

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

The establishment of the 'city of theatre'

I. THE TWO THEATRES IN THE CENTRE

The history of theatre in Vienna goes back a long way before 1776, but the date has passed into legend, celebrated in the centennial jubilees beloved of Austrian institutions. Its significance lies in two decrees that Joseph II, the reforming Emperor, issued on 23 March 1776 in an autograph instruction to the Master of the Imperial Household (*Obersthofmeister*), Johann Josef Fürst Khevenhüller-Metsch. One decree elevated one of the two court theatres to the status of a 'National Theatre'; the other, still more important, broke the monopoly hitherto enjoyed by the court theatres by establishing a new 'liberty for theatre' (*Spektakelfreiheit* or *Schauspielfreiheit*). This permitted the building of new play-houses outside the walled city centre and so paved the way for the flowering of Viennese theatre in the early nineteenth century. Both measures had their rationale in the cultural politics of the Enlightenment.

As a consequence partly of the Thirty Years War, partly of the fragmentation of the political map, the history of the stage in the German-speaking countries lagged behind that in France and England. Heinrich Laube, the most distinguished director of the Burgtheater in the second half of the nineteenth century, traced the idea of an 'educated' German theatre back to about 1730, when Gottsched's reforms enjoyed the support of Caroline Neuber's company in Leipzig.¹ But it was later still, in the 1760s and 1770s, that the first public theatres were founded in the German-speaking cities. Until then, most theatrical entertainments throughout German-speaking Europe took place either in court theatres or on the (often temporary) stages where itinerant troupes performed. The court theatres were often manned by Italian or French companies, and though the itinerant troupes performed in German, many of

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the works they acted were translated and adapted from other languages.

The theatrical life of Vienna had gone its own way since the Counter-Reformation, and in particular it had been spared the reforms that had taken place in Protestant Germany. Nevertheless, both court and popular traditions were strongly represented there. It had been one of the great European centres of court entertainments since the age of the Baroque. These had mainly been of Italian origin, with French comedy added in the eighteenth century. When Hofmannsthal has the Marschallin in the first act of *Der Rosenkavalier* receive an Italian tenor at her *levée*, that is an authentic reflection of the cultural and especially operatic flavour of mid-eighteenth-century taste.

The most famous of all the productions for festive occasions at court was Cesti's *Il pomo d'oro* (1668), one of the most lavish examples of Baroque opera in Europe, which was organized as part of the festivities celebrating the marriage in 1666 of Leopold I to Margarita Teresia, the younger daughter of Philip IV of Spain. The elaborate décor was by Lodovico Ottavio Burnacini, the libretto by Francesco Sbarra. The subject, the mythological Judgement of Paris, was tailored to the occasion: the Prologue ended with a celebration of Leopold as a victorious warrior, with the stage surmounted by La Gloria Austriaca borne by Pegasus; the conclusion of the opera twisted the traditional story to allow Jupiter to bestow the prize on the new Empress.² What ceremonial allegories of this kind lacked was comedy. In general, however, comic interludes were an integral part of operatic entertainment at court, and survived until about 1720. They centred on vulgar comic servants who bore Italian names but were descended from the comic figures of the German stage (the drama of the so-called *Englische Komödianten* of the seventeenth century) rather than from the *commedia dell'arte*. As late as 1792 Christian Gottlob Klemm, a playwright in Vienna, would stress how much of an advantage it was for the Viennese theatre that its comic figures were variants of an indigenous type belonging to the German-language theatre and not imported from Italian or French tradition.³

The production of *Il pomo d'oro* took place in a wooden opera house which Leopold I had had specially built by Burnacini on the Cortina, south-east of the Schweizerhof tract of the imperial palace (*Hofburg*), adjoining where the Josefsplatz now is. Half a century later

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The establishment of the 'city of theatre'*

3

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu reported another operatic production in the Baroque tradition. The work was Johann Joseph Fux's *Angela Vincitrice di Alcina*, which she attended in 1716 in the gardens of the Favorita, the summer palace of Emperor Karl VI (on the site of what is now the Theresianum, in the fourth district of the city). The décor was by the celebrated Italian stage-designer Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena, and the report Lady Mary gave in one of her letters to Pope stresses the expensiveness and ingenuity of the scenic effects and the opulence of the costumes:

Nothing of that kind ever was more magnificent; and I can easily believe what I am told, that the decorations and habits cost the emperor thirty thousand pounds sterling. The stage was built over a very large canal, and, at the beginning of the second act, divided into two parts, discovering the water, on which there immediately came, from different parts, two fleets of little gilded vessels, that gave the representation of a naval fight. It is not easy to imagine the beauty of this scene, which I took particular notice of. But all the rest were perfectly fine in their kind. The story of the opera is the Enchantments of Alcina, which gives opportunity for a great variety of machines, and changes of the scene, which are performed with a surprising swiftness. The theatre is so large, that it is hard to carry the eye to the end of it; and the habits in the utmost magnificence, to the number of one hundred and eight. No house could hold such large decorations . . .⁴

The love of festivity on special occasions would never die in Vienna. Even in the commercial theatres of the early nineteenth century, which catered for a much humbler public, the enterprising director of the Theater an der Wien, Karl Carl, mounted a gala evening in March 1832 to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Emperor's accession, and followed it up the following year with a 'carnival' evening, for which the theatre was specially decorated and brilliantly illuminated with Argand lamps (the paraffin lamps that were the normal form of theatre lighting until they were gradually superseded by gaslight in the mid nineteenth century).

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu also visited a performance by the distant antecedents of Carl's company, the troupe led by Joseph Anton Stranitzky. This company had begun as one of many bands of strolling players which had visited Vienna regularly from the mid seventeenth century onwards. They enjoyed the facility of a permanent theatre, probably from the end of 1710. This was the Theater nächst dem Kärntnertor (Kärntnertortheater for short), which had been built by the city of Vienna close by the city wall and had

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)

opened on 30 November 1709, originally occupied by Italian players. Stranitzky's company performed blood-and-thunder dramas interspersed with short songs and interludes of broad comedy. These *Haupt- und Staatsaktionen* followed what by international standards was a primitive formula, and the scripts left room for comic extemporization. From those that survive (probably about a quarter of Stranitzky's repertoire) we know that the subjects included popular German material (e.g. a play on the damnation of Faust) but that most were derived from Italian opera. Stranitzky simplified the libretto texts and reduced the arias, though music, including ballet, remained an important element; indeed the 'good music' of his troupe was one of the factors advanced in 1709 by the Lower Austrian government in favour of according him the lease of the theatre.⁵

The principal appeal of his company to the Viennese public, however, lay in its comedy, which centred on the traditional German comic figure Hanswurst, played by Stranitzky himself in a stage version of a Salzburg peasant costume. The play that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu visited in 1716 was *Amphitruo*, which 'began', so she told Pope, 'with Jupiter's falling in love out of a peep-hole in the clouds, and ended with the birth of Hercules' but turned on the comic use made of Jupiter's metamorphosis. Her letter protests her shock at the vulgarity of the production ('I could not easily pardon the liberty the poet has taken of larding his play not only with indecent expressions, but such gross words as I don't think our mob would suffer from a mountebank'); but in view of the language barrier this may be taken with a pinch of salt. What her letter does not leave any doubt about is the entertainment value of the performance:

They have but one playhouse, where I had the curiosity to go to a German comedy, and was very glad it happened to be the story of Amphitruon, that subject having been already handled by a Latin, French, and English poet, I was curious to see what an Austrian author would make of it . . . The way is, to take a box, which holds four, for yourself and company. The fixed price is a gold ducat. I thought the house very low and dark; but I confess, the comedy admirably recompensed that defect. I never laughed so much in my life.⁶

After Stranitzky's death in 1726 leadership of the company passed to Gottfried Prehauser, who also acted the Hanswurst role; later a rivalry developed between Prehauser and Joseph Felix von Kurz,

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The establishment of the 'city of theatre'*

5

who played another servant figure, Bernardon, in burlesque musical plays combining comedy with pantomime effects using allegorical figures, an inheritance from Baroque theatre tradition. For at least one of the thirteen Bernardon plays that have survived, *Der neue Krumme Teufel*,⁷ it is known that the music was composed by Haydn. Another play, *Bernardon der dreißigjährige ABC-Schütz* (the text of which is lost), is an example of how such material lived on in the dialect theatre: adapted by later playwrights, first Karl Friedrich Hensler and then Friedrich Hopp, for a different comic figure, under the title *Thaddädl der dreißigjährige ABC-Schütz*, it was still playing in the Theater in der Leopoldstadt, with Nestroy in the main role, in the 1840s. Another work, the parody *Bernardon die Getreue Prinzessin Pumphia*, published with a preface stressing its theatrical character and praising the skill of Prehauser's company (see document 1, p. 246), is an important forerunner of the tradition of parody in the nineteenth-century commercial theatres.

