MEDIEVALISM AND NATIONALISM IN GERMAN OPERA

EURYANTHE TO *LOHENGRIN*

Michael S. Richardson

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Medievalism, or the reception or interpretation of the Middle Ages, was a prominent aesthetic for German opera composers in the first half of the nineteenth century. A healthy competition to establish a Germanic operatic repertory arose at this time, and fascination with medieval times served a critical role in shaping the desire for a unified national and cultural identity. Using operas by Weber, Schubert, Marshner, Wagner, and Schumann as case studies, Richardson investigates what historical information was available to German composers in their recreations of medieval music, and whether or not such information had any demonstrable effect on their compositions. The significant role that nationalism played in the choice of medieval subject matter for opera is also examined, along with how audiences and critics responded to the medieval milieu of these works.

In this book, readers will gain a clear understanding of the rise of German opera in the early nineteenth century and the cultural and historical context in which this occurred. This book will also provide insight on the reception of medieval history and medieval music in nineteenth-century Germany, and will demonstrate how medievalism and nationalism were mutually reinforcing phenomena at this time and place in history.

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To my parents

"'Genoveva', Oper von Rob. Schumann: vorleßte Scene des IV. Actes" ("'Genoveva', Opera by Rob. Schumann: penultimate Scene of Act IV") from the *Illustrirte Zeitung*, July 13, 1850, pg. 24. Reproduced with permission from the Robert-Schumann-Haus Zwickau (99.13-C2).

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Abbreviations

AMZ	Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung
AWMZ	Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung
BAMZ	Berliner Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung
DJM	Dwight's Journal of Music
NZM	Neue Zeitschrift für Musik
TMW	The Musical World
M	major
mi	minor

1 German opera, the rediscovery of the Middle Ages, and the building of a nation

Siegfried exonerates Genoveva, her life is spared, and the couple is reunited. The bishop blesses the happy pair, and the elated throng is overcome with joy as they sing a robust four-fold declamation of "Heil!" ("hail!") in a sunny E major. The curtain falls, and all may now leave the theater filled with a glorious image of a nation's past, along with an optimistic vision for that nation's future. Such may have been the intention, at least, for Robert Schumann's only opera *Genoveva* of 1850, set in Germany's fabled medieval past. Medievalism, or the reception or interpretation of the Middle Ages, was a prominent aesthetic for German opera composers in the first half of the nineteenth century.[1] Just a cursory look at the works of early nineteenth-century German opera composers shows that almost all of them wrote at least one opera with a medieval setting, if not more (see Appendix: Medievalist German Opera Table). Fascination with medieval times was a ubiquitous artistic feature in the European-wide Romantic era, and in Germany specifically, it served a critical role in shaping the desire for a unified national and cultural identity. But despite the significance of medievalism for German opera composers, relatively little attention has been paid to how different composers treated this unifying subject matter. This work seeks to provide such a study by investigating the interplay of Romantic fantasy, historicism, and nationalism as it is musically expressed in six German operas that will form the heart of this investigation: Carl Maria von Weber's *Euryanthe* (1823), Franz Schubert's *Fierrabras* (1823), Heinrich Marschner's *Der Templer und die Jüdin* (1829), Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850), and Robert Schumann's *Genoveva* (1850).[2]

Interest in the Middle Ages and in medieval lore has been a common theme throughout the post-medieval history of Western Europe. In Germany during the "pre-unification era" of 1800 to 1870, the allure of a shared medieval past carried strong political implications. Following the devastation of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), a prevailing sense of economic and cultural inferiority to France throughout much of the eighteenth century, the Napoleonic wars (1803–1815), and with the onslaught of industrialization and a population boom from 1815 to 1848 that left many with inhumane

working and living conditions, Germans in the first half of the nineteenth century desired to build their own sense of strength and unity as a people. In this period, however, Germany was not a single, unified cultural entity, but rather comprised an assortment of different states and principalities with their own unique cultures and dialects. As the Parisian Madame de Staël stated in 1810: "The Germans are Saxons, Prussians, Bavarians, Austrians; but the German character, on which the strength of them all must be based, is as fragmented as the land itself which has so many different rulers."[3] Indeed, regional interests persisted before and well after unification in 1871, causing Ernst Moritz Arndt in 1812 to advise German soldiers not to think on whether "you are called a Saxon, Bavarian, Austrian, Prussian, Pomeranian, Hessian, or Hanoverian, but remember only that you are called and you are a German and you speak in the German language."[4]

