Conflicting agendas at the Könige Nationaltheater?
Johann Friedrich Reichardt's Die Geisterinsel on the Huldigungstag for Friedrich Wilhelm III

Abstract:

With the founding of the Könige Nationaltheater in 1786, Friedrich Wilhelm II added an additional facet to his court's public image. Although an institution in close connection with the court, it was also a venue where the bourgeoisie was gaining political and societal confidence, and a place where an idea of a more diversified community was expressed. Clearly, the king and the people did not necessarily share a common agenda. For instance, nationalistic views of equality ought to have been one matter of conflict. This paper looks at a specific case in order to highlight this conflicting situation. On 6 July 1798, the Huldigungstag for the new king Friedrich Wilhelm III, Reichardt's Die Geisterinsel was premiered at the Könige Nationaltheater. Often described as an innocent kind of crowd-pleasing Zauberflöte-imitation, this Singspiel can also be read as an audacious recommendation for the new king how to be a righteous regent. An oddly bold way to pledge allegiance it seems.

Following his accession to the throne in 1786, Friedrich Wilhelm II sought to distance himself from his predecessor and uncle, Friedrich II. One way to accomplish this was with the founding of the Könige Nationaltheater, built on the Doebbelin theatre company. With its foundation the new king gave his court's public image an alternative addition. As has been emphasized in the past decades this new national theatre must be regarded as an institution in close connection to the court. The widespread interest in late eighteenth century German lands to establish national theatres used to be interpreted as a movement in opposition to the absolutist court culture, however that was clearly not the situation, particularly not in Berlin. On the contrary, here the king's influence on the theatre's activities was considerable. For instance, musicians of the court orchestra occasionally took part in performances at the national theatre as when court Kapellmeister Johann Friedrich Reichardt premiered his setting of Goethe's Claudine von Villa Bella there for the birthday celebrations of the crown prince in August 1789. As the king had answered Reichardt's request to use the court orchestra at this occasion: "Es versteht sich ein mahl für alle das auf meinem Theater mein Orchester spiele".


However, as it directed its activities at a broader public the national theatre was at the same time also a venue where the bourgeoisie was gaining political and societal confidence, and a place where an idea of a more diversified community was expressed. Clearly, the king and the people did not necessarily share a common agenda, although they might have shared some ideas and conceptions of the nation, possibly also the kind of ideas and conceptions Friedrich Wilhelm II was seeking to disseminate through his engagement with the national theatre. In the following I will show that the situation was considerably more complex than one would assume at first glance. For one thing, there were clear aesthetic differences between the court opera and the Königliche Nationaltheater that affected the meaning and political implications of their respective performances.

It should perhaps not surprise that, as a court institution, the national theatre was sometimes used for royal representational functions, such as the birthday celebrations just mentioned. However, the conflicting aspects of this institution made even these occasions more complex affairs than was expected, or probably even intended. To shed light on this I will look particularly on one such occasion: the premiere of Reichardt's Singspiel Die Geisterinsel on 6th of July 1798, the Huldigungstag, that is the official celebration of allegiance, for the new king Friedrich Wilhelm III; a premiere that took place at the Königliche Nationaltheater.

I will begin here with a short description of this Singspiel. After that I will turn to the traditional court opera performances of the eighteenth century in order to discern their function and meaning. I will then return to Reichardt's Geisterinsel and its performance at the Königliche Nationaltheater, and study that in light of the characteristics of traditional court opera. I will conclude with the suggestion that Die Geisterinsel, particularly in performance at the Königliche Nationaltheater, was conveying an emerging nationalistic worldview promoting a society of equality, hence a somewhat bold program for a Huldigungstag.

Die Geisterinsel was, arguably, Reichardt's most successful opera. In Berlin it saw two revivals, and, all in all, 55 performances until 1825. The libretto was written by Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter, and was an adaptation of Shakespeare's The Tempest. Apart from by Reichardt, it was set also by Friedrich Fleischmann in 1796, Rudolf Zumsteeg in 1798 and Friedrich Wilhelm Haack in 1799. And actually, Gotter's libretto was not the only Tempest-adaptation at the time, a further indication of the play's popularity.