For whereas in Germany Harlequin as the representative of extemporized comedy was ceremonially 'banished' from the stage in 1737, in Vienna extemporization survived in the Kärntnertortheater until the 1770s, and far from dying out, the popular comedy associated with Hanswurst was able to move its base after 1776 to the new theatres built in the districts outside the walls. This whole tradition of vernacular entertainment was to become the most distinctive element of the theatrical culture of Vienna. The Kärntnertortheater was indeed long known as the 'German theatre' ('deutsches Theater'), by contrast with the court theatre attached to the imperial palace (Hofburgtheater), where in the mid eighteenth century the programme consisted of Italian opera and French drama.

This theatre is generally referred to for short as the Burgtheater, and that is the term I shall use. Its function as a court theatre was to provide entertainment for what, by contrast with the states in Protestant Germany, was a multinational court; hence the long-established dominance of Italian opera in the repertory. There had been a succession of theatres in the complex of the imperial palace since the mid seventeenth century. After one new theatre had burnt down in 1699 – the first of many fires that would feature significantly in the history of Viennese theatre – Emperor Joseph I had a big court theatre rapidly built by Francesco Galli-Bibiena, with two halls (one for operatic festivities, the other for Italian players and

Cambridge University Press

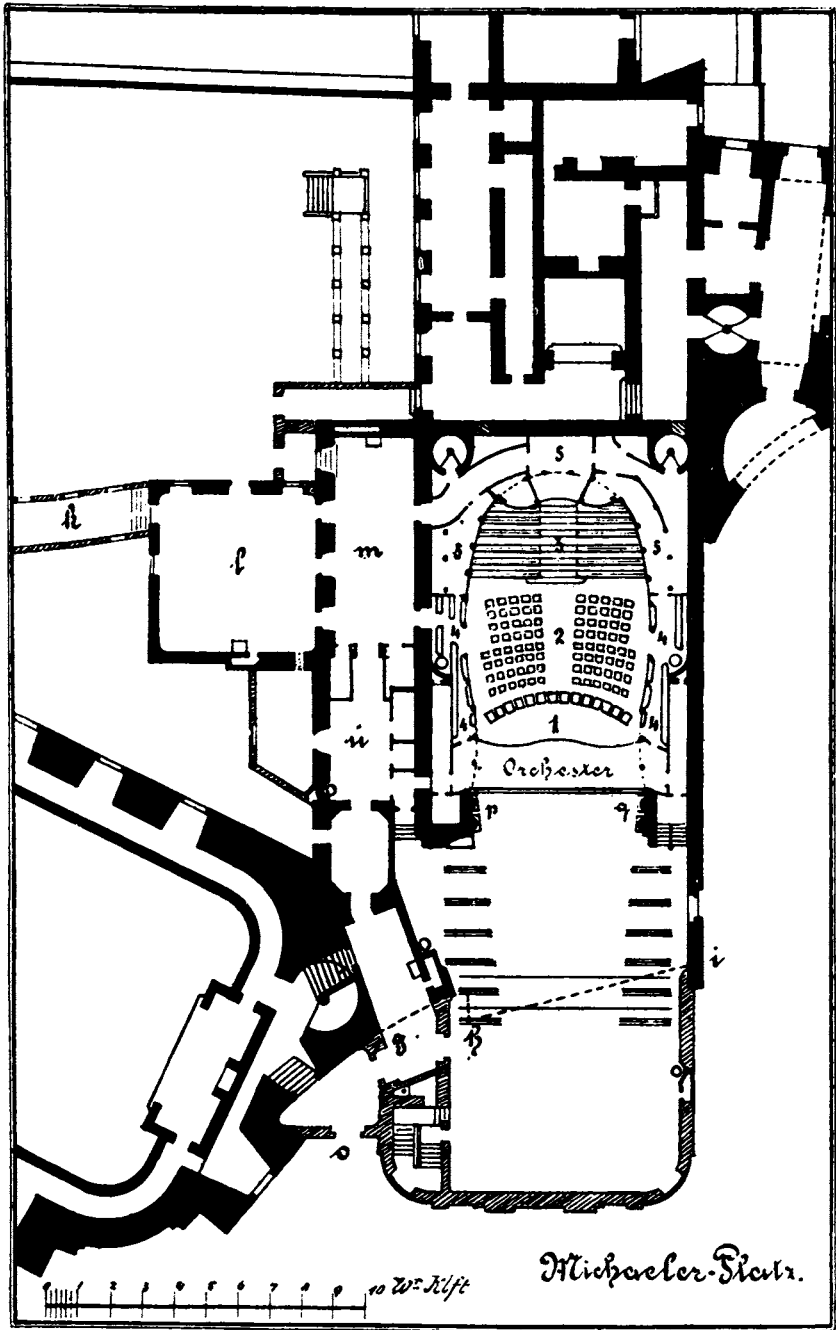
0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Singspiele); this lasted till the 1740s, when the halls were turned into ballrooms. (Opened in 1748, these *Redoutensäle* survived until November 1992, when they too burned down.) In the meantime, Maria Theresia had granted Joseph Carl Selliers, one of the directors of the Kärntnertortheater, permission to build, at his own cost, a theatre in an indoor tennis-court (*Ballhaus*) attached to the palace. In March 1741 Selliers was given a contract to perform Italian operas in both theatres, with the Burgtheater earmarked for a double existence as opera-house and playhouse (*Opern- und Comoedienhaus*). The new *Comoedienhaus* *nechst der Königlichen Burg* opened in 1742, but it posed financial problems for successive licensees. In 1759 Maria Theresia sanctioned the opening of a casino in a new building alongside the auditorium: this made a regular profit, and it may be that the nobility were deflected from the theatre by gambling. (The same year the seating for the 'common people' in the pit was enlarged.) The theatre was reconstructed and extended several times, notably in 1748, in 1759-60 (when it was given a new façade on the Michaelerplatz and the stage area was substantially enlarged), in 1779, and again in 1794. The reconstructions in 1759 and 1779 established what would roughly remain the (rather barn-like) shape of the theatre until 1888. The original adaptation of the indoor tennis-court produced a narrow and high theatre (it was about 25.5 metres long, 10.4 metres wide, and 13 metres high); by 1748 the length was increased to 38 metres (the auditorium alone had a length of over 22 metres), the width to 15.2 metres. It protruded on to the Michaelerplatz at the stage end (see plate 1). Estimates of the capacity vary: there were boxes for members of the court and for their attendants; there were benches in the stalls and in the uppermost gallery (known in Vienna at this time, as in Paris, as 'paradise', a close equivalent to the English 'gods'); and there was also standing room. The most careful calculation based on the data for 1774 is that the auditorium may have held about 1350, with about 130 of the seats, according to the previous season's figures, committed to complimentary tickets.⁸ The theatre was by no means always full: indeed, it has been calculated that in the mid 1770s, before Joseph II's reforms, the average audience was only about a fifth of the total capacity.⁹ There were seasonal variations; in 1768 Joseph von Sonnenfels recorded that spring and summer were less favourable times for the theatre than autumn and winter, and that in winter the best period was Fasching (the weeks of carnival preceding Lent).¹⁰ Seasonal



