss commissioned the designs from controversial Viennese stage designer, Alfred Roller, whose recreation of rococo Vienna remained definitive for over sixty years and was copied in opera houses all over the world. At Strauss’s request, Max Reinhardt from Berlin was appointed to apply his directing skills to reducing some of the opera’s more drawn-out scenes. Since Reinhardt was, however, anathema in conservative circles, Seebach initially refused to let him on the stage and he was not credited in the program. The Dresden opera thus opened up late, but purposefully, to modern directing and stage design. It is to Schuch’s
credit that he tolerated—perhaps even fostered—these new tendencies despite the loss of influence it entailed for him.

*Der Rosenkavalier* went on to be performed more than 50 times at the Semper Opera within a year—an unbroken record to this day. Only six weeks after the world premiere, the Czech premiere was staged under the name *Ružový Kavalíř*. In 1911 alone, an estimated 100,000 people in Dresden went to see this apparently inoffensive opera about an oafish aristocratic suitor, a gracious lady, a youthful beau, and his pretty, middle-class sweetheart. *Der Rosenkavalier* was also a popular source of sheet music for piano and vocal parts. It is safe to say, then, that this most often performed of Strauss’s works was familiar to much of Dresden’s population.

Within the theater, however, the opera’s plot and characters gave rise to tensions which marred its success. The lead male character is the ludicrously boorish Baron Ochs von Lerchenau, who tries to become engaged to the beautiful Sophie. Count Seebach, the General Director of the royal theater and orchestra, was not in the least amused by this portrayal of a member of the nobility and called for scenes to be cut. Strauss defended himself emphatically, insisting to Schuch that he encountered many such characters in real life. Although this was an indirect confirmation of Seebach’s political misgivings, Schuch supported him. In the end only a few passages, alluding to aristocrats sexually harassing commoners, were shortened. In this way, Schuch helped to save one of the major comic figures in German opera. The relationship between Seebach and Strauss, however, remained cool. The latter objected to the general director’s supercilious tone while Seebach felt that Strauss was encroaching upon his authority at the royal opera.

In contrast to Strauss’s self-assurance, the Dresden middle class remained strikingly diffident. During Schuch’s entire tenure, no protests of any note were recorded, although there were grounds enough. Neither Offenbach’s operettas with their suggestive ballet scenes, nor the unflattering portrayal of the clergy in *Tosca*, nor the passionate excesses of *Salome* sparked any public complaints or boycott campaigns such as frequently flared up in Lemberg and Prague. A first, hesitant attempt by the public to influence the program was reported in 1877, when the chairman of the Albert Theater’s shareholding association, Ernst Jordan, appealed to the royal theater’s director to stage more dramas and operas. Von Platen replied that he would “only answer to and possibly have to account to His Majesty the King as my most gracious master,” adding that by his mere response he was acting below his rank as general director. In Leipzig or Prague, this degree of arrogance toward the chairman of a civic association would have immediately triggered protests and press campaigns. But the Dresden appellant dutifully wrote to the king, who simply dismissed him as the director had done. Jordan declined to take the matter further and left it at that. No major discussions surrounding the theater—as were common in Leipzig, Lemberg, and Prague—followed. If there
were objections to such scandalous performances as *Salome*, the Dresden public and press bore them with restraint.

From the perspective of musical development, this lack of a critical public had its advantages. Although the royal theater depended on its middle-class audience financially from 1841,

It was thanks to this latitude, combined with the artistic alliance cultivated by Schuch and Strauss, that Dresden came to host the most spectacular world premieres in the new century, and not the royal theater in Berlin where Strauss was principal conductor. In a precarious but productive way, the Dresden royal theater was “emancipated from the audience” as Der Kunstwart observed approvingly, and recommended for all German theaters, in 1891.

In view of this, it is interesting to note the influence that the royal theater exerted on Saxony’s civic theaters. The Leipzig Municipal Theater was initially run by a personally liable entrepreneur who was clearly far more dependent on the audience’s favor than the director in Dresden. When the theater was placed under municipal control in 1910, directed by Max Martersteig, it was reorganized along the lines of Dresden’s royal theater. Now the competition in Leipzig was also a subsidized theater with an educational program to justify its enormous cost. As other institutions followed suit, the achievements thus gained were moderated by an element of loss: the latitude that opera theaters had previously enjoyed was sacrificed to ensure the provision of highbrow culture. Was there an alternative? Would it have been possible to maintain the Enlightenment goal of serving all of society? These questions are answered by looking at the Prague National Theater, which was run as an institution for all members of the nation. Although the royal theater was officially dissolved after World War I when the monarchy was abolished in Germany, the old structures endured almost unchanged in the guise of a state theater. State officials took over the positions previously held by Lütichau and his successors, and the Prime Minister presided over all instead of the king. The theater maintained its educational orientation as well as its dependence on state subsidies, which continued to grow in proportion to proceeds from ticket sales.

