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To cite this article: Austin Glatthorn (2021) Staging Imperial Identity: Music Theatre, the Holy Roman Empire, and the French Revolutionary Wars, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 14:2, 157-174, DOI: [10.1080/17526272.2021.1887594](https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2021.1887594)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2021.1887594>



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Published online: 19 Apr 2021.



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# Staging Imperial Identity: Music Theatre, the Holy Roman Empire, and the French Revolutionary Wars

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The Holy Roman Empire's final decades were plagued with conflict. While the war of the Bavarian Succession (1778–79) destabilized from within, the Revolutionary Wars (1792–1802) posed a threat from abroad. Scholars have long considered the Empire's kaleidoscopic constitution among its greatest weaknesses, for it could not possess the perceived power of a centralized nation-state and thus (allegedly) made its dissolution in 1806 all but inevitable. But by examining such works as *Günther von Schwarzburg* (1777), *Heinrich der Löwe* (1792), *Der Retter Deutschlands* (1797), and *Achille* (1801), I posit that there was nothing inevitable about the Empire's fate in times of conflict leading up to and throughout the Coalition Wars against Revolutionary and Republican France. This paper ultimately argues that, despite claims to the contrary, the Empire understood itself as a complex nation that placed its collective past and present centre stage so as to help ensure its future.

**KEYWORDS** opera, melodrama, cultural identity, German history, Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars

The Empire's hero lay dying. His enemies had poisoned him. Surrounded by powerful electors, he mutters in recitative:

I'm dying! — Carl! Reign — over free *Völker*! Oh Germany, — Germany! — How small — you are — divided by conflict! How great — through — brotherhood! Carl! — Rudolf! — My brothers! — More enervating — than discord — is proclivity toward foreign conventions — Pride — in being German — is — your greatness! (Klein, 1777: 82)<sup>†</sup>

<sup>†</sup>Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's own.

The protagonist's dying declaration leads to a chorus in which his entourage solemnly mourns in song: 'the hero of the *Vaterland* dies!' (Klein, 1777: 83). The curtain falls.

This is the concluding scene from the opera *Günther von Schwarzburg* by dramatist Anton Klein (1748–1810) and composer Ignaz Holzbauer (1711–83). Premiered in Mannheim on 5 January 1777, the piece tells the (mostly fictionalized) tale of the fourteenth-century Imperial succession rivalry between Thuringian Count Günther von Schwarzburg (1304–49) and Carl IV of Luxemburg (1316–78). Beginning with the eponymous character's election as emperor, *Günther von Schwarzburg* is set around his coronation and the internal German rivalry that sought to prevent him from taking the throne. Günther's final words presented here capture well the tone of the entire opera, one written in praise of Germany's culture, yet simultaneously designed to critique the current state of its political affairs. Indeed, this three-act opera has more to do with the cultural and political concerns of the Holy Roman Empire leading up to the year 1800 than that of the earlier period it depicts on the stage.

*Günther von Schwarzburg* presupposes an awareness of the political and cultural world in which its drama unfolds. Audiences needed to know, for example, that emperors were elected, as the plot is set in motion when the Elector Palatine reveals that all of the electors will cast their votes in favour of Günther. Late in the first act, Carl attempts to force the electors to change their minds when he besieges Frankfurt am Main, where Imperial elections and coronations had been held since the sixteenth century, although not in the fourteenth century when the action takes place. Günther is crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Frankfurt during the following act in a ceremony that, according to the libretto, closely resembled eighteenth-century coronations. As Klein and Holzbauer worked on the opera, tensions were growing amongst Imperial Estates and eventually led to the outbreak of the War of the Bavarian Succession in 1778. It is thus little surprise that Günther's final wish is that the Empire's *Völker* remain true to their *Vaterland* at a time when internal rivalry threatened the Imperial peace. So familiar were these basic aspects of the Imperial system to theatregoers that Klein saw no reason to clarify this information in the libretto.

Yet although an understanding of *Günther von Schwarzburg* is predicated upon a general knowledge of the Empire, the piece is rarely examined within the Imperial context in which it was commissioned, performed, and received. Rather, scholars posit it as the first German 'national' opera, the beginning of a trajectory that reached its zenith with Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* [*The Nibelung's Ring*] (first performed as a cycle in 1876) in a Germany under Prussian hegemony (for instance, Leopold, 2006 and Warrack, 2001). *Günther* was neither the first German-language opera nor the first on a German historical topic (see, for example, Warrack, 2001: 27). Nevertheless, scholars position *Günther* as integral to the development of subsequent German national opera of the nineteenth century. In so doing, they often forgo even mentioning the Empire, which is

surprising considering an awareness of its politics are required to make sense of the plot. Their omission may be explained by Richard Taruskin's insistence that 'the musical stage became the favored site, in the age of burgeoning nationalism, for the idealized or allegorical re-enactment of every nation's history' (Taruskin, 2010: (3)205). Informed by a modern concept of nation, he dismissed this possibility for the Holy Roman Empire because its constitution was a 'crazy quilt of little principalities and city-states, and the multinational Hapsburg ("Holy Roman") Empire was slowly crumbling under its own dead weight' (Taruskin, 2010: (3)206). This appraisal of the Holy Roman Empire – one still commonly embraced – not only runs counter to most historical research published in the last thirty years, but also hastily conflates two distinct cultural and political spheres: the Holy Roman Empire should not be equated with the overlapping, yet distinct Habsburg Empire.

