Center Stage

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CHAPTER TEN

Nationalizing Opera

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, music theater was distinctly international in character, being almost synonymous with Italian opera in many countries. How did opera increasingly come to be perceived as an expression of the nation in various countries after 1848? How did national genres of opera develop? The three main elements indicating the nationalization of opera are the singing language, the dramatic and musical content of works, and their reception and the proportion of native pieces in the repertoire.

Changing Singing Languages

The existence of German, Polish, and Czech opera cannot be regarded as a given or the natural result of nation-building. New national opera genres flourished only where there was an ensemble that could sing in the native language. This was the case at different times in Dresden, Lemberg, and Prague.1 In Dresden, King Friedrich August I established a German opera department as early as 1817 which, under the direction of Carl Maria von Weber, soon gained widespread renown. Initially, French operas were a strong component of the repertoire. But these were performed in translation, which gradually established German as a singing language to rival Italian. In 1831, the Italian opera department was finally closed down. Under the aegis of chief conductor Richard Wagner in the 1840s, all pieces were translated, no more performances were given in Italian, and Dresden became the first major royal theater to engage in nationalizing opera. After 1859 and the decline of neo-absolutism, no *stagioni* were held in Vienna either.

The nationalization of the singing language paralleled changes in the audience. By the time Dresden’s Semper Opera was built in 1841, the Italian-speaking (or even singing) members of the court constituted only a small minority among the opera public. They were now outnumbered by the urban middle class, which was much less familiar with foreign languages and frequently held nationalist views. Consequently, the popularity of German-language performances in-
increased. To ensure that audiences could understand the texts and follow the plot, greater emphasis was laid on declamation than today. Furthermore, nationalizing the singing language gave German operas the considerable advantage that they could be immediately assessed and rehearsed, whereas French or Italian works had to be translated first. This frequently detracted from the quality and, crucially, incurred greater costs. None of the opera theaters considered in this book remained unaffected by these market forces.

The history of Polish opera in many ways parallels the development of music theater in the German lands up to the end of the eighteenth century. Although there was no Polish Mozart, under Bogusławski and Elsner a native tradition of lyrical drama blossomed in Warsaw and Lemberg. Performances in Polish were common. This changed, however, in the period following the failed November Uprising of 1830–31. The suppression of Polish culture at the hands of Russia and Prussia stifled the development of Polish opera, which was then not strong enough to rival Italian opera. Native opera was further disadvantaged in Lemberg by the existence of a German and a Polish ensemble: since the German ensemble performed so many operas, the Polish Theater confined itself chiefly to spoken drama. Theater director Miłaszewski effected some changes after his arrival in the 1860s, staging more music theater with the Polish ensemble. But he tended to choose Parisian operettas over the Polish comedy dramas underscored with music.

Even the closure of the German Theater in Lemberg in 1872 did not herald a more productive phase for Polish opera. Ongoing social and political conflicts between the high nobility and the intelligentsia prevented a permanent, Polish-singing opera ensemble from becoming established. The reduction of year-round opera to one stagione in 1875 and again in 1886 compelled Polish singers in Lemberg to seek employment in Warsaw or elsewhere in central or Western Europe during the rest of the year. If they were talented and found success, they often stayed abroad. Singers who were prepared to work seasonally were usually employed from Italy. Thus the Polish Theater was reduced to a provincial theater in Italy’s cultural orbit. Instead of contemporary pieces, mainly older French and Italian pieces were performed, blocking any fresh artistic input. It was not until 1896 that a permanent Polish ensemble specializing in music drama was established under Ludwik Heller. Polish opera finally enjoyed renewed success, with both Moniuszko’s older standard works as well as more recent native works such as the verismo-inspired piece *Janek* by Żeleński and *Manru* by Paderewski.

The Czech National Theater indirectly profited from the instability of the Polish Theater. In 1886, the two most talented Lemberg soloists of the late nineteenth century, tenor Władysław Florjański and soprano Tereza Arklowa, went to Prague, where they rounded off the Czech-singing ensemble. Singing the lead roles in a new production of *Dalibor*, they contributed to popularizing Smetana’s dramatic work. While Tereza Arklowa subsequently moved on to Budapest, Florjański stayed in
Prague and played a central role in the “triumph in Vienna” which marked the National Theater’s international breakthrough. The careers of these artists show the effect of cultural transfers, involving both exchanges of works and of performers, and hence, intertextual and interpersonal cultural transfers.

It would be an exaggeration, however, to attribute the upswing in Czech opera solely to these external influences. Smetana had already established an ensemble to rival the German-language Estates Theater in the predecessor Czech playhouse. Šubert, the first director of the National Theater, forged ahead with creating a Czech singing ensemble, sometimes by radical means. As the incident involving Marie Pospišilová shows, performers who had contacts with the German Theater were shunned by Czech society and the Czech ensemble. The National Theater’s mission to reach all strata of society went hand in hand with a principle of ethnic exclusivity which was rigorously upheld by Šubert and his successor.

A comparison of developments in Lemberg and Prague leads to a jarring conclusion: Czech opera as an institution and as a genre was fostered by the Czechs’ more radical and often xenophobic type of nationalism. Lemberg’s more tolerant attitudes and sustained focus on Italian opera, by contrast, left Polish opera consigned to the realm of the provincial. It was not until Heller’s arrival on the eve of World War I that Polish opera managed to “catch up.” Nevertheless, from the broad perspective of the entire nineteenth and twentieth century, it would be wrong to interpret the Polish culture scene as backward, since the world’s major theaters later also adopted the custom of singing in the original language. Although the Polish Theater in Lemberg was out of step with Central Europe in the late nineteenth century, from a contemporary perspective, it was ahead of its time.

**National Operas in Europe: A Comparison**

In musicology, “national opera” is an umbrella term denoting works created over the course of the nineteenth century which are regarded as representative of individual national opera traditions. Carl Dahlhaus has based his typology primarily on phenomena of reception. At the same time, he observes a number of important stylistic aspects of plot and compositional technique that these works have in common. Curiously, Dahlhaus and English-language scholarship—with the exception of Hannu Salmi and a few others—fail to consider Richard Wagner in this context. Wagner has been omitted from research on national opera not on account of his works or personality but due to an inherently nationalist tradition of reception which emerged in the late nineteenth century in Germany and continues to have an impact on the English-speaking world today. In order to analyze this tradition, some works and the reception of central and eastern European opera composers of the nineteenth century will be compared below.
Music example 9. Scene from *Lohengrin* accenting *deutsch* (German).

The German national movement’s influence on Wagner is apparent in his early writings as well as in his choice of subject matter for operas. Following his appointment as chief conductor in Dresden, Wagner wrote *Tannhäuser*, his first attempt to deal with specifically national myths. The opera is set in the late Middle Ages at Wartburg Castle, a site of central importance for German legend, where the historical “singers’ contest” referred to in the full title (*Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*) took place. It linked, then, the legendary medieval event with the nineteenth century’s boom of choral festivals and supported the notion of the Germans’ inherent musicality. But in spite of the opera’s positivist elements and historical frame, it met with a lukewarm reception due to the psycho-
logical storyline which failed to touch a nerve with the public in 1845. *Tannhäuser* was dropped from the repertoire in Dresden after a few performances and no other theaters could be convinced of its merits before the 1848 revolution.

Despite this disappointment, Wagner continued to deal with national myths and history. He set his next opera, *Lohengrin*, in a key period of Saxon and German history, the reign of Heinrich I, the first Saxon prince to occupy the royal German throne. The opera opens with Heinrich making a rousing, symbolic appeal for national unity against the Hungarians who are threatening the empire. Many of Wagner’s contemporaries would have recognized the allusion to autocratic Russia, which was hated by liberals like him but protected from direct attacks by the censors. The motif of armed struggle against foreign enemies was later taken up by nearly all central European and eastern European national operas, which also dealt with national unity, traitors to this noble cause (who were usually aristocrats), and the protagonist’s heroic self-sacrifice for the greater good.