While continuity prevailed at the Semper Opera after 1918, what began as a royal theater had been through a profound transformation in the course of the long nineteenth century. By the end of this period, the Dresden opera was a royal theater only in name. The mechanisms of artistic autonomy which Richard Wagner had sought to establish ushered in a heyday of German opera under Ernst von Schuch and Richard Strauss, demonstrating that music history was made in the smaller cities of Central Europe as well as in the imperial capitals. The case study of Prague also provides convincing proof of this. Paradoxically, the many world premieres that took place in Dresden were to a certain extent made possible by the theater’s detachment from the city and its mostly bourgeois public. It is, then,
more accurate to speak of a process of emancipation from the court (Enthofung) than one of embourgoisement.

Another characteristic development at the Dresden Opera between 1815 and 1914 was the near total “nationalization” of what had been an international art form, in terms of repertoire, singing language and subject matter. This process of making opera national peaked, however, a decade before the turn of the century. Subsequently, priorities turned toward establishing a European repertoire, aided by lively international exchange.

Notes
1. See Schuch, Richard Strauss, 50–51. Unfortunately, very few audio recordings featuring Schuch as conductor exist to document his work.
2. After Cologne and Munich, the Saxon residence was the third city in the empire to present this work following its premiere in Vienna. On the public’s reception of Verdi and especially his Requiem, see Kreuzer, Verdi and German Culture, 15–70.
4. See Langer, Der Regisseur, 9, 50.
5. On the ideal of authenticity, see Dahlhaus, Textgeschichte und Rezeptionsgeschichte, 109. On productions of Der Ring before the turn of the century, see Eckert, Der Ring, 36–41.
8. For these statistics, see Kummer, Dresden und seine Theaterwelt.
11. On Bayreuth’s dictate on how to play Wagner in Germany, see Großmann-Vendrey, Wagner, 262.
12. On this incident, see Bartnig, Ernst von Schuch, 368–69.
14. On the enthusiastic reception of Cavalleria Rusticana (then known by the German title Sicilianische Liebesrache or later Bauernrache) in Dresden, see Lederer, Verismo, 32–33; On the reception of Tosca see Dresdner Nachrichten, Oct. 23, 1902, 1; Bartnig, Ernst von Schuch, 364.
15. See the review in Dresden Journal, Oct. 26, 1882, 1.
16. Quoted in Der Kunstwart 5 (1891–92), 285. A similarly positive review was written in Vienna by Fleischer, Die Bedeutung der Internationalen, 65.
17. See Dresden Journal, March 2, 1894, 2.
18. On the close contact between the Prague National Theater and the Leipzig Municipal Theater under Max Stägemann, see NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 211, 73–87. Productions included The Bartered Bride, The Kiss, and V Studní by Blondek. On the Smetana concerts in Dresden, see Brescius, Die königliche, 102–104.

20. See the correspondence between Hartmann and the Prague National Theater in NA, Fond ND, Sign. D 221, 28–31.

21. On the exchange between the royal theater and the National Theater, see their extensive correspondence in NA, Sign. D 211, 33–44.


23. An English translation of the libretto was printed in *Polish Music Journal* 4, no. 2 (2001). See also the editorial by Maja Trochimczyk, *Rediscovering Paderewski*, [http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/4.2.01/trochimczyk4_2.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/4.2.01/trochimczyk4_2.html).


25. See *Dresdner Nachrichten*, May 31, 1901. A more informed assessment of the work can be found in Trochimczyk, *Rediscovering Paderewski*, [http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/4.2.01/trochimczyk4_2.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/PMJ/issue/4.2.01/trochimczyk4_2.html).

26. Its performance in Lemberg is discussed in detail in the following part.

27. On Paderewski’s experiences in Berlin and his appreciation of Schuch, see *The Paderewski Memoirs*, 165–72, 124.

28. Quoted in a review in *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Sept. 9, 1901, 2.


30. This was partly due to its failure to premiere as planned at the Vienna royal theater. Although Mahler had intended to stage the piece, this was prevented by the Czech tenor Vílém Heř falling ill and Mahler’s creative crisis as director of the royal opera. On the Mahler era in Vienna, see Willnauer, *Gustav Mahler*.