My essay addresses the misconception that the Holy Roman Empire was unable or unwilling to stage its story because there was a contemporary consensus that the polity was in terminal decline and doomed to collapse. Scholars have long associated the turbulent period of war beginning in 1792 with an emerging German national consciousness. Klaus Pietschmann has investigated such works as *Günther von Schwarzburg* (1777), *Heinrich der Löwe* [*Henry the Lion*] (1792), and *Achille* [*Achilles*] (1801) as expressions of German national identity c.1800 (2010). But just how the Empire specifically re-enacted its story through music theatre during the conflict with Republican France remains largely unexplored. Focusing on *Günther von Schwarzburg*, I begin by outlining both the politics and musico-theatrical culture of the Holy Roman Empire on the eve of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. I then draw on new evidence to posit the wartime works *Heinrich der Löwe*, *Der Retter Deutschlands* [*Germany's Saviour*] (1797), and *Achille* – like *Günther* – as expressions of a shared Imperial culture rather than as part of a later German national teleology. In so doing, I demonstrate not only how overlapping Imperial concepts as *Nation* [nation], *Vaterland* [fatherland], *Patriotismus* [patriotism], and *Volk* [see p. 5 for a definition] were negotiated through music for the stage, but also that, despite projecting anxiety about the future, such music theatre does not portend the collapse of the Imperial system in the run-up to 1806. This exploration ultimately challenges the view that dramatists and composers did not re-enact the Empire's story c.1800 because it was not a nation-state, revealing that they did indeed portray the Holy Roman Empire as a complex nation centre stage.

### **The politics of Holy Roman Imperial music theatre, c.1800**

When *Günther von Schwarzburg* premiered in early 1777, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation, or 'Reich') sprawled across Central Europe and comprised over 300 territories. Each Imperial

Estate (*Reichsstand*) had its own elected or dynastic ruler who reigned over their territories with varying degrees of autonomy. Many viewed one another as rivals and feuding was common, a concern that *Günther von Schwarzburg* addressed directly. Yet each Estate was also bound to one another by the Imperial constitution and its institutions, including the Reichstag (an assembly of Estates), the Imperial Church (though less so after 1648), the Reichskammergericht and Reichshofrat (the Imperial supreme courts), the ten *Kreise* (large administrative regions), and the emperor, who was elected by an elite group of princes aptly called electors (*Kurfürsten*). As Joachim Whaley (2012) and Peter Wilson (2016) have recently argued, such institutions made the Empire a complex polity capable of reform in the face of repeated crises to protect by peaceful means its diverse territories and peoples.

Well before Klein and Holzbauer set to work on *Günther von Schwarzburg*, there was consensus that the Holy Roman Empire was a federation of princes, a system referred to as the ‘Reich’, ‘German Reich’, or simply ‘Germany’, as Günther does throughout the opera (Whaley, 2006: 447). As Whaley (2006: 448) and Wilson (2016: 281 and 286–88) have further demonstrated, most Germans – as a cultural-linguistic group – of all strata of society associated the Reich with the nation, for even ordinary people understood the Imperial constitution and their place within it. That is not to suggest that Germans were the only community whose rights the Empire protected. Indeed, other cultural-linguistic groups, including Bohemians, Burgundians, and Italians, ‘identified with the Empire to varying degrees, but only the Germans associated it with their nation’ (Wilson, 2016: 255). And although the Reich’s diverse peoples fostered distinct identities, they were not opposed to one another, Germans, or the Empire (Wilson, 2016: 281). To borrow Whaley’s words, ‘diversity and complexity was no obstacle to a sense of belonging to a larger system or to identifying this system with the wider national community of the Germans’ (2012: (2)441). As other historians have cautioned, it would be dangerous to conflate modern connotations of nation(-state) with the early modern concept that embraced overlapping degrees of identity, including local, supra-regional, and imperial (Stollberg-Rilinger, 2018: 13). Indeed, in a polity in which the concepts of nation and state were separate but related, identity operated on multiple, often overlapping levels. This helps to explain the various degrees of Imperial belonging that can be gauged by the eighteenth-century meanings of the interrelated terms ‘Nation’, ‘Vaterland’, ‘Patriotismus’, and ‘Volk’. Although these words would eventually take on distinct and ultimately dangerous meanings after the dissolution of the Reich in 1806, for those living within the Empire, *Nation* could at once refer to a specific local Imperial Estate and the supra-regional Reich as a whole; *Vaterland* could denote the *Nation* or individual communities within it, while *Patriotismus* was the commitment to, and engagement in, the *Nation* or *Vaterland*, however one might have defined them (Whaley, 2006: 451). Contemporaries contended that the basis of the *Nation* was the *Volk*, a community of free individuals united in culture and language (Whaley, 2006: 453; Wilson, 2016: 233–91).