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4 Der Sturm: libretto by Johann Samuel Patzke, set by Johann Heinrich Rolle, performed in Berlin in 1782; Der Sturm, oder Die bezauberte Insel: libretto by Johann Wilhelm Döring, set by Peter or Heinrich Ritter, performed in Aurich, Emden and Altona in 1799; Die Geisterinsel: libretto by Johann Daniel Hensel, 1799. See Bauman: North German Opera
The action of *Die Geisterinsel* takes place between one morning and the next, on an island inhabited by benevolent spirits, and just like Shakespeare, Gotter lets us learn the prehistory in the course of the day. In Gotter's libretto, the island was originally protected by the good spirit Maja, but she was eventually trapped and tormented by the evil witch Sycorax who took control of the island together with her son Caliban. With the arrival of the magician Prospero, exiled prince of Milan, and his daughter Miranda, the forces changed. Prospero fought Sycorax, won, and exiled her for exactly ten years. He set Maja free and they all lived happily together until Maja passed away some years ago. Prospero also took care of Caliban, teaching him to speak and making him his servant. So far Gotter stays rather close to Shakespeare's original, but now he adds a little twist to make the action more enthralling: when the ten years have passed Sycorax will come back, and a spell has been cast on Prospero forcing him to sleep through the night of her return. Hence all is set for disaster: Sycorax will kill Prospero in his sleep; Caliban will be the new ruler of the island and take Miranda as his bride. Enter the good spirit Ariel who, conjuring a shipwreck, manages to get some new people on the island: some comic characters that side with Caliban, and the prince of Naples who falls in love with Miranda. Unfortunately, the odds still look pretty grim when night falls. Fortunately, though, Maja arises from her grave just in time to stop Sycorax. Then when the morning comes Caliban attacks; but in vain, and Prospero forces him to jump into the sea. At this moment another ship comes to the island with the message that the tyrant of Milan has been overthrown, and the Milanese would like to welcome Prospero back home. Then follows a finale, extolling the love for one's fatherland, and after that Prospero breaks his magical staff, bids farewell to all the good spirits of the island, and the whole party leaves for Milan.

An exciting drama filled with magic and suspense, and with a magnanimous and victorious prince in the lead role, why would this not be a perfect celebratory performance for the new king? Why would this opera performance differ from a traditional representative performance at the *Königliche Hofoper*? In order to figure that out we have to understand what a performance at the *Königliche Hofoper* meant.

The *Königliche Hofoper* was exclusively a representational institution that staged representational performances. And on the *Königliche Hofoper* stage there was nothing performed but Italian opera seria. As Reinhard Strohm has described, it was the general purpose of opera seria under enlightened absolutism to communicate the standard virtues of the ruler. In a typical plot the leading character suffers a conflict of interests, often between personal desires and the call of duty. The conflict is then resolved through the leading character's self-conquest and acceptance of his fate.\(^{5}\)

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From a larger perspective the leading character is representing the ruler. Hence the *opera seria* offers a moral lesson to the rulers in the audience. At the same time, it is reinforcing, and glorifying, the ruler’s position in society. When the leading character overcomes his conflict of interests and accepts his fate, he shows that he is not just anybody, but someone with the inherent qualities necessary to rule. And, by association, these qualities are inherent also in the ruler in the audience.

Representation lies at the heart of *opera seria*. As the leading character is representing the ruler in the audience, the opera on the whole is representing absolutist rule. As expressed by Martha Feldman: “[…] *opera seria* invariably reproduced, as narrative and social/symbolic practice, the prevailing social structure, broadly supporting the absolutist trope of sovereignty […].” By representing, and reproducing the absolutist social structure, *opera seria* was also reinforcing it. “Seria in its classic form asserts a social order that exists naturally, inevitably, and endlessly. An opera seria, as it progresses, merely turns the pages of eternal time, its outcome preordained and its messages and denouements hardly susceptible to validation through inspections by earthly mortals. Seria’s characters therefore need not be situated in real histories of family, place, or time. They are abstract actors of a transcendental truth, divine messengers of absolutist metaphysics.”