In political terms, *Lohengrin* is an interesting figure. Declared the king’s future successor by the people, he has democratic legitimacy. He maintains the unity of the land by defending the just rule of the king against aristocratic intrigues. The action is regularly punctuated by monumental mass scenes with chorus singing—an element borrowed from grand opera—in which the German nation is portrayed as a collective of regional groups. In the first act, the Saxons sing in a solemn C-major chord “Wohlauf für deutschen Reiches Ehr” (“Let us away! For the honor of the German empire!”), underlining their central role in the German unification process. The other plotlines in *Lohengrin* are hence arranged around the framework of the political context. *Lohengrin*’s departing prophecy of glory for the German Empire once again articulates the piece’s national bias, which the music also manages to reflect, regularly accenting the word *deutsch* by a reduction of harmonic structure. In short, both the subject and the music were ideal national opera material. But it was initially withheld from the public in the light of Wagner’s involvement in and indictment following the revolution. *Lohengrin* was not performed until the social and political circumstances had changed.

Wagner’s breakthrough as the foremost German opera composer finally came with *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, which portrays the Protestant middle class as the true proponents of German culture. In the final scene, most often cited as evidence of Wagner’s nationalism, the main hero Hans Sachs criticizes the German princes for their un-German ways and their preference of *welsch* culture (a pejorative term for Romance languages and cultures). *Mastersingers* was jubilantly received as a call for German unification by the premiere public in Munich in 1868, and again in Dresden a short time later. The nationalist middle class identified strongly with the hero Hans Sachs, who found his way into many households via piano music and other popular adaptations of the score.
Music example 10. Nationally encoded Marsh from The Mastersingers of Nuremberg.

On which terms can The Mastersingers of Nuremberg be defined as a national opera? Wagner opposed the use of folk songs and popular dance rhythms on principle. No local color of this kind can be found in Mastersingers or any of his other works. But he suffused his music with a specific character and created a unique sound by using historical instruments and composition techniques. The result is in fact summed up by the main hero Hans Sachs when he sings: “Es klang so alt, und war doch so neu” (“It sounded so old, and yet was so new”). As well as Hans Sachs’s story, the sound of Wagner’s music and eventually his entire oeuvre came to be perceived by the public as specifically German. Mastersingers can perhaps be regarded as the ultimate German national opera, espe-
cially in view of its reception on the fringes of and outside the German Empire. It was performed to inaugurate the New German Theater in Prague, for example, therefore providing the counterpart to Smetana’s Libuše for the National Theater. It was enthusiastically received in Graz, Strasbourg, and other borderland towns in the context of nationalist demands and repertoire policy. Although nationalist aspects were less significant for the public in the heart of the German Empire, in Munich and Berlin, too, Wagner, Lohengrin, and Mastersingers were perceived as the embodiment of German opera culture.

How did other nations react to this new phenomenon of a national opera culture? The Czech elites encountered Wagner’s work at the Estates Theater in Prague as early as the mid-1850s. Count Harrach, a supporter of the Czech national movement, was probably inspired by Wagner’s success to set up a competition for the creation of a Czech national opera to inaugurate the Provisional Theater. The winning entry, Bedřich Smetana’s The Brandenburgers in Bohemia (Braniboři v Čechach), focused even more intently than Lohengrin on a tale of defending the land against external enemies. The central plot strand of the “good” Czechs’ battle against the “evil” Brandenburgers invited comparison with contemporary conflicts with the Habsburgs. The people’s election of the beggar Jira to be king forms a key moment in the opera, premiered in 1866. In the following two acts, Jira goes on to rally the nation behind him and vanquish the intruders. As in Lohengrin, then, the election scene pleads the case for a democratically legitimized monarch. But rather than a mythical figure, Jira is a member of the underclass, which henceforth participates in society on equal terms and even takes a leading role in national politics. It is an irony of opera history that Smetana’s democratically minded librettist, Karel Sabina, was a police spy.8

Musically, too, The Brandenburgers in Bohemia mirrored the age’s mood of departure and Czech national awakening. This is articulated in the use of marching rhythms and choruses representing the nation on stage.9 A musical contrast serves to heighten the drama: while the Brandenburgers are generally underscored by only a few instruments, King Jira appears to the sound of chorus-singing in the middle and lower registers and full orchestration. Thus the impression is created that the Brandenburgers acted in isolation while the mass of the people supported the national movement. Here, the romantic element was secondary to the political storyline but included as a requisite component of a work in the tradition of French grand opera. Jira’s struggle to free three Czech girls abducted by the Brandenburgers ends predictably happily. Unlike his next two works (the Bartered Bride and Dalibor), this first of Smetana’s national operas did not gain a central place in the repertoire, mainly owing to the libretto’s weaknesses.
Music example 11. National mobilization in *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*.

Today most productions of *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*) present the piece as a folkish *opera buffa*. But behind the villagers’ dances and drinking songs lies some harsh social criticism. Sabina’s libretto attacks the petty bourgeoisie for pursuing material wealth at the cost of the individual’s well-being. But the opera’s most innovative aspect was its contemporary setting, which broke away from the historical precedent set by Wagner and in French Grand Opéra. Smetana’s realist perspective allowed the public to see the living nation portrayed on the stage, yet from a comfortable distance. Urban audiences were clearly fascinated by the antics of the country folk which the opera so vividly described and *The Bartered Bride* went on to be a major international success.

Michail Glinka and Ferenc Erkel—who were to Russia and Hungary respectively what Smetana was to the Czechs—dealt with similar topics in their dra-
matic national operas. Erkel’s *Hunyadi László* (first performed in 1844) portrays a bloody romantic intrigue which culminates in the murder of a queen of German origin and the execution of the Hungarian protagonist. This opera, too, addresses themes of national unity and the repulsion of foreign influences. In a subtext, the libretto criticizes some of the Hungarian nobility for cooperating with the Habsburgs in the prerevolution period. Musically, Erkel infused his work with a Magyar flavor by incorporating increased sevenths on the minor scale and *verbunkos*, a popular Hungarian dance.¹¹ He adopted a number-opera structure into which national dances and songs could be inserted. Croatian composer Ivan Zajc and, much later, Georgian composer Sakhali Paliashvili took similar approaches. It would fall beyond the ambit of this book, however, to analyze the work of these or the many other eastern and northern European composers acclaimed as the “fathers” of their country’s opera traditions.

**Con moto.** $\frac{\beta}{\alpha} = 126$

Glinka’s *A Life for the Czar* (*Żyzn’ za tsaria*) was the first work to be received as a national opera in Russia. It is set in the *smuta* era—a period of turmoil in the early seventeenth century when Russia was divided by dynastic conflicts and Moscow fell under Polish occupation for a time. It describes how the peasant hero Iwan Sussanin (the name by which the opera was known in the Stalin era) sacrifices his life in a subterfuge against the Polish army. On a political level, the
opera can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, it portrays peasants and the middle classes—who at the time of the opera’s writing were mostly bondsmen—as equal members of the nation. But on the other hand, it seemed to endorse Russian autocracy to its liberal critics in Prague. Glinka underscored the actions of his Russian heroes with nationally coded sounds and illustrated the Polish act with Polish dances.\textsuperscript{12} This contrast between the action and music of the two nations continued to elicit strong reactions many years after its premiere. A performance in Moscow in 1866 was interrupted by shouts from the auditorium of “Down, down with the Poles!”\textsuperscript{13} Modest Mussorgsky developed this juxtaposition of national music styles further in \textit{Boris Godunow} (first performed in 1874), where it served as a background to a more psychological drama.

While Moniuszko’s opera \textit{Halka} was received as an exemplary work of Polish music theater, it stands out from the pattern described above for focusing on an inner-social conflict. The peasant girl Halka is the tragic heroine who commits suicide after being seduced and abandoned by a nobleman. The opera contrasts Halka’s sensitivity and integrity with the falseness and arrogance of the aristocrat Janusz. Along with Glinka and Smetana, Moniuszko disobeyed the classical requirement that tragic protagonists be of noble birth.\textsuperscript{14} In classical drama, members of the lower orders were only deemed suitable for leading roles in comedies. The opera’s harsh criticism of the aristocracy initially met with a skeptical response, but after the failed uprising of 1863, its implicit demand for equality for peasants and their integration into the Polish nation resonated with the public. The opera became a fixture in the Polish repertoire and was performed to open the season for many years.