*Günther von Schwarzburg* was indeed a product of the cultural entanglements of *Nation*, *Vaterland*, *Patriotismus*, and *Volk*. Klein justified the choice of topic:

Should German heroes, who deserve to have their portraits in the centre of the human race, be forgotten in their *Vaterland*? Are only the ashes of Rome and Athens precious and adorable to us? Or do we only hear the names of these Romans and Greeks who appear on our stage? We cast our eyes on foreign archetypes of virtue, which perhaps never were, and do not see what is in our wombs. Is love of the foreign perhaps the disposition of our nation? [...] How rich is the realm of our history! I have chosen from it one of its heroes. He had conquered no world, no country; but he had the courage of a conqueror and the heart of a philanthropist. He was the pillar of a failing country, the fright of powerful troublemakers, and the sword [in the hands] of the defenders of rights. The *Vaterland* was his first concern. From a love of his *Vaterland* he embraced a crown and laid it down again owing to his patriotism. We want this same story to be told. (Klein, 1777: [i–iii])

Klein's introductory words pre-empt those of the opera's conclusion, which suggest that Germans abandon their 'proclivity toward foreign conventions' and instead be proud of their own cultural heritage. This sentiment engaged in a wider dialogue that called for German writers to distance themselves from Italian and French models. Believing that opera was a 'representation of a possible world, which the poet can fabricate according to his intents', in 1761, the statesman Justus Möser (1720–90) encouraged authors to place subjects from German history on the operatic stage (1761: 19). By the early 1770s, commentators such as Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg (1737–1823) had made clear their opposition to *Welsch* – a term referring to both Italian and French – operatic traditions and advocated that German music theatre needed to be free from foreign influence (Flaherty, 1978: 249–50; and, on 'Welsch', see Wilson, 2016: 261). Although the rejection of foreign subjects in favour of German ones might seem to suggest nationalist rhetoric, this was not the case. According to Helmut Walser Smith, the 'epistemology of nationhood, as it came into focus around 1770, is often mistaken for early nationalism. It certainly laid the foundation for nationalism. It was not yet, however, the thing itself' (Smith, 2020: 88). Mortally wounded, Günther thus entreats Carl to rule over the Empire's *Völker* rather than the singular *Volk* that would feature so prominently in the nationalist imaginaries of subsequent German states.

*Günther's* German historical topic distinguished it from other through-composed German-language operas of the period. One such work was *Alceste* [*Alcestis*] (1773), written by Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813) and set to music by Anton Schweitzer (1735–87). Wieland boasted that theirs was 'an opera in the German tongue [...] set by a German, [and] sung by Germans' (Wieland, 1773: 35). Both *Günther* and *Alceste* were in German and created and performed by Germans. What set *Günther* apart was that its subject was taken from German

history. Yet, like that of *Alceste*, *Günther*'s music consisted of aria as well as simple and accompanied recitative in the manner of Metastasian *opera seria* [serious opera]. That there was nothing particularly 'German' about its music seems not to have mattered, perhaps because there was little discussion, let alone consensus, of what German music might constitute at this time.

Scholars would later posit *Singspiel* [sung play] as *the* German national genre, an answer to well-established Italian models and especially similar French traditions like *opéra comique* [a stage work with spoken dialogue as well as vocal and instrumental music]. To borrow Estelle Joubert's words:

within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century histories of opera, the *singspiel* is viewed as a generic prototype, the seed from which a long lineage of German operas emerged. [...] Viewed within the political and ideological contexts from which they emerged, it becomes increasingly apparent that these histories are based on nationalistic motivations rather than any explicit generic similarities among the operas. (2006: 214)

Turning to the *Singspiele* of Johann Adam Hiller (1728–1804), scholars have defined this German-language genre as a mixture of dialogue and simple song – like *opéra comique* – revolving around plots concerning the lives of commoners rather than the mythological and heroic as was common in *tragédie lyrique* [lyric tragedy] and Italian *opera seria*. But the generic label 'Singspiel' had no precise use in the period (Bauman, 1985: 9–14). *Günther von Schwarzburg* exemplifies the flexibility of the term. Despite it containing recitative, da capo aria, and brief instances of spoken dialogue, Klein and Holzbauer labelled their piece a *Singspiel*. What some consider to be the first German national opera was therefore not even the type of *Singspiel* that was later codified and fashioned into a national generic prototype. Put another way, the term 'Singspiel' is not as much a contemporary genre as the subsequent, retrospective grouping of any number of stylistically disparate works on ideological grounds.