Considering such fragmentation alongside the desire for a nation, the question as to what was German was perhaps most open to debate and definition in the early to mid-nineteenth century than at any other time. The question "was ist deutsch?" was in fact a contested one, with Richard Wagner weighing in on the matter in an 1865 essay featuring that exact question as its title. Wagner looked to the nation's past to uncover the "German spirit," singling out Johann Sebastian Bach as truly emblematic of said spirit in the way he humbly toiled at his craft in relative obscurity.[5] Wagner evidently, and one would now say mistakenly, believed Bach to be the "culmination of the medieval world," and he was not alone in glancing toward an idealized medieval past as a foundation for national identity.[6] Indeed, the Germans were arguably more influenced by a growing awareness and rediscovery of the Middle Ages than any other country at that time, and their interest in medieval times formed a decisive motivational impetus to unite as a nation.[7] Regarding the special significance of medievalism for German nationalism, Francis Gentry and Ulrich Müller write,

> All European language and cultural groups sought their self-affirmation and national identity in their own past, which, for most, meant the Middle Ages. This process applies especially to the Germans, who lived without a unified national state in territorial fragmentation and political impotence and who had to procure their political utopia from the alleged glorious past of the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.'[8]

The "statehood" of the Holy Roman Empire from the medieval past had in part facilitated and enabled a growing sense of nationalism that ran parallel with the overwhelming regional patriotism that dominated throughout much of nineteenth-century Germany.[9] A sense of continuity with the past as well as a sense for a shared common history among the different German-speaking regions and cultures became an essential tool for engendering national identity and for furthering the nationalistic cause. As Gentry and Müller indicate, it was precisely because of Germany's political and

territorial divisions that the Middle Ages—with its sense of united state-hood under the Holy Roman Empire—carried such significance for the development of the modern German nation. The first seeds of nationalism began to sprout in Prussia, and the Prussian character initially dominated the nationalist movement. Nevertheless, German identity could be mined from the common language that united the many diverse territories and regions.[10]

Medievalism was one of the most prominent features of the Romantic movement in Germany, and the very term "romantisch" emerged in the eighteenth century to describe in a positive light the poetic style of medieval romances and epics. Interest in the German Middle Ages among eighteenth-century German philosophers arose in part due to feelings of cultural inferiority to France and other European nations and as a counter to regional loyalties in favor of a higher national ideal, and philosophers like Johann Gottfried Herder espoused that Germans look to their own past as a model for a future nation.[11] His collection of essays *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* of 1773, which combined some of his own writings with those of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Paolo Frisi, and Justus Möser, became an influential document for budding nationalist fervor in the early part of the nineteenth century. Herder's valorization of folk song and folk art, Goethe's praise for medieval German art and architecture, and Möser's elevation of German history and traditions triggered patriotic sentiment and fostered a greater awareness of the past as the root of national and cultural identity.[12] In his 1774 essay *Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Mankind*, Herder expounds on the glories of medieval times when he writes that

> the spirit of the age weaved and bound together the most diverse characteristics—*courage* and *monkery*, *adventure* and *gallantry*, *tyranny* and *magnanimity*—into the whole that confronts us, standing between the Romans and ourselves, like a ghost or a romantic adventure. It was once nature, once—*truth*.[13]

He later in the essay exalts the time period in nationalistic terms by praising the

> many *communities of brothers living beside one another*, all sharing the same *German descent*, *one constitutional ideal*, *one religious faith*, each *struggling with itself* and *its parts*, each *moved* and *driven* almost invisibly but very pervasively by *a holy wind*, the *Papal prestige*.[14]

Such a statement vividly portrays how the perceived ethnic, political, and religious unity of the Middle Ages ultimately served as a fitting model or influence toward a united German nation in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought and culture.

