Opera and the Imagined Nation

Weber’s *Der Freischütz*, Schinkel’s Neues Schauspielhaus
and the Politics of German National Identity

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This paper looks at music theatre’s role in shaping a sense of cultural identity by examining Weber’s *Der Freischütz* and its première in Schinkel’s Neues Schauspielhaus in the light of the German quest for a sense of national identity and nationhood in the early years of the nineteenth century. Following the Wars of Liberation and the establishment of the German Confederation, the possibility of a united Germany seemed more real than ever before, highly desirable to some but threatening to others. The stakeholders involved included the still-powerful aristocracy and royal families of the various regions, representatives of the high culture associated with the courts, such as Goethe for instance, and, very importantly, members of the increasingly influential – but also disparate – bourgeoisie. All these groups and individuals had their own view of the German nation as a utopian possibility (or impossibility), an imagined space to be negotiated and then translated into lived reality. The focus here is on Weber’s opera and its première as a case study of the politics of cultural and national identity, the way place, power and participants interacted to give individuals a sense of themselves as members of a national group. The text and its performance, the event as public spectacle and the physical space of the theatre, are all examined for their contribution to the process of self-constitution of the audience, offering a confirmation of an imagined unity, but simultaneously suggesting the possibility of transgression and exclusion.


1 ‘Oh, this passionate enthusiasm, with its sympathetic power it has made you the darling of your people! Never has a more German musician lived than you! Wherever your genius took you, to whichever distant, incredible realm of the imagination, always it remained tied with those thousand gentle strings to the heart of the German people, with which it cried and laughed, like a trusting child listening to the legends and fairy tales of its homeland. […] Look, the Briton now does you justice, the Frenchman admires you, but only the German can love you; you are his, a beautiful day in his life, a warm drop of his blood, a piece of his heart, – who would want to reproach us, if we felt that your ashes should be a part of his soil, the beloved German soil?’ (Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.)
Thus Richard Wagner on 15 December 1844, when Weber’s remains were finally brought back to Germany\(^2\) from England and reinterred in Dresden, where he had lived and worked for so many years. Wagner’s words, particularly the sentence “Nie hat ein \textit{deutscherer} Musiker gelebt, als Du!”\(^{\text{1}}\), have often been quoted to indicate the central place which Weber occupied in the minds of nineteenth-century Germans as they sought to define both themselves and their music in specifically national terms. What has received rather less attention in this context is Wagner’s “Bericht über die Heimbringung der sterblichen Überreste Karl Maria von Weber’s [sic] aus London nach Dresden”\(^3\) (41-46) which precedes the eulogy in his complete works.

In this, Wagner describes in some detail the process which was gone through and the difficulties encountered before Weber’s remains finally arrived back in Dresden. It is a fascinating and revealing document in many respects and would undoubtedly repay closer study, but here I just want to draw attention to one or two salient features which I read as symptomatic of the situation in the German Confederation with regard to the all-too-vexed question of national identity in the first half of the nineteenth century (and indeed probably well beyond). On the one hand, the fact that a committee had been in place for some years to try to bring Weber’s remains back to Germany signals the major contribution of cultural achievement and cultural monuments to the continuing attempts – particularly those made by middle-class Germans – to establish a clearly defined and widely accepted sense of national identity. The membership of the committee, consisting as it did of citizens prominent in the arts and education, and the local \textit{Liedertafel}, or men’s singing group, offers a copybook example of the central role of the \textit{Bildungsbürgertum} (urban educated middle-class), and their cultural associations and activities in the nineteenth-century project of German nationhood. On the other

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\(^2\) Nomenclature contributes to the difficulties of discussing the question of German national identity in the nineteenth century. I will continue the generally accepted practice of referring to ‘German’ and ‘Germany’, but it is clearly important to bear in mind that a united German nation did not come into existence until 1871, and that even then, regional differences continued to be of major importance. In 1821 the German Confederation consisted of 39 states (34 monarchies and 4 free cities), each with its own character and established practices. There was a Federal Diet which met in Frankfurt, but the representatives sent to its meetings were concerned chiefly to defend the interests of their particular state.

\(^3\) ‘Report on the bringing home of Carl Maria Weber’s mortal remains from London to Dresden.’