Besides its centrality for the plot of *opera seria*, representation was at the heart also of the neoclassical acting style of the eighteenth century. The neoclassical actors did not seek to portray the feelings and attitudes of his or her character; instead they were using representative gestures to express emotions and emphasis. As described by Michael J. Sosulski: “This style of acting was truly representational, rather than essential; there was nothing realistic about it. Everything that took place on stage was designed to indicate, rather than be, a further reality. ‘Natural’ speech and gesture upon the stage would have been considered base and vulgar, given the premium placed on stylized grace and beauty.”

Neoclassical theatre was not about creating the illusion of another reality, but a representation of one; and at the same time a representation of the present absolutist reality. Hence there was a gulf between actors and audience, a gulf neoclassical theatre had no interest to bridge. In the words of Sosulski: “In an aesthetic environment like the German theater at mid-century, the chance of a spectator identifying with a dramatic character was slim. The separation between the audience and the characters portrayed on stage was as

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6 Feldman: *Opera and Sovereignty* (wie Anm. 5), 6.
considerable as the artifice of the actor was intricate.” In opera seria there was no desire to emotionally include the audience in the plot; they were just observing spectators.

If the plots of opera seria were representing an absolutist metaphysics, asserting “[…] a social order that exists naturally, inevitably, and endlessly […]” as Feldman argues, the same was true also of the institution of the court opera in toto. This was particularly true in Berlin where the opera house was used solely for the purpose of court and state representation. It was open only during carnival and at other ceremonial occasions, enforcing the Prussian court and state. The seating arrangement in the opera was determined by, and demonstrated, the hierarchy of the Prussian state with most of the seats reserved for the court, the nobility, the military and the administration. The few remaining seats were available for any Berlin citizen requesting a ticket. Admission to the opera was free.

As if to emphasize its courtly representative function the Berlin opera house was less constructed for viewing the stage than for viewing the audience, with the partitions between the boxes pointing towards the centre of the hall rather than at the stage. Together with the stalls being horizontal this meant that for most of the audience the view of the stage was not particularly good. (Even though this inconvenient layout had been criticized by Berlin Ratsherr Peter Heinrich Millenet in 1776, it was not altered when the opera house was rebuilt and renovated in the 1780s). Presenting a good view of the stage for its audience was clearly not the most important function of the opera house. More essential was its representative function, displaying the Prussian court and state. Which might have been the reason why the building’s humble interior design did not quite match the perfection of its outside, as described by Millenet.

With this understanding in mind we can turn to the performance of Die Geisterinsel. Would not that be functioning in the same way? Isn't Prospero just as good a royal representative?

What becomes evident when comparing the performances of Italian opera seria at the Königliche Hofoper

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9 Sosulski: Theater and Nation (wie Anm. 8), 122–123.
10 Feldman: Magic Mirrors and the Seria Stage (wie Anm. 7), 458.
12 Henzel: Die italienische Hofoper in Berlin (wie Anm. 11), 33–34.
with performances of German Singspiel at the Königliche Nationaltheater is that there was considerably more differentiating them than just language. As Jörg Krämer has pointed out, one crucial difference was the audience. In Berlin "[...] different audiences mingled at the German musical theater: nobles, commoners in courtly service and parts of the urban bourgeoisie, while the Italian opera continued to serve a more closed, primarily courtly audience."¹⁵ This more diverse audience, compared to the court opera, led to a different impact on society. In Krämer's words: "[...] from the 1770s the German musical theater constitutes the broadest, most mass affecting forum, in which a new understanding of subjectivity is constituted and discussed."¹⁶

Another significant difference between the court opera and the national theatre concerned the acting. On the stages of the national theatres in the German lands a change in acting style took place. Instead of the neoclassical acting's focus on representation it centred on identification. As described by Sosulski: "This conception of acting encouraged the actor to identify with his character's plight and emotions, and in so doing make the character become 'real.' In contrast to neoclassical acting, which created characters in spectators’ minds rather than on stage and merely represented their emotions with symbolic gestures, acting based upon identification conjured up the character itself before the spectators’ own eyes. Emotions were not represented, but genuinely felt by the actor, which resulted in the apparent disappearance of the character's mediated quality and a bridging of the conceptual distance between the spectator and the actor that had long typified the formal theatrical experience."¹⁷

Unlike the court opera, the national theatre sought to create a sense of communality between the actors and the audience. The action on stage was meant to be relevant for the audience on a subjective level, not as representation. To further distinguish the national theatre from the court opera the connection between actors and audience was established through mutual emotions, rather than reason.¹⁸

This altered relationship between actors and audience is actually noticeable also in the building of the

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¹⁶ "[...] das deutsche Musiktheater bildet ab den 1770er Jahren das breiteste, massenwirksamste Forum, auf dem ein neues Verständnis von Subjektivität sich konstituiert und diskutiert wird."; Krämer: Deutschsprachiges Musiktheater (wie Anm. 15), 7. My translation.