1 Ground plan of the old Burgtheater, drawn by Franz Segenschmid.

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)

discrepancies of that kind were not peculiar to the eighteenth-century Burgtheater: in 1823, for example, the director of the court theatres, Count Dietrichstein, pointed them out to the then Emperor, and takings in the Wiener Stadttheater in 1878 show a similar pattern, with the figures for May, June, and September (the theatre was closed in July and August) less than half of those for the other months.¹¹ The problem may, however, have been particularly intractable in the Burgtheater because the atmosphere tended to be stuffy, so that the audience in the upper galleries were glad when the annual six-week break was moved from Lent to summer in 1786. Nevertheless the narrowness of the theatre produced a distinctive atmosphere, facilitating a sense of close contact between the stage and audience which would eventually underlie the characteristic style the company developed in the nineteenth century.

2. ENLIGHTENMENT REFORM

The battle over extemporization, sparked off at least as much by the popularity of Bernardon as by Prehauser's Hanswurst but nevertheless generally called the *Hanswurststreit*, was fought out in Vienna in the period 1748–70. The move to suppress extemporized comedy in favour of controlled performance of written comedy was part of the same process of enlightened despotism that also saw the introduction in 1751 of a centralized system of censorship for printed books. At the same time, the *Hanswurststreit* was both a sign of growing interest in the theatre and a stimulus for progress. With the exception of the work of one gifted playwright, Philipp Hafner, the popular drama of the dialect stage was still crude in mid-century, and this underlined the need for reform in the spirit of the Enlightenment. Hafner was not a supporter of extemporization, the unpredictability and potential vacuity of which he satirized in a parody of a scenario,¹² but he was very much a theatrical dramatist, opposed to the tyranny of literary theorists. He died after only two years' writing for the stage, and his total output was only eight plays, but in adaptations by Joachim Perinet some of them continued to be performed until the mid nineteenth century. In works like the satirical *Die bürgerliche Dame*, about a bourgeois woman who gives herself aristocratic airs, the lighter *Etwas zum Lachen im Fasching*, centring on a loose-living philanderer (both of which contain roles for Hanswurst), and the parody *Evakathel und Schnudi*, a burlesque of

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The establishment of the 'city of theatre'*

9

bombastic tragedy, Hafner anticipated important strands in the later development of Viennese popular drama, though his achievement as one of its founding fathers was recognized only when Grillparzer's uncle, Joseph Sonnleithner, published an edition of his works in 1812.