There was nothing inherently 'national' about Hiller's *Singspiele*, but eighteenth-century commentators did nevertheless note the importance of his music within the Reich. The significance contemporaries attached to his works and others stylistically like them was because of their popularity and the ease with which the Empire's theatre companies could stage them. *Singspiele* that contained spoken text and less intricate vocal music were, generally speaking, not as demanding and more accessible than Italianate opera; they allowed most actors to perform in the vernacular and they were cheaper and easier to stage than other operatic models. Owing to these factors, members of the Mainz Nationaltheater decided to produce a *Singspiel* when they set out to stage a new work to celebrate the Imperial coronation shortly after the outbreak of war in 1792.



## ***Heinrich der Löwe* (1792): the outbreak of war and the final Imperial Coronation**

The coronation of Franz II (1768–1835) in 1792 was the latest – and last – in a long line stretching back nearly one thousand years to Charlemagne (742–814) in the year 800. In addition to their political responsibilities, emperors fulfilled a symbolic function: they embodied the solidarity and – especially during times of conflict – the continuation of the Reich (Whaley, 2012: (2)569). Those who made the arduous journey from all reaches of Europe to Frankfurt am Main did so to take part in the Reich’s oldest and grandest spectacle of power, what Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger has described as the embodiment of the Imperial system itself (2008: 229).

In the years leading up to this coronation, refugee communities of French aristocrats had been amassing in the Rhineland, where they received hospitable treatment from the Empire’s princes and planned to raise armies to crush the revolutionaries in France (Whaley, 2012: (2)567). Although Imperial ministers assured the Legislative Assembly that Emperor Leopold II (1747–92) had asked the ecclesiastical electors to expel the refugees, they maintained that any aggression would invoke the wrath of the emperor, princes of the Reich, and other sovereigns (Whaley, 2012: (2)568). This threat only added fuel to the fire. And when Leopold II died unexpectedly on 1 March 1792, the Empire was left without a ruler until a successor could be elected and crowned in Frankfurt, as there was no King of the Romans – an heir apparent elected during the life of a reigning emperor. The French seized the opportunity presented by this interregnum and declared war on Franz as King of Hungary on 20 April 1792. Despite Brandenburg-Prussia and Austria’s alliance to counter any such aggression in the Declaration of Pillnitz (1791), the majority of the Holy Roman Empire remained at peace (Conge, 2000: 56). Franz was chosen by electoral vote in early July and crowned Emperor Franz II in Frankfurt am Main on 14 July 1792. It was in this context that the coronation opera *Heinrich der Löwe* was composed and first performed.

The Mainz company premiered *Heinrich der Löwe* the day following Franz II’s coronation on 15 July 1792. This two-act ‘allegorisches Singspiel’ was written by dramatist Heinrich Gottlieb Schmieder (1763–1811) and set to music by Carl David Stegmann (1751–1826; Schmieder, 1792a). Although almost all of the music is lost, *Heinrich der Löwe*’s text and allegorical content provide meaningful insight into how the Empire was portrayed on the musical stage at the onset of war. Set during the Wendish Crusade (1147), the piece begins as a Christian prisoner defeats a Wend in a ritual interpreted as an omen of impending doom. Heinrich’s messenger offers peace, but the pagans refuse and hostilities begin. After Heinrich is victorious, his subjects demonstrate their gratitude in a festival, but their celebration is interrupted when a herald announces the election of Friedrich of Swabia as emperor. Friedrich and Heinrich had once feuded, but Heinrich declares his loyalty and presents the captured Wends to Friedrich, who then emancipates the prisoners. The curtain falls as the former rivals ride together to Frankfurt for the coronation.



Much as with *Günther*, Imperial audiences who saw *Heinrich der Löwe* may have seen a historical saga play out on stage, but it was one that paralleled contemporary events. Unlike *Günther*, however, the struggles portrayed in *Heinrich der Löwe* were against foreign enemies. There was no shortage of conflict in 1792; the war with France (1792) was the latest in a recent string of armed conflicts including the Austro-Turkish War (1788–91), the Brabant Revolution (1789–90), and the feudal revolt in Hungary (1790). Although the *Singspiel*'s Christian-pagan theme may suggest the Reich's long rivalry with the Ottoman Empire, I would argue it primarily addressed the new threat posed by France. As Pietschmann has demonstrated, there are parallels between its action and the outset of hostilities in the First Coalition War (1792–97) (2010: 302). By 1792 it was clear to those within the Reich that the French Revolutionary Army was anti-clerical if not outright anti-religious (Blanning, 1974: 288). Timothy Blanning has revealed that a citizen in Trier reported that the French 'had lit fires on altars, abused statues of the Virgin, defaced crucifixes, defecated into tabernacles, and so on' (1974: 330). What bothered those living within the Reich was not that the French practised a religion that could not be tolerated, but rather that they appeared to have no faith whatsoever. *Heinrich der Löwe* addressed this latest threat alongside existing ones in its final scene:

Heinrich: Oh! Your majesty – your future government comes at a difficult time – war from far and near – but your courage and your wisdom (*with high discernment*) will help pull you through – all of Europe looks to you – South and North hope for their rescue, their peace comes from their emperor.  
 Friedrich: God will grant me strength and strengthen my courage to defeat the Empire's enemies and again give to my land peace and tranquillity.  
 Heinrich: Our arms are for you, required where they are necessary for you and heaven will bless our weapons. (Schmieder, 1792a: 73–74)

In so doing, Heinrich (representing the Empire) offered the new emperor his undivided support in confronting the Reich's enemies (France) so as to restore order to Europe.

I would further argue that the character Heinrich embodied the Empire's subject-ruler dynamic. In Act II, scene 6, Heinrich's subjects pay tribute upon his victorious return from battle. Presenting their sovereign with silver, miners thank him for enriching their lives; Heinrich in turn ensures them that they will remain prosperous under his rule (Schmieder, 1792a: 64). Just a moment later, a burgher offers him a crown woven by every citizen, explaining 'we lay this crown at your feet, gracious lord duke, in deep reverence! Our city was a small, barren place. Commerce and industry lay low. Your grace has elevated us...' (Schmieder, 1792a: 65). Such prosperity was not mere propaganda. Most of the lower classes were dependent on the elite for their livelihood, helping to explain in part why there were no serious uprisings in the Empire. Furthermore, the Reich's political fragmentation acted as a quarantine of rebellion, and princes, the *Kreise*, and the

Reichskammergericht worked together quickly to suppress and contain any regional insurrection (Blanning, 1974: 307). And had the courts abruptly left their *Residenzstädte* [cities where a sovereign resided], those left in the cities would have faced financial ruin (Blanning, 1974: 289–90). In 1793, the Austrian ambassador Count Joseph Heinrich Schlick (1754–1807) wrote: ‘one begins to appreciate only too clearly how little the capital and its citizens can fend for themselves without the court and the numerous nobility attached to it’ (cited Hansen, 1933, in turn cited in Blanning, 1974: 302). The same sentiment was acted out on the coronation stage. In a scene during which subjects perform homage to their overlord, *Heinrich der Löwe* helped to reinforce an acceptance of – if not reliance upon – the Imperial system at the outset of a war which threatened its very existence.

*Heinrich* was conceived to deliver this message to *Völker* around the Reich from the very beginning. For although the coronation *Singspiel* had an ‘extraordinary effect in Frankfurt and was performed three times in a row, once before the Emperor’, it was designed to be staged by companies in locations near and far (Schmieder, 1792c: fol. 1r). A month before *Heinrich*’s premiere, Schmieder wrote to the theatre director Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Großmann (1743–96) to enquire if he would be interested in staging it, ‘since it should be sent to several theatres at the same time, including Hamburg, Aachen, etc., in order to give it on the [coronation day]’ (1792b: fol. 1r). Linking the story to Großmann’s particular region, Schmieder assured him that these theatres would speak well of the piece:

[It is] particularly suitable for your prevailing circumstances, and all of the allusions are certain to be effective, especially in your area because I have chosen the story of Duke Heinrich der Löwe, which plays [out] entirely in your borders — and I hope it can also be given on other occasions. (1792b: fol. 1r–1v)

Anticipating that the entire Reich would soon be at war, Schmieder maintained that the accessibility of the *Singspiel*’s allegories would be easily grasped and effective in other celebrations such as ‘the return of a prince, a victor, etc.’ (1792c: fol. 1r; and 1792d: fol. 1r). To ensure that *Heinrich* remained transferable to diverse Imperial stages for occasions other than the coronation, Schmieder and Stegmann designed their *Singspiel* so that all a director need do is remove or replace the part of Friedrich and substitute the note announcing his election – both of which occur at the very end of the work – with other suitable figures or news as local circumstances demanded (Schmieder, 1792c: fol. 1r; 1792d: fol. 1r; Stegmann, 1792: fol. 1r). In this way, *Heinrich der Löwe* could not be criticized for being too focused on a specific Imperial Estate when performed in other areas, as was the case with *Der Fürst und sein Volk*, another *Singspiel* from that summer that caused a reviewer to lament that ‘too much in the printed version is local to Saxony, which must be omitted or altered for here [in Bonn]’ (Anon, 1793: 127). This sentiment as well as *Heinrich*’s pre-conceived adaptability suggests that such

*Singspiele* needed to negotiate identification with both the shared Imperial and distinct local cultures.