¹⁷ Sosulski: Theater and Nation (wie Anm. 8), 124.

¹⁸ This change in audience attitude from rational observation to emotional identification was mirrored by a transformation in listening as described in James H. Johnson: Listening in Paris: A Cultural History, Berkeley 1995.
Königliche Nationaltheater, the Französische Comödienhaus. Here the three balconies were supported by consoles instead of pillars, and the partitions dividing the two lower balconies into boxes only reached breast height. This meant that a good view of the stage was offered everywhere. The connection between audience and stage was clearly a priority in the national theatre.

Actually, turning to the plot of Die Geisterinsel, this sense of communality is expressed also here as we can now hear in the already mentioned finale:

*PROSPERO
Allmächtig ist die Liebe
Zu dir, o Vaterland!

Am Ziel der Lebensreise,
Erwacht sie noch im Greise,
Und leitet, trotz den Jahren,
Durch Muhen und Gefahren,

Ihn sanft am Gängelband.

CHOR
Allmächtig ist die Liebe
Zu dir, o Vaterland!

FERNANDO UND MIRANDA

Mit dir lacht Wonn' und Seegen
Mir überall entgegen.

Wo du bist, will ich bleiben;
Dir folg' ich ohne Sträuben
Bis an der Erde Rand.

Ach! stärker ist die Liebe,
Als jedes andre Band.

FABIO

Und schwärmten hier, wie Bienen,
Brunetten und Blondinen,
Hohn sprach ich ihren Netzen

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19 Built in 1774 for Friedrich II's French theatre, it seized being used as a theatre four years later. It became the permanent scene of the German national theatre in 1786.

20 Millenet: Kritische Anmerkungen (wie Anm. 13), 33–34.
This finale might not appear as such a radical change from anything expressed in traditional opera seria, but it actually is. Prospero might be a duke, at first glance exalted above his subjects, like so many opera seria protagonists. However, he is at the same time a prince that overtly speaks of his love for his fatherland. The crucial difference though is that when he does this in the finale, he is not alone. He is joined in this feeling by everyone on stage. In his love for his fatherland he is part of a community, and everyone in this community shares this love, regardless of whether they are a duke like Prospero, a prince like Fernando, a chef like Oronzio or sailors like the choir.

It is also telling that the reason Prospero was overthrown in the first place was because he left the government to his brother and instead spent his time with the liberal arts, growing a stranger to the state. In other words, he left the community and put himself outside of the nation. This is something he has come to realize over the years on the island, and when the sailors come for him in the end he is ready to be part of

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the community again and join in the mutual love for their fatherland. So, in contrast to a traditional opera seria, here we have an all-including community on stage for the community of the audience to identify with.

As already mentioned, the diversity of the audience was characteristic for the national theatre. This class inclusive composition of the audience meant that a different conception of society was possible here, and was also expressed on stage. As Krämer points out: “Thus, the German Singspiel [...] produces a specific aspect of mediation: discursively it brings socially differentiated parts of society together. The sentimental discourse propagates a universal aspiration, which is realized in social practice as a process of assimilation of the middle courtly and upper bourgeoisie layers.”

The all-including national community expressed on stage is experienced also in the diverse audience and it is also offering a new model of society, one founded in a common national identity and expressed in common emotions, as opposed to the older class society which was founded on the ultimate different statuses of all subjects. In Krämer’s words: "In this demarcation towards the older understanding of absolutist rule, the perspectives of an urban bourgeois sentimentality and the self-image of small and medium-sized residences coincides. It is confronted with the new image of a 'warm' emotional community of a ‘father of the people' and his subjects, constructed on the model of the family and legitimized as a ‘natural' and universally declared anthropology.”