\textit{Halka}’s reception as a national opera was promoted by a sense among Warsaw’s music lovers that native music needed to catch up. The Polish nation required a homegrown piece to match Russia’s emblematic national opera, \textit{Żyzn za tsaria} by Glinka. The desire to keep up with neighboring lands or cities was indeed one of the salient factors contributing to the creation and reception of national operas. Moniuszko struggled to repeat his success with \textit{Halka}, eventually opting for a comic subject—as Wagner and Smetana had done—for his opera \textit{The Haunted Castle (Straszny Dwór)}. Similarly to Wagner’s \textit{Mastersingers}, the opera was set in the Renaissance period (when Poland had blossomed) and glorified the driving force of the national movement—in this case, the aristocracy. Superficially, the opera tells the tale of two knights’ adventures wooing two noble sisters despite having taken oaths of chastity. This provided plenty of opportunity for singing of the chivalric and patriotic qualities of the nobility. In the third scene of the second act, the Marshal, father of the two brides, sings approvingly of the noble knight: “He must protect his homeland/ like the lioness her brood/ and where foes treacherously rage/ he would bravely give his blood.”\textsuperscript{15} The Russian censors in Warsaw saw to it that the foes in question were not explicitly named, but the
public would have made the logical inference. Furthermore, foreign influences in Poland are criticized when the sisters turn down the advances of urbanite lawyer Damazy on account of his foreign dress. Although the theme of undesirable foreign influence can also be found in *Mastersingers*, in terms of composition there are few similarities between the two pieces. Moniuszko composed *The Haunted Castle* along the same lines as *Halka*, incorporating several folkloristic songs and dances in a number-opera framework. Nevertheless, Moniuszko’s intention echoed Wagner’s, as both were trying to create a specifically national sound—the latter by using archaic devices, and Moniuszko by integrating the contemporary popular music of his homeland.

**Music example 13. Final scene from* Halka.*
Whether tragedies or comedies, these national operas have much in common. They all deal with the history of the composer’s own nation, in marked contrast to French grand operas, which were usually set in foreign lands (Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* being a rare exception). As a rule, they sought to portray national histories from an affirmative perspective and bring them to life on the stage to be shared by the contemporary public. They conveyed nationalist values by treating issues such as national unity, treason, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation. Accounts of audiences’ often emotional responses—weeping and cheering—attest to the truly moving impact of these operas on the public in the years immediately after their premieres.\(^\text{16}\)

As well as nation-building themes, these operas also addressed social issues and conflicts. Two striking examples are the operas of Moniuszko and Glinka featuring comparatively negative portrayals of the aristocracy, despite the fact that the composers themselves were of aristocratic descent. These libretti identified a certain strata as the heart of the nation (the middle class in Germany and Bohemia; the nobility in Poland and Hungary) and called for the lower social strata to be integrated with them in the nation.

Comparison on a musical level, however, reveals greater diversity among these national operas. Erkel, Glinka, and Moniuszko incorporated stylistic elements of the (mostly urbanite) folk music of their countries, especially dances.\(^\text{17}\) But no national coloring, in musical terms, can be found in Wagner’s national operas. While the works of Smetana, Glinka, Moniuszko, and Zajc have been extensively researched by their compatriot musicologists, Wagner’s use of folk songs and popular rhythms has been disregarded by German scholars. Perhaps this is due to an unwillingness to disturb the cult of genius surrounding the composer by associating his work with lowbrow music genres.\(^\text{18}\)

In terms of compositional technique, Smetana falls between Moniuszko and Wagner. Like Moniuszko, he based his rhythms on the day’s dances but, like Wagner, avoided contemporary folk music influences in his melodies and harmonies. Indeed, he prompted the converse reaction, influencing Czech musical tastes, and some of his songs and dances became popular hits in their own right. His proximity to Wagner is unsurprising considering the parallels in their biographies and the contact they shared with the New German School around Franz Liszt.

Comparison of these national operas brings two paths of development to light: an Italian path, by which composers (such as Moniuszko, Glinka, and Erkel as well as Zajc, who is not treated here) filled the traditional number-opera structure with folk melodies and dances; and a German path, using continuous music, a system of leitmotifs, and an emphasis on native-language text (as in the work of Wagner and Smetana, and *Taras Bulba* by Ukrainian composer Lysenko).

An essentialist interpretation of these works would be misplaced, since they were received as national operas largely independently of the music’s affinity
with the “folk music” of their countries. But they were nevertheless portrayed as
typically German, Polish, or Czech, and so on by the contemporary press. The
well-informed opera public arrived at the theater knowing what to expect. Audi-
dences at the world premiere of *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* in Munich or
*Dalibor* in Prague in 1868 were prepared for a work of national character. Music
publications nourished and exploited these expectations and marketed works by
appealing to nationalist sentiments.

The “national style” which these operas represented should also be consid-
ered through the lens of nineteenth-century patterns of reception. Many musico-
ological studies have explored the influence of folk music on the works of “national
composers.” Several attempts were made in the twentieth century to uncover the
popular roots of the work of composers such as Smetana in line with Communist
ideology. However, even these studies generally concluded that the “folk music”
of the composer’s time served at most as a source of inspiration. In fact, ballroom
music and other urban music forms were more significant influences.

In view of the parallels between these works and their reception by the
public, it seems biased to omit Wagner from considerations of national opera.
While Czech, Polish, Russian, and Hungarian opera is “only” national, Wag-
nier’s work is elevated, in a sense, above this category and implicitly endowed
with an aura of universality. This view, propounded by German musicology and
stemming from the nineteenth-century reception of his music, is still common
in the English-language literature today. Its disregard of national influences on
Wagner’s music is unjustified, since Wagner was obsessed all his life with defin-
ing the term *deutsch* and infusing it with musical content. During his time in
Dresden, at least, German nationalism determined the parameters of his work, be-
fore he claimed access to more universal truths while in exile in Zurich. Certainly,
Wagner should not be perceived merely as a national composer and his works
only as national operas. The enduring appeal of *Lohengrin* and *Mastersingers*
lies in the fact that they can be interpreted and enjoyed independently of their
national themes. Without reducing these or other works to their national content,
then, changes in their reception through history can be observed. Consequently, a
view of operas not as timeless masterpieces but as products of their time, affected
by changes in their interpretation, emerges.

Paradoxically, the huge success of these national operas ultimately contrib-
te to the genre’s decline. The market for national opera became saturated. Al-
though there was still scope for some innovation in the field—the opera *Dalibor*
displaced *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* in 1886, for example—later examples
of the genre were at a clear disadvantage. While Mussorgsky was acclaimed in
Russia for *Boris Gudonow* and Erkel in Hungary for *Bank Ban*, in Germany de-
cades passed before any new opera was able to achieve the same level of popular-
ity as *Lohengrin*, *Mastersingers*, or *Der Freischütz*. In Bohemia, Smetana’s two
major works, *The Bartered Bride* and *Dalibor*, continued to draw the highest attendances. Polish composer Władysław Żeleński’s opera *Konrad Wallenrod* fulfilled all the criteria for a national opera but flopped in Warsaw and Lemberg, and Moniuszko remained the paragon of Polish opera. The diminished rate of success of national operas twenty or thirty years after their initial emergence shows that the public’s acceptance of the genre remained confined to a few highly revered, symbolic works.

The next generation of composers in all the countries considered here used national material early in their careers, such as Richard Strauss with his debut opera, *Guntram*. But it was no longer a recipe for success. The emergence of musical modernism, evident in works such as Zdeněk Fibich’s trilogy *Hippodamia* and Richard Strauss’s *Salome*, finally marked a shift in focus away from national legends and folkloristic sounds. The composers of *Młoda Polska* and, in later life, Żeleński also worked with topics other than national myth and history.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the public’s reception of national operas changed. Opera-goers increasingly sought universality rather than specifically national content or significance. *Lohengrin* has maintained its position in the repertoires of German and international theaters as a great Romantic opera with an enchanting, ill-fated love story. *The Bartered Bride* is still performed today as a realistic piece that has lost none of its vitality and relevance and is open to various interpretations.

**National Composers**

Wagner, Moniuszko, and Smetana achieved enduring fame in their mother countries, and partly also abroad, thanks to the popularity of their national operas. Their success was not, however, immediate. While they often encountered opposition in younger years, they were increasingly venerated toward the ends of their lives.

The incident at the Paris premiere of *Tannhäuser* in 1861 marked the beginning of Wagner’s ascent to becoming a German figurehead. The German public was outraged at the disturbances caused by some of the Parisian audience, which not only wounded their national pride but also offended against established codes of behavior in the theater. The next performance of *Tannhäuser* at the Dresden Royal Theater was applauded with particular emphasis, in a demonstration of the Saxon audience’s allegiance. Subsequently, all of Wagner’s Romantic operas became permanent fixtures on the Dresden repertoire in the 1860s. But even German opera lovers approached Wagner with a certain caution, not only on account of his controversial personality. Influential Dresden critics such as Carl Banck found his verse long-winded and his music unmelodious. In 1878, the Royal Ministry abandoned negotiations over a production of *The Ring of the Nibelung* in
the Semper Opera due to doubts over whether the public, “although it loves all innovation,” should be subjected to Wagner’s “tedious, unpoetic texts.”