Stegmann continued working on *Heinrich* until the last minute and was therefore unable to send the score until after the coronation (Stegmann, 1792: fol. 1r). When the work eventually was staged in Hamburg, Johann Friedrich Schink (1755–1835) found Stegmann's *Singspiel* to be 'an extraordinarily attractive product of his musical talent'; his choruses were 'truly dramatic' and arias were 'spirited, melodically characteristic, sublime, without pomp and are always in their proper place – you do not only hear them, you feel them as well' (Schink, 1793: 777–78). Despite this praise and Schmieder and Stegmann's best efforts, *Heinrich der Löwe* appears not to have been performed on more than a handful of occasions after the coronation. This was because France's war against Austria had quickly escalated into a *Reichskrieg* involving the entire Empire. The Battle of Valmy on 20 September 1792 turned the tide of the war in France's favour, and Republican troops advanced ever deeper into the Rhineland. The ongoing hostilities forced many theatres to seek respite far from the front or disband altogether, as was the case with at least six companies between 1792 and 1794 ([Reichard], 1796: 328). Indeed, not long after the Hamburg performance of *Heinrich der Löwe*, the director there, Friedrich Ludwig Schröder (1744–1816) considered his theatre 'the most peaceful of a nation' (1794: fol. 213r). In the end, *Heinrich der Löwe* was little performed, as there was little cause for celebration.

### ***Der Retter Deutschlands* (1797): continued hostilities and the Treaty of Campo Formio**

The *Reichskrieg* continued to go poorly for the Empire. The capital of the Electorate of Mainz – the most important in the Imperial constitution – had fallen to French forces and was occupied in October 1792. Although the city was liberated by Brandenburg-Prussian forces in mid-1793, Republican troops had overrun the other ecclesiastical electorates the following year. With the occupation of territories to the west of the Rhine and the advance of French forces ever deeper into the Empire, the war dragged on. Some Estates had had enough. Brandenburg-Prussia had signed the Treaty of Basel with France and withdrew its forces from the coalition to address concerns in its new Polish 'acquisitions' in 1795. In so doing, it hoped that other Estates might similarly breach Imperial law and broker their own peace deals, isolating its rival Austria in the process. The northern half of the Reich follow suit, allowing France to concentrate its war machine fully against the southern Imperial territories that continued in the conflict.

The little-known melodrama *Der Retter Deutschlands* brought a war-weary Empire and an isolated, yet determined Austria to the musical stage. Published in 1797, the piece contains allegorical roles for Germany (i.e. the Reich), Austria, France, and Europe's Guardian Spirit, as well as choruses of German, Austrian, and French soldiers (Anon, 1797: [4]). That this anonymous work was set as a

melodrama is significant. Although commentators around the Empire did not consider *Singspiel* a national genre, they had since the mid-1770s fashioned melodrama as a particularly Imperial genre, despite its Rousseauian roots (see for instance, Anon, 1789: 177–78). This melodrama is further evidence of a particular Imperial musico-theatrical culture and allegory in time of war.

As the curtain rises, a despondent Germany, dressed as an old man, bemoans that he is no longer his former self. This is at once a reference to the Reich's age and to the occupation of its Western estates. Clad in full armour, Austria proudly walks onto the stage and inspires Germany in song: 'my *Volk* are noble and remain faithful to the *Vaterland*; its God and its glorious princes are its sanctuary' (Anon, 1797: 14–15). France is shocked to see Austria and Germany standing arm-in-arm again and arrogantly taunts them. Austria responds by proclaiming that its Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, and Tyrolians remain true to their Estate and will together confront France to save the Empire (Anon, 1797: 24). Similarly realizing the potential power of his princes, Germany vows to once again join Austria in the struggle. Towards the end of the melodrama, Europe's Guardian Spirit chides France for beginning the hostilities and proclaims that true peace can only be restored once the aggressor has been defeated. The work concludes as French forces retreat back across the Rhine, and Austria and Germany proclaim hand-in-hand:

Austria: Here, in a new union –

Germany: Our enemy shall tremble. — And you my German *Völker* ... sing a song of praise — to the valiant saviour of your *Vaterland*. (Anon, 1797: 34)

At the heart of *Der Retter Deutschlands* lay an optimistic message: that Austria's diverse cultural-linguistic population remained true to the *Vaterland* and would continue fighting alongside other Estates to restore the Empire and its *Völker* to the *status quo ante bellum*.