32. In terms of subject matter, *Guntram* continued the tradition of national, Germanic operas. On Schuch and Strauss’s early contact, see Bartnig, *Ernst von Schuch*, 370.

33. Having finally been put on the program in Berlin, it was taken off a short time later after protests from the prudish Empress. See Walter, *Richard Strauss*, 174–75.


37. A comprehensive analysis with an overview of performance practices is contained in Piper’s *Enzyklopädie des Musiktheater*, vol. 6, 82–89.

38. See Bartnig, *Ernst von Schuch*, 371. With her matronly figure, Marie Wittich was not the ideal person for the role, but there was no other soprano in Dresden with her vocal ability.


40. See the reviews in *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Dec. 10, 1905, 4; *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Dec. 11, 1905, 4 and *Dresdner Journal*, Dec. 11, 1905, 1. The workers’ press was more restrained in judgement. See a review and sensitive assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the opera in *SAZ*, Dec. 15, 1905, 1.

41. Citations from a review in *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Dec. 11, 1905, 4.


43. See the first short review in *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Dec. 10, 1905, 4.

44. “Eine Meisterleistung eines allerersten Theaters, die von keiner Bühne der Welt überboten werden kann,” *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Dec. 11, 1905, 4, last paragraph.

45. See the statistics in SHAD, MdKH, loc. 44, no. 38, 129–37, 111.
46. On censorship in Berlin see Walter, *Richard Strauss*, 177. In a letter of 1905, Cosima Wagner politely disassociated herself from the work. Later, however, an article in the periodical *Der Turm* quoted Siegfried Wagner as claiming that Strauss’s doom-ridden works sullied German theater, and that *Elektra* was an insult to Sophocles and an abasement of all antiquity. See the correspondence between Cosima Wagner, Siegfried Wagner and Strauss in Trenner, *Cosima Wagner*, 257, 278–81.

47. Remarkably, *Salome* was never performed in Prague, and in New York, it was dropped after one performance following objections from the Metropolitan Opera’s shareholders. On the dispute between the Met’s director and the box owners, see Metropolitan Opera Archive (hereafter Met Archive), *Minute Books*, April 10, 1880—September 1892, 119–38.


49. Ticket prices were fixed in 1877 at 50 pfennigs for the cheapest standing room and 5.50 for the most expensive balcony seat. For prices, see SHAD, MdKH, loc. 41, no. 13, 4 (in this file there are also price comparisons with the Munich royal theater. See MdKH, loc. 41, no. 13, 7a and no. 16, 1–2).

50. See SAZ, Nov. 25, 1874, 3.

51. See SAZ, Sept. 7, 1900, supplement, 1 and SAZ, Sept. 1, 1902, 1. After the turn of the century, so-called people’s performances (*Volksvorstellungen*) were also given, at reduced prices. See SHAD, MdKH, loc. 44, no. 40, 158.

52. Quoted in an article in SAZ, Nov. 6, 1903, 1–2.

53. See SHAD, MdKH, loc. 44, no. 31, 115–16; SHAD and no. 43, 124–27.

54. See SAZ, Sept. 1, 1902, 1. Ten years earlier the periodical *Der Kunstwart* had called for reduced price tickets to be made available so that the theater could become a “reconciliatory force” between the unpropertied and the property owning classes. See *Der Kunstwart* 5 (1891–92), 237–38.

55. For a comprehensive overview of contemporary press coverage, see the “Sammlung Otto Sohrmann,” a special section of the archive of the Sächsische Staatsoper in Dresden.


57. Michael Walter has demonstrated how Strauss musically referenced *Der Freischütz* and Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, among other things. See Walter, *Richard Strauss*, 267–72.

58. See the detailed director’s sketches by Alfred Roller in Schuh, *Der Rosenkavalier*, 157–78. On the reception of *Der Rosenkavalier* see the many newspaper articles in the Sohrmann collection.

59. See the review in *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Dec. 15, 1911 (n.p., copied from the Sohrmann collection).

60. For the shortened passages see Schuch, *Der Rosenkavalier*, 218–20. The entire original version of the second act is reproduced on 196–218.


62. See the correspondence between the chairman of the stock association for the Albert Theater, Ernst Jordan, von Platen, and the King in SHAD, MdKH, loc. 44, no. 6a, 127–28.

63. On the proportion of ticket proceeds making up the budget, which was considerably larger than in Vienna or Berlin, see Walter, *Die Oper*, 90.