Most significantly, Wagner linked his national opera project with audacious artistic demands. Calling for the abolition of the number opera in his Zurich writings, to be entirely replaced by music drama with continuous orchestration, simply went too far for most opera lovers. Research has shown that national programs are most successful when they remain nebulous and allow space for individual preferences. Wagner’s demands, however, were single minded and concrete.

Yet soon after Dresden had rejected the Ring cycle, Wagner came to be seen in a more favorable light in Saxony and in Germany when the Municipal Theater in Leipzig under Angelo Neumann (who went on to become director of the New German Theater in Prague) proved that the cycle could be staged successfully. Here, the four operas from The Rhinegold to The Twilight of the Gods were eachreprised twelve times in the first season alone. In January 1879, the Leipzig Municipal Theater was, moreover, the first to show the cycle on four consecutive nights. In 1882, shortly before his departure from Leipzig, Neumann also staged the highly acclaimed premiere of Tristan and Isolde. The onus was now on the Dresden Royal Theater to retain its public, which could easily reach Leipzig by train. Since nothing is more popular than a success, in the 1880s, no major theater could afford to ignore Wagner’s Ring cycle. Friedrich Nietzsche helped foster the cult surrounding Dresden’s former chief conductor and further increase his fame. In Robert Pröll’s 1878 history of the Dresden Royal Theater, Wagner is proudly described as a “genius” who “infinitely excels.”

Prague’s reception of Smetana followed a similar pattern. During his lifetime, Smetana encountered disapproval from the public and critics who condemned his “Wagnerism” especially in Dalibor. But their arguments intentionally misconstrued the link between the two composers. While Dalibor contained similarities to Wagner’s early operas, Smetana’s critics objected to notions set out in Wagner’s Zurich letters; in other words, aesthetic principles which Wagner formulated after composing Lohengrin. By openly sympathizing with the Young Czechs, Smetana fell afoul of their opponents in Bohemia. It was not until late in his career that he was wholeheartedly embraced as the leading Czech opera composer. Smetana’s death in 1884 was mourned across Bohemia and has been commemorated regularly by the National Theater ever since. Posthumously, he achieved iconic status after the acclaimed revival of Dalibor in 1886 and the National Theater’s triumph in Vienna in 1892.

Meanwhile, Smetana’s similarity to Wagner enabled the German opera public to access his work and, by extension, Czech music theater in general. Dresden-based critic and translator Ludwig Hartmann, who once claimed to be “more excited about Czech music than any other German,” was instrumental in this. Hartmann translated the libretti of Czech (and Italian) operas, reviewed countless
concerts of Czech compositions and saw in the work of Smetana, Dvořák, and Fibich the “full naturalness of an art which is deeply rooted in its homeland.” Dresden music critic Otto Schmid gave Czech opera theoretical endorsement by claiming that Bohemia was one of the lands to produce a “German” type of music stemming from the Reformation. At the same time, he also acknowledged that its Czech branch had blossomed into an independent music tradition. Schmid contrasted “German-style” abstract music-art with the Romantic tradition of emphasizing emotion and sensation. Hence he embraced Czech alongside German music in the context of a bias against French and Italian music.

By virtue of his national and international successes, Smetana became enshrined in Czech national memory and the first composer to indisputably represent the nation. His exalted, almost sanctified status worked to the detriment of Antonín Dvořák and his reception in Bohemia. Zdeněk Nejedlý and other critics associated with Young Czech and left-wing nationalist circles resented the high nobility’s preference for Dvořák and disapproved of his contact with Brahms and the Old Czechs. Nejedlý condemned the lack of progressive spirit he perceived in Dvořák’s music, since it was not oriented toward Wagner and Smetana. In his later capacity as the first Czechoslovak Communist minister of education, he rejected the lyric opera Rusalka as it was not based on national material and did not conform to a national style. Thus the cult surrounding Smetana engendered a narrow-mindedness which not only worked against Dvořák but against the entire Czech music scene. Here, another parallel to developments in Germany is revealed, where late nineteenth-century composers struggled to overcome Wagner’s legacy and find their own voice in opera.

Similarly, Moniuszko’s exalted status in Poland made life difficult for the next generation of Polish composers. Taking Moniuszko’s cue, Jarecki and Želeński continued to incorporate folk melodies and dances in a set-number structure. But the lukewarm reception of their works showed that this was not enough to distract attentions from dull libretti. The modernist Młoda Polska group was the first to break away from this adherence to tradition.

Nevertheless, some national operas retained their popularity even after the turn of the century. While this is no indicator of aesthetic value, it does provide evidence of the successful nationalization of opera. In Bohemia and Germany, where opera was most thoroughly nationalized, it was received by a wider radius of society than in countries where it retained its elitist status, such as Great Britain or the United States. Higher levels of social inclusivity, in turn, fostered cultural productivity. Countries where music theater remained the domain of small elites produced far fewer native opera composers than countries such as Italy, Germany, and Bohemia.

If an outstanding native opera composer could not be found, some nations identified with their fellow countrymen’s instrumental music. Grieg became
Norway’s figurehead national composer, similarly to Sibelius in Finland, Elgar in England—following in Handel’s footsteps with his oratorios—and Bartók and Kodály in Hungary. These composers also found their places in the pantheons of their nations and were commemorated in street names and monuments.

Yet around the turn of the century, by the time a Smetana museum was opened in Prague, the notion of national style—the basic premise for the genre of national opera—was becoming outdated. Janáček, a Moravian, and the foremost Czech opera composer of the generation after Dvořák and Fibich, disassociated himself from the folkish, in his eyes superficially national music of the Smetana school. He pursued an ethnological approach, visiting remote areas of eastern Moravia in search of “genuine” folk music to inspire his compositions. These reflected the dichotomy between the city, the musical idiom of which was already contained in the canonized national style, and the country, where Janáček came from. Béla Bartók and Karol Szymanowski followed similar paths in Hungary and Poland, respectively, analyzing the music and culture of rural populations in a bid to overcome what they felt to be the inauthenticity of their predecessors and the limitations of a canonized national style. Although they were operating in the context of musical modernism, a hundred years ago, in terms of postmodern literary theory they were already engaged in deconstruction. This may serve as a slight reminder that the Gellnerian or Andersonian school of nationalism studies—despite all its merits—did not invent the wheel. At the Prague National Theater, meanwhile, director of opera Karel Kovařovic resisted change by defiantly staging a cycle of all the best-loved traditional Czech operas while rejecting Janáček’s Jenufa. But in the long term, modernism could not be stopped. As ethnologically and regionally defined music came to the fore, the construct of a unifying and binding national style became obsolete. The idea of national music was deconstructed from within.

These developments in musical modernism shed light on the broader context in which opera and music history were evolving at the turn of the century. Modern nationalism was sustained by the promise of social equality, participation and a richer cultural life, as Herder had once envisaged. The Romantic-era, prerevolution proponents of nationalism had believed that European civilization would benefit from fostering national traditions and cultures. The Italian revolutionary Mazzini wrote in Paris of his hopes for the development of a “European music” combining the German and Italian schools. Wagner expressed similar views as a young man. While cultural nationalism went on to engender great aesthetic productivity, spawning the careers of Wagner, Smetana, and Moniuszko, opera analyzed as a source shows that the aesthetic application of nationalism in music had been exhausted after about half a century and even came to obstruct innovation in opera. In this respect, music history mirrors the cultural history of Europe in general.
Richard Wagner, Nation Builder

Among all “national composers,” Richard Wagner stands out, not only on account of his musical achievements—on which much has been written—but also because of his activities as a high-profile intellectual and writer.\(^\text{32}\) He was adamantly opposed to positivist historiography, holding that myths and legends made up an equally salient element of history as concrete data and the biographies of political leaders. He believed, in a Romantic sense, that mythical traditions conveyed the “spirit of the people” (Volksgeist) and contributed to a more encompassing national history.\(^\text{33}\) Juxtaposing the academic tradition of historiography with his concept of Volksgeschichte, he wrote: “The people is therefore in its poetry and artistry quite brilliant and truthful, while the learned history writer, who only adheres to the pragmatic surface of events . . . is pedantically untruthful because he is not able to understand the object of his own work with his heart and soul and therefore, without knowing it, is impelled toward arbitrary, subjective speculation.”\(^\text{34}\) Wagner, the historian, formulated this argument in an essay titled “The Wibelungen: World History as told in Saga” (Die Wibelungen oder die Geschichte aus der Sage) which later provided the inspiration for his Ring cycle. The “folk history” that he spoke of formed a national bond between the generations back to the earliest times. Part of the appeal of this Romantic view, blending documented history with legends, myths, and oral traditions into a perennial whole, was its great dramatic potential. Operas based on already studied and known historical characters and events were limited to an extent by factual parameters, whereas myths and legends allowed far greater scope for creativity.