But later that year, Austria and its allies were defeated and had no recourse but to sign the Treaty of Campo Formio. This concluded their involvement in the War of the First Coalition. The terms of surrender formally ceded significant portions of Imperial Italy and the Imperial Estates on the left bank of the Rhine to France. Upon the formal transfer of the Electorate of Mainz, on 30 December 1797, the German Jacobin Joseph von Görres (1776–1848) declared:

At 3 in the afternoon the senile Holy Roman Empire, fully conscious and provided with all of the holy sacraments, passed away peacefully in Regensburg at the ripe age of 955 years, 5 months, and 28 days from utter exhaustion and stroke. [...] The illness escalated in such a dreadful progression that the patient, in an age of about eight hundred and fifty years (at the time of the Thirty Years War) had a violent haemorrhage lasting nearly half a century, which flooded half of Europe, and from which he had hardly recovered when finally the miserable French came along and a stroke made a quick

end of his suffering. Gentle and cheerful were the last hours of the departed one, a better future smiled at him and alleviated the agony of death; he saw without horror the fearsome abyss which had opened to engulf him because his conscience expressed no bloodguilt. (Görres, 1797–1798: (1)73, 75, 77)

In so writing, Görres provided the old man of *Der Retter Deutschlands* – similarly representing the Reich – with an age, time, and cause of death. He expressed well the opinion of those who believed that the Imperial system was outmoded, especially ever since the carnage of the Thirty Years War (1618–48). Although he was justified in that the Reich was becoming increasingly incapacitated because of the war, his celebration was nevertheless premature. Austria and its allies took up arms to reverse the conditions of the Treaty of Campo Formio in the War of the Second Coalition (1799–1802). The French were again victorious and the Peace of Lunéville (9 February 1801) demanded that the vanquished accept the terms of surrender as outlined in the earlier Treaty of Campo Formio.

### ***Achille* (1801): optimism and renewed defeat**

Dramatist Giovanni De Gamerra (1742–1803) began working on an *opera seria* designed to celebrate the birthday of Empress Marie Therese (1772–1807) in the shadow of war (Rice, 2003: 166). *Achille*, set to music by Ferdinando Paer (1771–1839), premiered in Vienna’s Kärntnertortheater on the birthday of the empress, 6 June 1801, four months after the Peace of Lunéville. *Achille*’s opening act takes place prior to the events of Homer’s *Iliad*: the united forces of Achilles and Agamemnon are victorious when they capture the city of Lyrnessus. Achilles falls in love with the captured Princess Briseis, though Agamemnon believes his courageousness in battle entitles him to the princess. Briseis chooses to remain with Achilles, and the first act concludes as the victorious Greek armies march towards Troy. In the second act, Agamemnon plots his revenge and kidnaps Briseis. A heartbroken Achilles now refuses to fight. Patroclus, his confidant, rushes to battle on behalf of Achilles and is slain by Hector at the gates of Troy. Meanwhile, Briseis escapes her captor and is reunited with Achilles as Patroclus’s corpse is carried back into the camp. Achilles vows to avenge his friend’s death, and Agamemnon reappears in reconciliation. Just as all seems well, a priest ensures the destruction of the Greek armies if Achilles does not return Briseis to her father. Trumpets sound calling the united Greek forces of Achilles and Agamemnon to arms once again. The curtain falls as Achilles, Agamemnon, and their warriors sing ‘let us run to the field of battle, and thus to victory!’ ([De Gamerra], 1801: 61).

Unlike the other works explored here, *Achilles* is a foreign-language opera that does not take its subject from the annals of Imperial history. By comparison, its Italian text and ancient Greek subject would seem to transport audiences even further from the temporal and geographic boundaries of the Reich. But as

Pietschmann has demonstrated, political commentators associated the Empire with the ancient Greek city-states (2008: 173). Just months following *Achille's* premiere, the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* [*Journal for the Elegant World*] reported:

This war, with all its unfortunate outcomes, had yet caused the fortunate event that had awoken the feeling of unity in the German Nation, which dispelled petty jealousy, and arrived at the conviction that one must always return to this unity in the impulses of adversity. Germany had therefore gained one hundred times more inner strength when it forfeited the expanses of its borders. With more certainty than before we can compare our constitution with that of the Greek states, who also observed themselves with jealous looks, were often embroiled amongst one another in bloody feuds, but with every foreign offensive united into a mass, which won the immortal victories of Marathon, Artemisium, and Salamis. (Anon, 1801b: 922–23)

Like Hellas, the Empire's Estates pursue their own interests but will band together when faced with threats from abroad. This association had been established long before *Achille* was ever staged. A decade earlier, a commentator in Munich noted that 'those competent in German matters of state have more than once made the remark that Germany, generally speaking, most resembles the Greek states' (Anon, 1790: 142). Wieland further likened the Empire to the Hellenic territories in his essay 'On German Patriotism' written in early 1793 (Smith, 2020: 155–56). Although earlier critics like Möser might have hoped that German dramatists would abandon Greco-Roman subjects on stage, those in the Empire nevertheless perceived the politics of ancient Greece as analogous to their own.