Interest in history proliferated through all levels of German society from 1800 onward in a number of different ways, as nostalgia for the past had

become commonplace throughout Western Europe following the French Revolution.[15] German historiographers in particular revered the Middle Ages as a time when German culture and institutions were able to flourish devoid of foreign interference, while scholars and common citizens alike searched through libraries and records for old tales, legends, and information on the beliefs and practices of their ancestors.[16] One of the most influential works of medieval literature at this time was the *Nibelungenlied* or "Song of the Nibelungs," a thirteenth-century Middle High German epic poem that was rediscovered in the mid-eighteenth century and that would eventually form part of the basis for Richard Wagner's operatic tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876). Interest in the epic poem grew in the early part of the nineteenth century due in part to the Romantic fascination with the Middle Ages and to growing nationalist sentiment sparked by the Napoleonic wars. Throughout the nineteenth century, the poem continued to accrue patriotic significance through a number of *Nibelungenlied*-based dramas that captured the mood and desire for German independence and national autonomy, with Friedrich Hebbel's 1861 three-part tragedy *Die Nibelungen* standing as one of the most famous of the *Nibelungenlied*-based dramas in this century. National festivals that dealt with historical subject matter emerged in the early nineteenth century as well, as interest in both a united nation and in a rediscovery of ancient ancestral roots took shape throughout German-speaking lands. Such festivals as the *Wartburgfest* of 1817—led by Protestant *Burschenschaften* (youth fraternities)—involved pilgrimages to the Wartburg Castle, famous for being the site where Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. At Wartburg, members of the *Burschenschaften* would dress in what they thought was medieval German garb, and the festival came to represent a sort of connection or union with a common German past and heritage. Other festivals involved the staging of "medieval" tournaments and grandiloquent processions for the Prussian royalty.[17]

The nineteenth century witnessed the erection of important monuments, such as the construction of Walhalla near Regensburg under Ludwig I of Bavaria (dedicated in 1842), a structure that mimics the classical ideal of ancient Greek architecture and contains, housed within it, busts and plaques of famous figures of German history. The century furthermore saw the completion of the Cologne Cathedral, which was at the time seen as a "national church" that could reconcile Catholics and Protestants.[18] Germans thought proudly of how their tribes brought down the Roman Empire, and the brave "teutonic" warrior and the "noble savage" were popular symbols in nineteenth-century culture. Such conceptions owed their roots in part to the fifteenth-century rediscovery of Publius Cornelius Tacitus's ethnographical treatise *Origin and Land of the Germans (Germania)* of 98 CE. In this treatise, Tacitus describes with great detail the customs and social mores of Germanic tribes, and he speaks favorably of those "noble" and martial people in reaction to what he saw as decadence and moral decay in Rome. Although interest in the treatise had declined somewhat by the nineteenth century, its

cultural impact was still felt.[19] Coupled with this fascination for the noble savage was a general scholarly interest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the folk, folklore, and all things ancient, childlike, and primitive on the part of writers such as Herder, Möser, and Ludwig Tieck.

In art, a group of Christian painters known as the Nazarenes developed around 1812; they championed revivals of medieval art and depicted biblical scenes in their own works as a way of highlighting the religious nature of art. The project of reviving medieval works of art was a common goal of the Nazarenes and of the Cecilians, who sought for a revival of medieval music. Gothic architecture represented a kind of religious art form that was thought to be closely tied to the history of the Germans.[20] Apart from real-life Gothic cathedrals, painters often depicted the architectural style in their own artistic portrayals of medieval times. Friedrich Schinkel, although not a member of the Nazarenes, created a number of notable paintings that portray cathedrals and other elements from German history, and his early nineteenth-century works are a strong reflection of the same brand of medievalist nationalism that would influence German opera from this era.[21] In mid-century, Alfred Rethel utilized his own studies of medieval history to create modern works of art with tremendous cultural impact in his six woodcuts of 1849, *Another Dance of Death*.