At first glance, The Ring of the Nibelung does not appear to refer to any historical events. But in view of Wagner’s original essay on the Wibelungen, it is evidently based on a blend of history and myth. To Wagner, the legend of the Wibelung, which he regarded as the etymological precursor of the Nibelung,\(^\text{35}\) was proof of the unbroken continuity of the German nation from early times. He saw the tale of the Nibelung as a metaphor for the history of medieval German dynasties from Charlemagne, the Ottonians, and Saliens to the Welfs and the Hohenstaufen. In this sense, Wotan stands for Frederick Barbarossa and the twilight of the gods symbolizes the demise of the Staufer dynasty and subsequent disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.\(^\text{36}\) That would explain why Wagner staged The Ring of the Nibelung in Bayreuth as a truly historical, costume opera, whereas today it is mostly interpreted as an abstract reflection on the abuse of power and love.\(^\text{37}\)

Over the course of his life, Wagner created an operatic panorama of German history. The Ring of the Nibelung, Lohengrin, Tannhäuser, and Mastersingers spanned the history of the Germans from their imagined origins to the Renaissance and offered an enduring vision of perennial German history based
on ethnic continuity. The characters donning horned helmets and other Germanic paraphernalia in the world premiere of *The Ring of the Nibelung* captured the imagination of the Wilhelminian public and contributed directly to the rise of the Germanic cult. Wagner insisted, moreover, that the original costumes were copied for further performances, ensuring that the national character of the *Ring* cycle was preserved.

Wagner’s influence on his contemporaries’ view of German history cannot be overstated. Unlike the majority of university lecturers, he had a vast audience at his command. His operas not only reflected the spirit of the age but also to some extent defined it. *Mastersingers*, especially, with its criticism of French and Italian culture and anti-Semitic sentiment, served to broadly disseminate the Wagnerian standpoint. Wagner’s Protestant, middle-class, anti-Jewish and anti-western posture anticipated imperial Germany’s dominant national code. In acknowledgment of the trail he blazed, he was elevated to the rank of paragon of Germans, the nation’s composer.

No other national composer of any country was as prolific as Wagner, whose writings filled 12 volumes of *Collected Prose and Poetical Works*, nor had such a profound impact on his compatriots as a consequence. Moniuszko, Smetana, Glinka, and Erkel all focused entirely on composing, not even writing their own librettis. But although they rarely expressed political opinions in public, they too based their work on librettis with political content and dealt with crucial points in the histories of their nations. Their works had a progressive character, in a social as well as a national sense, and broke new ground by featuring members of all strata—the middle class, petty bourgeoisie, and peasants—in pivotal roles, in stark contrast to the *opera seria* performed at the European courts in the eighteenth century. Many popular works, including Wagner’s *Mastersingers* and Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*, managed almost entirely without royal and aristocratic characters. When the aristocracy did appear, it was mostly in a negative light, in several works by Wagner and Smetana as well as in Moniuszko’s *Halka* and later in Strauss’s *Rosenkavalier*. While negative characterizations of the aristocracy were not entirely new—one need only think of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and the portrayal of the count in *Le Nozze di Figaro*—in the mid-nineteenth century they became a central theme of German, Czech, and Polish opera. This is especially surprising in the case of Glinka and Moniuszko, who were themselves aristocratic by birth. The nobility now inveighed against its own role in history, displaying the kind of social self-criticism that is usually associated with the middle class.

It would, however, be naïve to assume that it was purely the political convictions of these composers that compelled them to work so closely with the national movements of their countries. There were, of course, market demands to be satisfied. Both for the sake of their artistic pride and their financial security, Wagner and his counterparts aimed to write popular pieces. As Smetana wrote in a letter
to Franz Liszt in 1858, “It takes a great deal of self-denial and courage to write works for the moths.”

Wagner was convinced that German opera composers were underpaid and placed at a disadvantage by the competition from imported works. In his 1849 article on founding a Saxon national theater, Wagner proposed a solution to both problems. It involved the near-nationalization of the repertoire so that it would contain mostly German operas plus the best foreign pieces. He had more or less achieved this in his capacity as chief conductor in Dresden. But now he also called for the formation of a “society of dramatic writers and composers” which would participate in devising the program and running the national theater. Furthermore, it would be responsible for arranging higher, fixed fees for composers and authors with the theater directors. In short, Wagner proposed establishing a protected opera market, operated by a national cartel of artists who codetermined the value of their work. These reformist ideas were embellished with national arguments and clearly aimed at improving Wagner’s position and that of other German composers. His contemporaries in music theater in Bohemia, Poland, Russia and other European countries soon followed suit with comparable proposals.

Even the project which was closest to Wagner’s heart, the festival theater in Bayreuth, arose from a combination of personal ambition and applied nationalism. Wagner originally envisaged a national opera theater and tried to rally public support for it through the numerous Wagner Societies across the country and by giving concerts. But a national opera theater dedicated exclusively to works by Wagner did not have as broad appeal as he had hoped and fundraising proved difficult. The inclusion of other popular German composers such as Carl Maria von Weber would probably have convinced more members of the public to donate.

Wagner hoped the founding of the empire would improve the chances for his festival theater in Bayreuth, but he was disappointed. The nation-state came replete with an imperial capital, an imperial army and many other national institutions against which cultural projects like Bayreuth paled into insignificance. The arts, moreover, were one sphere in which the German princely states retained their autonomy, hence there was no need for pan-national opera theater. The nation-state formation was counterproductive for opera and theater in other countries as well. In Italy the subsidies for the former princely theaters were cut, precipitating a crisis in opera which was only weathered by theaters in firmly middle-class towns such as Milan, Bologna, and Parma.

On the whole, continental empires proved more conducive to running opera theaters and other emblematic forms of national culture than nation-states. The Austrian and Russian Empires invested considerable sums in theater. In parallel with the imperial governments’ efforts to demonstrate wealth and secure political interests through public theaters, the nobility, middle class, and ascendant national movements also mobilized their financial and social resources to political
ends. It was especially important to rival nationalities in multi-ethnic cities, such as Prague and Lemberg, to have their own theaters.

Interestingly, Czech opera culture and the Prague National Theater project developed along similar lines to Wagner’s reform proposals for Saxony. Czech theater activists managed to rally a considerable part of the nation to the construction of a national theater. One of its central tasks was to promote the production of Czech arts. As soon as the Provisional Theater was opened, it was supplied with a growing number of native operas, like in Dresden under Wagner, and as a rule Czech was the singing language. In 1874 the association of Czech dramatic writers and composers concluded a very favorable contract with the Provisional Theater. This guaranteed Czech composers royalties of ten percent of receipts plus an additional 100 guilders after a work’s third and fifth performance. They were also conceded the right to protest cuts and vote on the casting of roles. The usual rate for royalties in most countries at the time was between seven and eight percent and the Provisional Theater often paid foreign composers less. Czech composers therefore profited directly from the conditions established by this national institution and the cultural nationalism on which it was based.

Smetana, Dvořák and Fibich, for their part, gave the Czech national movement much in return. Thanks to them, the Czechs gained international recognition as an equal cultural nation. Furthermore, their works dealt with all the central icons of national mythology and so helped to disseminate a view of history stretching back to the distant past—as Wagner’s oeuvre did—and portray the perennial character of the nation. This self-affirmation was particularly important to Czech society which did not have the benefit of a continuous history as a nation with its own state and whose language had been completely marginalized in the eighteenth century. The public rewarded these composers by patronizing their operas. In Prague, it was nothing less than a patriotic duty to attend the premiere of a Czech opera.

