Chapter Three  
Poet and Composer: Operatic Insights of an Insider

Turbulent Times

Hoffmann’s final years in Bamberg and his subsequent stays in Dresden and Leipzig (1813-1814) belong to the most productive and tempestuous times of his life. In addition to his activities for the Bamberg theater, Hoffmann provided some of his most important contributions to the AMZ, among them his famous reviews of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (1810) and overture Coriolan (1812); Ludwig (Louis) Spohr’s First Symphony (1811) and his extensive opera reviews of Joseph Weigl’s Das Waisenhaus (1810); Gluck’s Iphigénie en Aulide (1810); Ferdinando Paer’s Sofonisba (1810-1811); and Adalbert Gyrowetz’s Der Augenarzt (1812). The theater’s director, Franz von Holbein, left abruptly to assume the directorship of the Würzburg theater in 1812, the same year that brought unfortunate developments in Hoffmann’s personal life. Although married to Michaelina Rorer (Mischa) since 1802, he had fallen hopelessly in love with one of his pupils, Julia Mark. After a scandal in September, during which he lost his temper with Julia’s drunken fiancé, Hoffmann was effectively barred from their house. Despite the ensuing uproar, Adalbert Friedrich Marcus, head of the committee in charge of the Bamberg theater after Holbein’s departure, offered Hoffmann the position of stage director. At the beginning of the following year, Hoffmann received an offer from Holbein to join him at the theater in Würzburg in late March. This position did not materialize, however, since by 23 April, Holbein himself had resigned from the Würzburg theater due to Prussia’s mounting war effort, and had resumed his career as guest performer.

Unexpectedly, yet another offer reached Hoffmann in February 1813: On the recommendations of Gottfried Härtel and Friedrich Rochlitz, Joseph Seconda invited Hoffmann to fill the vacancy of music director at his German opera company in Dresden/Leipzig. Rumours about the company’s deplorable reputation prompted Hoffmann to turn to Rochlitz

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1 Tagebücher, 16 November 1812, p.182. The offer, however, turned out to have been wishful thinking on the part of Marcus (Tagebücher, 17 November).
for advice. After Rochlitz’s reassuring reply, Hoffmann accepted Seconda’s terms and agreed to move to Dresden in April.

Hoffmann had already taken matters into his own hands, however, and on 18 March, the day before he accepted Seconda’s offer, had signed another contract, this one with far-reaching consequences for his life and career. Carl Friedrich Kunz (1785-1849), a wine merchant who had founded a library (‘Königliches privilegirtes neues Leseinstitut’) in 1812, had also launched his own publishing house. Kunz had already hired Hoffmann to acquire and catalogue the Italian titles for the library, and now signed a contract with him to publish a two-volume edition of Fantasiestücke in Callot’s Manier. The collection would consist of a selection of Hoffmann’s contributions to the AMZ and some new titles. A few months later, however, Hoffmann asked Kunz not to publish his name as author-editor of the Fantasiestücke, explaining that it should become known to the world only through a successful musical composition.

In thanking Härtel for recommending him to Seconda, Hoffmann had already expressed his hope that through this new position he would finally gain fame as a theater composer. In his letter to Härtel, he also expressed his relief that he could avoid going to Würzburg, and assumed that the battles around Leipzig and Dresden would be over by the time he arrived.

As events demonstrated, however, this was far too optimistic an assumption. A few days prior to Hoffmann’s letter to Härtel, Prussia had officially declared war on France and King Friedrich Wilhelm III had called on his people for support in the struggle against Napoleon (An mein Volk, 17 March 1813). The King’s proclamation, which was drafted by Hoffmann’s best friend Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel was published on 20 March 1813. The Prussian army was expanded by creating volunteer military or paramilitary units, the so-called Freikorps, who now fought alongside the Russians against Napoleon. When Hoffmann left Bamberg for Dresden on 21 April, after passing through Bayreuth, he encountered the first Prussian advance posts. From then on the road was filled with Prussian Hussars, Russian Cossacks, Mongolian Kalmucks and Turkic Bashkirs.

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3 Tagebücher, 19 March 1813, p.199.
4 The date also marked (probably not coincidentally) Julia’s birthday.
6 Letter of 20 July 1813, Briefwechsel, I, p.399.
7 Letter of 23 March 1813, Briefwechsel, I, p.370.
8 Schlesische privilegirte Zeitung, no. 34 (20 March 1813)