



Musiktheater in Raum und Zeit: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Theaterpraxis in Mitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Ed. by Vladimír Zvara. pp. 269. (Paralely, Bratislava, 2015. ISBN 978-80-89484-05-8.)

Most of the essays in this collection go back to a symposium held in Bratislava in 2009 on central European music theatre in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For ‘central Europe’ think ‘Habsburg’ and although the end dates of some of the essays go beyond the 1918 collapse of the Habsburg Empire, there is evidence (for instance in Pieter M. Judson’s *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016)) that much of the organizational apparatus and attitudes established during the empire lingered on in the successor states. Most of the eleven chapters in the collection favour Transleithania, i.e. the territory controlled after the 1867 Ausgleich by the Hungarians, rather than Austrian Cisleithania, with particular emphasis—five out of the eleven—on what is now the Slovak capital, Bratislava.

The Bratislava coverage is headed by a detailed historical account by Jana Laslavíková (‘Das Städtische Theatre in Pressburg 1886–1920’) with sections devoted to pre-1884, the building of the Stadtheater in 1886, repertory and direction 1886–1920, and important visiting artists. There are further articles on women’s roles in the same period by Jana Lengová, and on the beginnings and many paradoxes of the Slovak National Theatre by Ladislav Lajcha, the editor of an important collection of documents pertaining to the theatre’s history until 1945. Naďa Földváriová contributes a detailed account of one of the theatre’s main luminaries, Oskar Nedbal, well known before 1918 as a conductor, as the violist in the Bohemian Quartet, and as the composer of several successful Viennese operettas and ballets. Here, however, the focus is on Nedbal’s dramaturgy as chief conductor of the Slovak National Theatre (1923–30) and on finding reflections in it of the repertory choices of earlier Czech operatic conductors such as Karel Kovařovic in Prague (1900–20) and, rather more surprisingly, with those in the small theatre in Olomouc, which seemed to have served as trial station for Bratislava (p. 181).

For all his international reputation, Nedbal’s position was unenviable. Unlike the creation of the Czech Provisional (and subsequent National) Theatres in Prague and in Brno, which owed their existence to efforts of the Czech-speaking communities themselves vying for

space against a German operatic establishment, the Slovak National Opera was imposed from above in 1918 (part of the Czech 'colonization' of the province) to the anger of the Germans and Hungarians who constituted two-thirds of the city's population and the mainstay of the opera-going audience. Nedbal's appointment was unwelcome even to some Czechs (such as Zdeněk Nejedlý, who made it his business to campaign against it) mostly because of Nedbal's success with ballet and operetta, genres disparaged as unworthy of high-minded Czechoslovak music theatre.

The editor of the collection, Vladimír Zvara, concludes with a perceptive overview of the Bratislava material seen from a political angle, for instance considering the impact on repertory choices of the frequent changes of political circumstances. This turns out to be less extensive than one would expect, for instance in the two periods of authoritarian repression: the years 1939–45 (when Slovakia existed as an 'independent' Fascist republic), and the 1950s, the most politically fervent years of the newly installed Communist government. The latter exhibited a surprisingly *laissez-faire* attitude towards opera—in contrast for instance to the strict censorship that prevailed in other arts such as literature and non-operatic music. Away from the ideological limelight of Prague one could stage more innovative works and productions, particularly in the 'normalization' period of the 1970s (p. 237). Furthermore, the generous state subsidy meant that no intendant needed to worry, as in other eras of the theatre's history, about filling the theatre. Conversely, and in contrast to the interwar years or after 1989, the repertory cannot be taken during this period as an accurate indicator of audience choices and attendance.

Other Habsburg cities featured in the collection include Lenka Krupková and Jiří Kopecký's discussion of the German opera houses in Olmütz (today's Olomouc). Their chapter, concentrating on the city's imitation of the metropolitan stage (i.e. Vienna), is a sample of the couple's extensive work on Olomouc theatrical history (e.g. *Provincial Theater and its Opera: German Opera Scene in Olomouc (1770–1920)* (Olmouc, 2015)) which, unlike that of Czech cities such as Prague and Brno, is essentially the history of the German cultural population, with the Czechs much the poor relation. Markus Bauer's discussion of 'TheaterStadtRaum' centres on Czernowitz, then part of Austrian Galicia,

but now Chernivtsi in Ukraine. It is the essay in the collection that most concerns itself with the 'Raum' part of the collection's title in investigating the theatre building as a distinctive contribution to city space, a fascinating topic in view of the fact that it was yet another of the many similar opera houses of the empire designed by the Viennese architectural firm Fellner & Helmer. The same firm also designed the Royal Hungarian theatre in Budapest, features in Tibor Tallián's chapter, 'Oper als Statussymbol'. The 'status symbol' refers to the fact that with the fading of the Turkish threat to the Hungarian lands, Budapest replaced Pressburg (Bratislava) as the Hungarian capital—to the increasing 'provincialization' of Pressburg, which became almost a suburb of nearby Vienna. Furthermore, after the creation of the Dual Monarchy in 1867, Budapest now saw itself as the equal of Vienna, and wished to reflect this in a prestigious new opera house that attracted figures such as Mahler.

It makes sense that centres such as Prague and Vienna, whose theatrical activity has been amply covered in other publications, feature less here, but the sole essay on Prague, by Marta Ottlová, is disappointing in its concentration on finding fault with Philip Ther's *In der Mitte der Gesellschaft: Operntheatre in Zentraleuropa 1815–1914* (Vienna, 2006). Only two chapters attempt to range over the area as a whole. Gunhild Overzaucher-Schüller deals with stage dances in Vienna, Pressburg, and Brünn/Brno, and Marion Linhardt gives an account of the 'standardization' of roles (Fach) in popular music theatre, centring particularly on the emergence of the 'Jüdische Charge', i.e. Jewish minor character part.

Zvara has assembled an admirably international group of experts (from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, and Germany). Their essays are all printed in German, but there are substantial résumés in Slovak, and an eight-page names index gives a good idea of the range of the book. The forty occasionally fuzzy black and white photographs (theatre exteriors, interiors, production photographs, and a few individuals), all beautifully documented (pp. 253–7), provide a complementary evocation of the era.

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