**Nationalizing Repertoires**

The emergence of national opera made a deep impact on the repertoires in Dresden, Prague, and Lemberg, providing a growing proportion of works from the prerevolution period onward. In Dresden, moreover, the Italian and French operas still remaining on the repertoire during Wagner’s tenure as conductor (1842–1849) were performed in translation. In the aftermath of the revolution, the number of German operas in the repertoire was cut, only to rise again in the 1860s in parallel with the German unification movement. Wagner, especially, now gained a permanent place in the repertoire of the Royal Theater, despite the skepticism with which some of Dresden’s music critics and royal family viewed him. The national opera era was at its zenith in the 1880s, when numerous “Ger-
manic” operas besides those of Wagner were performed. German operas filled roughly three quarters of the repertoire during this period.\textsuperscript{44} By the turn of the century, however, the proportion had shrunk again to about sixty percent, mainly on account of the work of director Ernst von Schuch, a lover of Italian opera and of the verismo style and proponent of Russian, Polish, and Czech works.\textsuperscript{45} By the eve of the First World War, the Dresden repertoire could be divided into four categories. German opera, constituting over half of the repertoire, continued to predominate. This was mainly due to the popularity of Wagner, whose operas were staged every fifth night. Italian and French operas were performed almost as frequently and each roughly made up another fifth. The fourth category in the program consisted of Czech, Polish, and Russian operas.

Changes to the Prague repertoire developed in a similar way, albeit somewhat later. The Provisional Theater’s repertoire contained roughly 25 percent Czech operas. This mirrored the situation at the Lemberg Theater under Jan Dobrzanski, and his efforts to promote Polish opera. In the first months after the Czech National Theater’s inauguration, exclusively native pieces were staged. But by the late 1880s, the proportion of Czech operas had shrunk again to thirty percent.\textsuperscript{46} The Bohemian exhibition of 1891 and especially the National Theater’s triumph in Vienna a year later launched a renewed upswing in Czech opera and it henceforth constituted about half of the repertoire.\textsuperscript{47} The repertoires in Dresden and Prague were not nationalized in a linear process, then, but in intermittent surges punctuated by international sensations such as the premiere of Aida or the creative hiatus of a popular native composer.

Up until the First World War, the non-Czech half of the National Theater’s repertoire was made up of Italian, French, German, and Russian operas. Changes in the popularity of these imported works can also be observed. While French opera achieved best attendances in the 1880s, it was subsequently superseded by German opera, despite the fact that an independent venue for German opera in Prague also existed. The proportion of Italian opera performed, on the other hand, remained relatively stable. Prague was quick to produce Polish and Russian operas on account of the Czechs’ pan-Slavism and close links with Poland.\textsuperscript{48} Nevertheless, Polish operas were only staged during Moniuszko’s lifetime. Russian operas, by contrast, remained in the repertoire, not least thanks to Šubert’s efforts to perform the works of Tchaikovsky, Glinka, Borodin, and Dargomyshsky.\textsuperscript{49} It is certainly no coincidence that Tchaikovsky, who was greatly influenced by Western European music and considered an internationalist in Russia, was the most successful Russian composer abroad. The National Theater’s production of Eugene Onegin in 1888 in Prague and later at the International Music and Theater Exhibition in Vienna were of key importance for the reception of Russian operas in Western Europe. Tchaikovsky’s lyric operas were subsequently performed in Hamburg, Austria, and
the rest of the German Empire before being imported by Paris, London, and the United States.

In Lemberg (as in Warsaw) the repertoire was nationalized later still and in a more fragmentary manner than in Prague and Dresden. Despite the fact that Moniuszko’s _Halka_ was performed to open each season, Polish opera gained only a temporary foothold in the theater under Jan Dobrząński. After his death, the Polish repertoire was reduced to a few token “classics” and some ill-starred premieres. Later, under Ludwik Heller, the proportion of native pieces rose again to about a quarter, though still distinctly less than in Prague or Dresden. Furthermore, no Polish operas received a lengthy run outside Poland. As in Hungary, then, the Polish national opera tradition fared worse than its equivalent in Prague.

Imported French and, especially, Italian operas made up the shortfall in popular Polish operas. But toward the end of the nineteenth century, Lemberg, like Prague before it, became a Wagner city. The second performance of _Lohengrin_ in 1897 was an acclaimed success and was soon followed by _Tannhäuser, The Flying Dutchman_, and all the operas of the _Ring_ cycle in succession. Lemberg’s warm reception of Wagner was promoted by the city’s enthusiasm for Smetana. As both composers’ works were translated, there was now cause to set up a Polish ensemble, which earned Polish opera the upswing that contemporary nationalists had longed for.

Lemberg’s enthusiastic reception of Wagner follows a pattern repeated across Europe from Barcelona to Prague, Kiev, and Tallinn. The fascination of “small” nations for Wagner was based, among other things, on his perceived mastery in creating a specifically national opera culture. The mythic and legendary figures that inhabited his opera world appealed so strongly to the public in Bohemia, Catalonia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states because they were in the process of finding such figures to represent their own national histories. These nations, just beginning to assert their individual cultures, possessed no, or only a small, body of Polish, Czech, Ukrainian, Estonian, or Catalan opera. At this point, moreover, before German became established internationally as a singing language, Wagner’s operas were always translated, enabling audiences to experience them in their mother languages. This process of appropriating Wagner’s oeuvre was crucial to his reception by the “small” nations of Western and Eastern Europe. While Italian opera was frequently regarded as an alien and aristocratic art form in these countries, Wagner was perceived to be modern and nationally relevant.

Italian opera was indeed the main victim of the wave of nationalization in music theater across continental Europe. Although it survived very well as a genre, by the end of the nineteenth century hardly any permanent Italian ensembles remained outside Italy. The Italian opera department met the same fate in Vienna as it did in St. Petersburg and Dresden—displaced by the newly established national ensembles. In some cases, the Italian ensemble was dissolved.
for political reasons, such as following the new constitution in Dresden in 1831 and the demise of neo-absolutism in Vienna in 1859. In the long term, however, European and global market forces had an equally profound affect. The great increase in the number of opera theaters in Europe and on a global level enabled Italian singers to demand higher fees. Meanwhile, operatic newcomer countries and cities set up their own conservatories and music schools, ensuring a sustainable supply of homegrown, nationally molded singers and musicians. The entire opera market diversified in the same way as opera genres had done previously. Placing these long-term changes within exact time brackets is difficult since the circumstances varied from country to country. But when London’s Royal Italian Opera—one of the international bastions of Italian opera—dropped the “Italian” and became simply the Royal Opera, in 1889, it marked a symbolic turning point. While Italian opera had been hegemonic until the first quarter of the nineteenth century, it now was just another national opera genre among many.

National stereotypes influenced the German reception of Italian opera and other imported genres. According to popular theory, Italians were the best inventors of melodies while the French excelled in sensational effects, the Germans were profound and intellectual, and the culture of the Czechs and other “Slavic” peoples was pristine and essentially national in character. Respected critics in Lemberg and Prague held similar views of Italian and French opera. Such national stereotypes also gained currency in Western Europe, albeit with differently placed preferences. A tendency toward national pigeon-holing arose, which varied from country to country and city to city but had a far-reaching effect on the international reception of opera. Today, individual opera genres continue to be categorized as Italian, French, German, or Slavic, masking the diversity within these groups. National distinctions especially predominate in popular publications such as opera guides. In this respect, the twenty-first century can be seen as building upon the foundations of the long nineteenth century—one more reason to address this period in history.

**Beyond Nationalisms: London and New York**

The trend toward defining opera nationally spread from country to country, but did it encompass all of Europe? One place formed an exception in Europe and is a reminder that the continent should not be conceived as a single, homogenous cultural space. This exception was London. Opera theaters and concert houses in the British capital imported what they regarded as the best of European music culture. A clear preference for Italian opera predominated until the end of the nineteenth century and Italian remained the conventional singing language for many years. Even the first Wagner productions in London were sung in Italian, following the model of Bologna, the first major opera city outside the German
and Austrian Empires to stage acclaimed productions of Wagner’s works. Operas were not translated into English.