The reformers were led by the influential Joseph von Sonnenfels, who was appointed the first professor of cameralistics in the University of Vienna in 1763 and also engaged actively in journalistic debate from the mid-1760s. It was his *Briefe über die wienerische Schaubühne* (1768) that brought the controversy to a head. Sonnenfels's instincts were inevitably moulded by French models, but his aim, in keeping with parallel developments in Germany, was to establish in Vienna a legitimate German-language drama, cleansed of vulgarities (at the end of the *Briefe über die wienerische Schaubühne* he makes clear that he saw the death of Prehauser as presenting a particularly favourable opportunity for reform),¹³ and without the artificialities of the foreign plays associated with the court theatre.

In 1761, in the middle of the dispute, the Kärntnertortheater was destroyed by fire, and as a consequence the German actors were temporarily housed in the Burgtheater. This makeshift arrangement opened up the possibility of consolidating the two theatres, and the site of the Kärntnertortheater was bought from the city. In the event Maria Theresia had the theatre rebuilt by Nikolaus Pacassi as an opera house and reopened in July 1763, in a form nearly identical to that of the previous building, with seats on five floors; but from this point on, both theatres, though often leased to private directors, were court property, subject to strict supervision in keeping with the aesthetics and the pedagogic idealism of the reformers. No longer was the theatre perceived as serving the glory of the ruler and the amusement of the populace; rather its function was specifically that of enlightenment. The intention to educate and improve necessitated strict control of the repertoire, so that, as Sonnenfels put it in his *Grundsätze der Polizey, Handlung und Finanzwissenschaft* (1765–7), plays might become a 'school of manners, courtesy, and language' ('eine Schule der Sitten, der Höflichkeit und Sprache').¹⁴

For the same pedagogic reason censorship was extended in 1770 to the theatre and extemporization banned. Joseph II's definition of the function of the censor was based on a memorandum written by Sonnenfels, who was himself briefly appointed censor in 1770. The responsibility of the censor was to exclude from the stage everything 'that offends in the slightest against religion, the state, or good

Cambridge University Press

0521022576 - Theatre in Vienna: A Critical History, 1776-1995

W. E. Yates

Excerpt

[More information](#)

manners, all obvious nonsense and coarseness, that is, everything unworthy of a capital city and the seat of a court'.¹⁵ The principle that censorship was essentially intended to make the theatre conform to Enlightenment values in respect both of moral standards and of aesthetics was most fully set out in a long memorandum written in 1795 by Franz Karl Hägelin, who worked as a censor from October 1770 (when he succeeded Sonnenfels) to December 1804. The memorandum was drawn up for the guidance of censors in Hungary, and defined the theatre as being intended to function as 'a school of manners and taste'.¹⁶ The story of how censorship, intended as an instrument of Enlightenment principles, became a political device used to suppress Enlightenment ideas, will be pursued in Chapter 2.

Another measure for which Sonnenfels argued in his *Briefe über die wienerische Schaubühne* was the establishment of a 'national theatre' (*Nationalschaubühne*). The immediate model was the Hamburg theatre, founded in 1767; it was from Hamburg that Friedrich Ludwig Schröder came to the Burgtheater in 1781, bringing with him his interest in Shakespeare adaptations. But the idea was generally in the air; a 'national theatre' was also opened in Mannheim in 1779. These theatres were conceived as being financed out of state or court funds, even if that was not always maintained, and were under state or court authority. In Mannheim, where the repertory centred on sentimental plays by Iffland and Kotzebue, and Iffland was also the principal actor till 1796 (when he went to Berlin to manage the 'National Theatre' there), what can be seen is in fact the beginnings of middle-class commercial theatre in Germany. The ultimate exemplar of the true 'national theatre' idea was in fact the Comédie-Française in Paris, which had been established as long ago as 1680, and which would remain the yardstick of achievement even for Laube in the mid nineteenth century.¹⁷

The idea took hold in the 1770s for three main reasons. First, the development of an educated bourgeoisie had produced a need for permanent theatres in the big towns, which could appeal to the whole community (unlike court theatres which supported foreign companies) while also offering fare superior to the crude entertainment of the touring companies. Secondly, the perceived need was for non-commercial (that is, subsidized) theatres, in keeping with the Enlightenment aim of cultural education. And thirdly, this cultural intention had a political subtext, in the spirit of cultural nationalism, namely, the improvement of the German *Kulturation* by the promo-