The recreation of medieval history is also observable at this time in works of literature. Historical novels around mid-century reached a wide reading audience and sparked interest in medieval times, with writer Willibald Alexis dubbed the "[Sir Walter] Scott of Prussia" for his vivid portrayals of bygone eras in his novels published between 1840 and 1854. Historical novels indeed played a significant role in spreading Romantic fascination and yearning for a seemingly simpler, idealized, mystical, and noble medieval past.[22] As Brent Peterson indicates, the novel, and the historical novel specifically, was paramount in the forging of the idea of a German nation, and the connection that people felt through a common printed language was a significant means by which people united under what Benedict Anderson has characterized as the "imagined community."[23] Then King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who began his rule in 1840 and was called the "romantic on the throne," helped to set the historicist tone for the decade with his own interest in the nation's past and in medieval monuments, and through his endorsement of the project to complete the Cologne Cathedral. The 1840s moreover witnessed an intense spurt of patriotic fervor due to the Rhine crisis of 1840 when the French threatened to make the Rhine River the natural border between Germany and France, and nationalism went hand in hand with the upsurge of interest in history at this time.[24] Regarding the nationalist spirit in this decade, Helmut Walser Smith writes,

> In the 1840s, German nationalists increasingly believed that a broad range of criteria, some cultural, others political, contributed to the making of nations. These included not only language but also customs

and folkways, laws and constitutions, religion, *shared historical memories* [emphasis my own], and, perhaps most importantly, consciousness of community.[25]

Historicist German opera, apart from the obvious significance of being in the German language, could indeed serve at that time as a visual and aural embodiment of "shared historical memories" that played a key role in national identity formation.

German opera and "medieval" music in the nineteenth century

The rise of German opera had a patchy start as various composers sought to forge a uniquely Germanic operatic repertory.[26] Prior to Richard Wagner's dominance of the operatic scene in the second half of the century, a number of composers tried their hand at creating a national operatic tradition distinct from the predominant French and Italian repertory; opera is thus a ripe field for examining the rise of German nationalism in music at this time. Due in part to their disjointed political state at the beginning of the century, however, the Germans did not have a single operatic voice that could compete with the inflow of French and Italian works, and German opera in the first half of the century represents more a series of experimental starts and stops than a unified tradition. Although the majority of pieces performed in opera houses at the time continued to be French and Italian, German dialogue operas graced the stage as well.[27] As Wagner's reputation grew he began to outdo the collective intermittent attempts by various composers at establishing a national German opera, and by the second half of the century Wagnerian opera became practically synonymous with the genre. In the first half of the century, though, a healthy competition to establish a national repertory permeated the music scene, and it is no coincidence that in seeking to establish a national repertory many composers employed medieval themes and legends for their works. Ernst Theodor Amadeus (E.T.A.) Hoffmann's opera *Undine* of 1816 is one such example, which combines a fairy tale atmosphere with medievalist imagery in a story of a mermaid who falls in love with a knight.[28]

But beyond the fantastical *romantische Zauberoper* ("Romantic magic opera") genre as embodied in Hoffmann's *Undine*, the first half of the nineteenth century—particularly starting around the early 1820s with works like Carl Maria von Weber's *Euryanthe*—witnessed a strong trend in the onstage portrayal of medieval history. Wagner, for example, appears to have been more interested in the recreation of history on stage in the first half of the century than in the second half, as evidenced by his operatic projects of this time that were set in a fixed time and place rather than in a nebulous mythical past.[29] Wagner continued to be interested in history throughout the 1840s, and it was after *Lohengrin* that his focus—with the exception of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868)—switched more to myth.[30] *Lohengrin*