London’s continuing tendency toward internationalism in opera gave rise to a new trend in the late nineteenth century. It was in the British capital that it became customary to perform operas in the original language. This occurred partly under pressure from Wagner devotees who insisted on hearing *Lohengrin* the way they had on their visits to Bayreuth, Dresden, and other German opera cities. London’s theaters, at the center of the prosperous British Empire, were in a position to import whatever pieces they wished and invite the best conductors, soloists, and chorus singers from all over Europe to perform at the Royal Opera. Equally open to instrumental music, the British capital was known as the place, alongside Paris and Vienna, for composers to make a career and a fortune. In the 1880s, Antonín Dvořák established his international reputation in London and earned as much with a few evenings’ guest conducting as he did in a year at home.

The eclecticism of London’s music scene stemmed from Britain’s peculiar position as the foremost global empire and the imperial—as opposed to cultural—nationalism this engendered. In the late nineteenth century, London taste dictated fashions around the world and British capital dominated the markets. Unlike the economic and political latecomer nations on the continent, or defeated France, Britain did not deem it necessary to assert a distinctive identity through singing language or a body of nationally defined operas. Although the British reception of Handel and Elgar paralleled the musical nationalism of Germany and France to an extent, on the whole, a more cosmopolitan attitude to culture prevailed in the British Empire up until the First World War. This pattern had already emerged in the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century, when London was temporarily home to a number of central European musicians, including Georg Friedrich Handel, Joseph Haydn, and Carl Maria von Weber, whose careers climaxed here.

In the late nineteenth century, however, New York came to rival London with its rapidly developing economy. The inauguration of the Metropolitan Opera in 1883—the same year that the Czech National Theater was opened in Prague—marked New York’s arrival as a main contender on the international opera market. Like the Prague National Theater, the Met was funded by private donors, albeit on a basis more like that of the New German Theater in Prague. Led by William H. Vanderbilt, a company of shareholders was set up by a number of wealthy New York families—members of New York’s trade and industry oligarchy, including the Roosevelts, Morgans and Astors, Iselins and Goelets—bringing together a total of 1.7 million dollars. The theater was lavishly fitted with boxes, reflecting the dominance of its rich elite patrons. The circle occupied by the very wealthiest was known as the diamond horseshoe. The original Metropolitan Opera of 1883 had a total capacity of over 3150, including a large standing room area in the gal-
lery. With such high capacity and wealthy box owners, the Met was one of the financially strongest opera houses in the world.

Although far from the “old continent,” the Met confronted issues which were very relevant to opera in Central Europe. In the first year after its inauguration, it hired an Italian ensemble as had hitherto been customary in New York. All operas were sung in Italian, including French works and *Lohengrin*, as they were in London. But the first season under director Henry Abbey recorded a high loss, for which the box owners were liable. Partly as an economizing measure, in 1884, the Italian ensemble was replaced by a German opera company. Had Wagner still lived, he might have applauded this as a victory for German opera. But in fact Italian was abandoned as the singing language in favor of German for more pragmatic reasons. As relative newcomers, German singers demanded lower fees in the late nineteenth century than their Italian counterparts. Moreover, the German immigrant population in New York was larger than its Italian counterpart, and immigrants were among the target audiences of cultural ventures such as the Met. The public, however, was not entirely convinced by the change. Leading newspaper critics objected to Bizet’s *Carmen* and works by Verdi being sung in German and questioned the legitimacy of the linguistic monopoly, which was only broken for guest performances. For this reason, in 1891, Italian was reinstated as the main singing language, precipitating complaints from Wagner devotees and a petition signed by over 2,000 protestors.54

In 1895, the Met found a way to appease both sides by hiring a second ensemble with a German conductor to produce Wagner in German. It subsequently became standard practice to perform all operas in their original language. Not all opera houses could afford to internationally diversify in this way but, the Met, like the Covent Garden Opera, was one that could. In the early twentieth century, it even employed three choruses—Italian, German, and French—and engaged the best singers from all over Europe.55 The similarities between the operas in New York and London illustrate that, in terms of opera history, England had more in common with the United States than with continental Europe. For many years, London and New York even shared a director: between 1897 and 1903, both Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera were directed by Maurice Grau’s Opera Company.56 Grau made his name and his fortune as an impresario in New York, where he codirected the Met from 1891. Grau and the Met controlled the opera sector in most of the United States, providing extended opera seasons in Philadelphia and Boston and giving occasional guest performances in the Midwest. Thus, at the turn of the century, a cultural space spanning the Atlantic emerged. This space was formed by cultural transfers, networks, and the similar tastes of the opera publics.

The example of London’s connection with New York shows that there is not just one European history or space of opera. It would be wrong to draw a
generalized picture of opera’s nationalization, since its impact was far greater on continental Europe. The Metropolitan Opera remained international in orientation, hiring the world’s top singers and most famous conductors, such as Gustav Mahler and Arturo Toscanini. It was not difficult to lure these stars across the Atlantic. By the end of the nineteenth century, they could reach New York within a week by ocean liner and expect double or even four times the rate of payment they would receive in Vienna or Milan. As a result, the European market for singers and conductors was extended across the Atlantic.

While transatlantic activities did not yet have a direct impact on singing practice in continental or Central Europe, the Met did produce international stars like Jean de Reszke, predecessor to the even more celebrated Caruso. Reszke, of Polish origin, could famously sing in every major European language and did much to promote an internationalist approach to performance. Language pluralism became an eminently marketable value after World War I, as the option of performing a couple of seasons in New York became increasingly lucrative. In these circumstances, the international star system began to dominate the opera scene and the standing theaters in continental Europe faced difficulties holding on to their best known soloists for entire seasons. The availability of long distance flights and improved traveling conditions further contributed to the internationalization of opera after 1945. Today singing in one national language is a specialty of a few opera theaters, such as the Volksoper in Vienna and the Komische Oper in Berlin. In view of this, the nationalization of opera should be regarded as a phase of opera history which peaked in the late nineteenth century but was deflected by London and New York and eventually lost momentum in the period after World War II.

Singing in the original language made it possible to stage the world premiere of a work from almost any country. In 1910, for example, the Met produced the first performance of Giacomo Puccini’s The Girl of the West (La fanciulla del West), which introduced themes of American history into the world of opera. In the same year, the Met premiered a revised version of the opera King’s Children (Königskinder) by Engelbert Humperdinck. On the opening night, Humperdinck gave a speech in praise of operatic life in New York: “I was in this country five years ago, and I want to say that America seems to have made a great stride in operatic progress since that time. The great composers of Europe are now having the first performances of their operas given over here instead of in their own country. European composers are coming to think that New York is the center of operatic art, and not the European cities.”

This quotation reveals a change in mental mapping. In New York, Humperdinck—a great admirer of Wagner—did not speak of German, French, or Italian opera but of the composers of Europe and European cities. Many newspaper articles of the late nineteenth century distinguish between the two spaces in a
similar way. Indeed, according to the founding statute of the Metropolitan Opera’s shareholding company, its express intention was to imitate, or outshine, “the opera houses in Europe.” The New York press compared the local music scene to that in “Europe” and even labeled opera a “European” artform. From an American perspective, such as Humperdinck was assuming, distinctions between the various national schools of opera were less relevant than they were in their European places of origin. Preferences among the American public naturally differed, but whether one favored Italian opera or Wagner was not a cause for polemics as it was for Central Europe’s musical nationalists. From the distance of another continent, the contours of intra-European peculiarities blurred and Europe and the art of opera were regarded more as a unit than within Europe itself.

Interestingly, this discourse on European music in New York was paralleled by music journalism in Poland and Russia. Observers on the fringes of Europe also saw opera more as a unit than most French, Italian, or German music journalists and theorists would have liked. The Warsaw journal *Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne*, for example, ran a column in the 1880s titled “From Europe,” featuring news of premieres, singers, and guest performances all over the continent. Of course, cultural spaces appear less complex viewed from without than from within. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that until 1914 no serious attempt was made to assert an American genre of opera. Although music journalists occasionally promoted the idea, as in London, native composers could not rely on any special support. With a large body of successful operas already satisfying demand by the turn of the century, and without any clearly nationalist lobby, there was no persuasive argument for taking a chance on an unknown local composer rather than staging works that had been tried and tested in London, Paris, and Vienna.