This is precisely the kind of emotional community expressed in Die Geisterinsel, with Prospero as a national father figure rather than an absolutist ruler. Hence, this was also the message the performance sought to convey to the new king. It could be seen as the people suggesting to Friedrich Wilhelm III, on his Huldigungstag, what kind of king they wished him to be.

The ambition of the Singspiel to be inclusive of its audience is noticeable also when regarding the editions Reichardt published of Die Geisterinsel. A complete edition appeared in December 1799, although only in a clavier transcription and not in an orchestral score. This edition had been preceded already in 1798, at the
time of the première, by a song collection containing seven songs from the opera with clavier accompaniment "am Clavier leicht und befriedigend genossen werden können" as Reichardt states in the preface.\textsuperscript{24} Here he also promised a later edition of dance melodies from the opera intended for "gesellschaftlichen Tänzen" although this was never realized.

This can be compared to Reichardt's edition of his most successful opera seria \textit{Brenno} that appeared in 1804, 15 years after its premier in 1789. This edition contains a complete orchestral score and was intended for future operatic and concert performances (as stated by Reichardt in a review in the Berlinische musikalische Zeitung).\textsuperscript{25} In this review Reichardt emphasizes the instrumental music (overture and two ballet scenes). And the overture was also performed in concerts on several occasions.

It is evident that these editions have different purposes, and were directed at different buyers. The orchestral score of \textit{Brenno} was aimed at opera houses and orchestras, and possibly interested composers and collectors. The score of \textit{Die Geisterinsel} on the other hand was aimed at an audience interested in private music making. This is confirmed by the song collection and proposed edition of dance melodies. The \textit{Geisterinsel} editions actually extend the reach of the community in the national theatre into the homes of the audience. When performing the Singspiel songs in private the audience were expressing the same emotions, and were thus being part of the same emotional/expressive community, as in the theatre. The expression of this community was not bound to a building, such as the \textit{Königliche Hofoper}. Instead, it had the advantage of being available wherever its members choose to express it.

The nationalistic emotion expressed in \textit{Die Geisterinsel} is an indication of a changed view of the nation compared to what is expressed in absolutist opera seria. We find a similar change of view reflected also in Reichardt's dedication to king Friedrich Wilhelm III in the edition published in 1799. Whereas the edition of \textit{Brenno} simply has a dedication to the king on the title page, in the edition of \textit{Die Geisterinsel} we read the following: "Euer Königlichen Majestät sind ein aufgeklärter Beschüzer vaterländischer Künste; Sie werden, so bald die stets wache Sorge für das Wohl des Staats auch auf die angenehmen Künste einen wohlthuenden Blick zu werfen verstattet, gewis auch der Vervollkommnung des deutschen Singspiels den langersehnten Schuz gewähren. In dieser Überzeugung wage ich's Euer Majestät diese Oper zu überreichen, die ich zu dem erfreulichen Tage, den jeder gute Preuße segnet, mit dem vollen Gefühl der verehrung und Dankbarkeit entwarf, mit dem ich ersterbe Euer Königlichen Majestät Allgetreuester

\textsuperscript{24} Johann Friedrich Reichardt: Gesänge im Klavierauszuge aus Der Geisterinsel, Berlin 1798.

Unterthan Joh. Friedr. Reichardt.\textsuperscript{26}

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Here the king is named an enlightened protector of patriotic art, and hence most willing to give the German Singspiel its longed-for support. In other words, even if the opera is given to the king, as a piece of patriotic art it is aimed at the people. The king should be regarded as its supporter and protector, rather than its ultimate recipient. As depicted in the opera itself, the king ought to be regarded as part of the national community, rather than position himself outside, or above it. His patriotic feelings should not be any different from the rest of the community's. In their love for a nation all citizens are equals.

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\textsuperscript{26} *Your royal majesty is an enlightened protector of patriotic art; and as sure as the always attentive care for the wellbeing of the state also allows for a benevolent look to be thrown at the pleasant arts, you would certainly be willing to give also the German Singspiel its longed-for support. It is with this conviction I dare to present your majesty with this opera, which I designed with the fullest sentiment of honour and gratitude for the happy day blessed by every Prussian, I remain your royal majesty's most faithful subject, Johann Friedrich Reichardt*; Johann Friedrich Reichardt: Die Geisterinsel, Berlin 1799. My translation.