In both New York and London, then, the international repertoire denied native-born composers the advantage of a protected market niche to develop in. As a result, opera here provided less area for identification by the public, or for reflecting national prestige, and was regarded more as a means of entertainment. But should this lack of national opera be perceived as a deficit, as some American theorists and music critics did at the turn of the century? From the traditional perspective on music history as a linear progression, the development of a national school of music may indeed appear to be an important stage of development. But some of the twentieth century’s most successful modern operas were written by composers from countries which did not experience it. A case in point is Benjamin Britten in the United Kingdom. Perhaps his success was promoted by the very lack of a traditional national canon of British opera. Or in more proverbial terms: latecomers can also be newcomers. It was easier to develop a new genre of opera and to achieve individual success as a composer if the music theater market was not already saturated by an existent body of work. This interpretation presupposes a philosophy of history based on a cyclical concept of time,
which was alien to the nineteenth-century protagonists in music, whether they were composers, critics, or musicologists. In modern Europe the cultural elites of most countries strove to “catch up” and become one of the more “civilized” nations inspiring the creation of national opera, music, and high culture. The notion of progress, then, has an inherently transnational dimension, which will now be addressed in the final scene of this book.

Notes

1. This is considered closely in the three case studies above. See above for the relevant literature.
2. See Dahlhaus, Musik im 19. Jahrhundert, 181–90. A similar argument can be found in Konold, Nationale Bewegungen.
3. On the influence of grand opera see Oberzaucher-Schüller, Meyerbeer—Wagner. The opera’s national orientation is discussed in Bernbach, Wo Macht, 220.
6. As well as the wealth of German language literature on Wagner, valuable insight is provided by Grey, Die Meistersinger.
9. On the earlier usage and political significance of choruses in Italian and French opera, see Philip Gossett, “Becoming a Citizen,” 41–64; also Fulcher, French Grand Opera, 40–42. Smetana’s dramatic and musical use of the chorus in Braniboři v Čechach is reminiscent of Italian opera, especially Bellini’s I Puritani. The influence of transfers from Italian opera on Smetana’s work has, however, been much less researched than his alleged Wagnerism, which was the subject of much public debate.
10. Spoken-word dramas dealing with similar subject matter also enjoyed high attendance in the 1870s and 1880s. See the list of each evening’s takings in the appendix of Šubert, Dějiny.
11. On Erkel’s operas and composition principles, see Véber, Ungarische Elemente.
12. On this opera and its composer Glinka, see Taruskin, Defining Russia Musically, 25–47. On the musical-dramatic function of dances and folk music in Russian, Czech, and Polish national operas see Tyrrell, Russian, Czech, Polish, 163–74.
13. Piotr Tchaikovsky recounted this in a letter of April 1866 to his brother. Quoted in Neef, Handbuch der russischen und sowjetischen Oper, 193.
14. On the revolutionary plot of Halka and this style dictate, see Dahlhaus, Die Musik im 19. Jahrhundert, 186.
15. Translation by Charlotte Kreutzmüller.
16. On public reception, see the individual case studies of Dresden, Prague, and Lemberg.
17. On the conception of national music and operas in Moniuszko, see Golianek, Twórczość operowa; with regard to Halka, especially 126–28.
18. We must take Wagner’s word, then, that the composition of The Flying Dutchman was inspired by East Prussian sailors’ songs and Tannhäuser by the song of goatherds in northern Bohemia. See Gregor-Dellin, Richard Wagner, 172. The influence of local music on Wagner is considered briefly by the nineteenth century Dresden music critic Otto Schmid in Richard Wagner, 20.
19. One example is the analysis of Dvořák’s music by Beckerman, *The Master’s Little Joke*, 143–44.


21. Some recent proposals and publications in musicology point in this direction, for example Hinrichsen, *Musikwissenschaft*.


23. Quoted in SHAD, MdKK, loc. 41, no. 13, 20. On the negotiations between Wagner’s representative and the Royal Theater, see also the minutes, 13–14.

24. On ambiguous ideology in nationalism, see Hobbsawm, *Nations and Nationalism*.

25. On the Leipzig performances of *The Ring of the Nibelung* and *Tristan and Isolde*, see Hennenberg, *300 Jahre*, 79–81.


27. Quoted in a letter to Šubert in NA, Fond ND, Sign. 221, 31, and a newspaper review in NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 221, 28.

28. See Gojowy, *Das Deutsche*, 44.


33. On the usage of these terms, see Wagner, *Die Wibelungen*, in Wagner, *SSD*, vol. 2, 124.


36. Myth and history are paralleled in this way in the text cited above (see previous footnote) especially on 120–22, 130.

37. On political interpretations of *The Ring of the Nibelungen* since Chereau’s legendary 1976 production in Bayreuth see Bermbach, Borchmeyer, *Einleitung*, IX–X.


41. See Roselli, *Das Produktionssystem*, 111–12.

42. See part 4 on Prague.

43. See the terms of the contract in Kadlec, *Družstva*, 54.

44. See *Tage-Buch 1887*, 42–59. Twice as many French operas were staged as Italian operas in this period, making up about a sixth and a twelfth of the repertoire, respectively.

45. See programs of 1895 and the season 1900–01 in SHAD, Loc. 44, no. 25, 6–10 and loc. 44, no. 30, 115–24. The number of German operas performed in Dresden was roughly average for a major German opera theater. While in Munich and Leipzig somewhat more were staged, in Hamburg and Vienna the number was somewhat less. See *Opernstatistik für das Jahr 1894*, 6–30.

46. On the changing proportion of Czech, French, Italian, and German opera on the program in Prague, see Havránek, *Společenské*, 207. For the years 1883–1892, Havránek arrives at the following figures: 31.5% Czech operas, 22.2% French, 20.9% Italian,
20.7% German, nearly 5% Russian and Polish. Statistics on the performance of Czech operas 1883–1889 can also be found in AND, Annual Report 6 (1890), 20.

47. The programs are documented in their entirety in the annual reports of the National Theater.

48. The Provisional Theater staged Moniuszko’s Halka, in the presence of the composer, as early as 1868. In 1886 a second, less-acclaimed premiere was staged in the National Theater which, according to the music journal Dalibor, honored an obligation toward “the nation most closely related to us.” Dalibor 8, no. 36, Sept. 28, 1886, 356.

49. Between 1883 and 1914, a considerably larger amount of Russian and Polish spoken-word dramas were staged. This tradition climaxed in a combined Czech-Polish performance in 1891 and an appearance by the Moscow Art Theater under Stanislavski in 1906.

50. See part two on Dresden.

51. See Toelle, Der Duft.

52. The attitude of the influential Dresden music critic Otto Schmid provides a good example. See his collected reviews in Schmid-Dresen, Bunte Blätter, especially the citations on 67.

53. On the construction and funding of the Met, see Irving Kolodin, The Metropolitan Opera 1883–1966. A Candid History, 4–6. The basic capital stock amounted to more than one-and-a-half times as much as the cost of construction of the second Dresden Semper theater and two-and-a-half times as much as that of the National Theater in Prague.


55. See the Metropolitan Opera Archive (Met archive), Paybook 1906–07, 11. In its “prospectus” of the Grand Opera Season 1908–09, the Met boasted that it had hired 130 musicians for its orchestra, “a larger number of musicians than is employed in the most important opera houses in Europe.” (The prospectus for each season can be accessed in the archive of the Met.)

56. On this period, see Kolodin, The Metropolitan, 159–98.

57. See Met archive, Paybook 1908–09, 116–18. Mahler received 25,000 Austrian crowns per month, almost as much as he was paid per year as director of the Vienna court opera. In total, in the season 1908–09, Mahler earned $18,962, the equivalent of approximately 94,000 crowns.


59. See Met archive, Minute Books, April 10, 1880–September 1892, 12.

60. For comparative references to Europe in the press, see “The Outlook for Opera,” NYT, Feb. 7, 1893, 4; “The National Theater,” Harper’s Weekly, Dec. 30, 1905, in Met archive, Pressbooks, Roll 1; “Six Million Dollars Paid to Foreign Musicians,” NYT, Nov. 10, 1907. (There is no pagination in the huge collection of articles in the William James Henderson Scrapbooks which are preserved in the archive of the Met). References to Europe as a whole can also be found in the annual prospectus of the Met. For example, see Metropolitan Opera House. Grand Opera Prospectus, Season 1908–1909; on the controversy surrounding Salome, see Met archive, Minute Books, April 10, 1880–September 1892, 119–38.

61. EMTA, vols. 9, 10, 18.

62. On this debate in Germany, see the valid criticism of Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, one of the doyens of postwar musicology in West Germany, in Vladimir Karbusicki, Wie deutsch ist das Abendland?