Audiences recognized parallels between *Achille* and contemporary events, as the dominant militarism present throughout its text and music make it yet another allegorical work during a time of conflict. Much as Möser had before him, De Gamera believed in the representational capacity of theatre (Rice, 1991: 11). For De Gamera, 'in time of war [theatrical spectacle] can increase patriotic heroism' and, considering how the war was unfolding, both patriotism and heroism needed a boost equally in Vienna as throughout the Empire (De Gamera, 1790, cited Rice, 1991: 11). Paer helped audiences to make the connection between the imaginary realm of theatre and the real world from beginning to end. Only thirty-three bars into the overture, an onstage *Harmonie* – an ensemble of wind instruments closely associated with the military – performs a reveille of almost equal length. This music prompted one critic to remark:

just as it is generally known that Achilles had lived in the world somewhat long ago, one also knows that he is no colonel or general in the I[mperial and] Royal army. Despite this, with the rise of the sun and the departure of the army, Paer 'applied a reveille yet still in use by the Austrian army with percussion and piccolos!' [...] the music as a whole is considered good and solid for the theatrical effect. (Anon, 1801a: 814–15)

Paer's inclusion of Austrian military music made explicit the implicit political allusions before the curtain was even raised (Pietschmann, 2008: 174). As the *Harmone* left the stage and the curtain opened, the full orchestra joined in again to play a brief passage of characteristic battle music (see Will, 2002: 190–229). The *Harmone* then returned to perform music that audiences would later hear in *Achille*'s final chorus. In moving from a march to battle music and ultimately to a victory chorus, the overture contains what Richard Will has identified as the principal contents of a battle symphony, a type of piece that became increasingly popular in the Reich during the conflict of the 1790s (2002: 190–99). What is more, almost all of Paer's music draws on martial topics, including an exchange of Greek and Trojan trumpeters calling their armies to battle. Most importantly, the opera's victorious finale was an optimistic expression of future triumph that may have helped instil hope in an audience weary of war.

Much as the other works explored here, *Achille* communicated to Imperial audiences that it was imperative that the Estates set aside their individual interests and unite behind the emperor. If not, they risked the destruction of the very political system that both legitimized and ensured their existence. And much as the political stage of the Reich, the theatre was an important stage for imagining the Holy Roman Empire, stages that had been seriously damaged in the conflict of the 1790s. Not long after the opera's premiere, Stegmann began adapting *Achille* and its message as a *Singspiel* for productions across what was left of the Empire's theatrical network. His adaptation, which replaced simple recitative with spoken text but retained accompanied recitatives as well as the Austrian military music, was published by Nikolaus Simrock (1751–1832) in French Bonn (Paer, c.1802). Stegmann's German version of *Achille* was subsequently staged around the Empire, including Augsburg, Frankfurt am Main, and Munich in 1802, Stuttgart and Prague in 1803, Dresden and Dessau in 1804, Berlin and Leipzig in 1805, and Kassel and Lübeck in 1806 (Pietschmann, 2008: 169; Anon, 1802a: 230; and Anon, 1802b). A critic who saw the Stuttgart production of *Achille* insisted that one's 'interest increases from scene to scene' owing to the music's 'grand, simple, and transcendent' character that was capable of generating a pathos and passion rarely seen in opera (Anon, 1804: 59–61). Despite its new German text, Paer's opera nevertheless brought this viewer back to an earlier time, for *Achille* 'reminded us very vividly of the former Italian operas by Metastasio and Jommelli under Duke Karl' (Anon, 1804: 60–61). Paer's music was thus capable of transporting theatre-goers to an era when the Empire was overrun by Italian opera rather than French troops. At a time of prolonged crisis, *Achille* optimistically communicated to audiences a message of endurance through mutual cooperation.

Following defeats in the Third Coalition War (1803–06) and increasing resistance from Imperial princes now allied with Napoleon, Emperor Franz II came to the conclusion that he had no option but to release civil servants from their duty to the Imperial institutions and the Estates from the Empire on 6 August 1806. Many considered his decision illegal, but, crippled by internal rivalry, foreign



influence, and the *Reichsdeputationshauptschluss* – the largest re-jurisdiction of German territory prior to 1945 – the Imperial system seemed beyond repair.

## Conclusion

Far from ‘crumbling under its own dead weight’, the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 was not a foregone conclusion. No one living around the turn of the new century could have foreseen that it would cease to exist after the autumn of that year. When war broke out in 1792 the Reich had persisted for a millennium, during which time it had survived countless trials including the crisis of the Reformation and the utter devastation of the Thirty Years War. And this is precisely what the music theatre investigated here demonstrates. While such works acknowledged the shortcomings of the Imperial system, they nonetheless maintained through historical parallel and allegory that the Empire – as a cultural and political nation – would continue if its diverse *Völker* remained patriotic and loyal to their *Vaterland*. Although they recognized the internal rivalry brought about by the Reich’s ‘inclusive diversity’, as Wilson has labelled it, the works considered here also communicated that their common bonds would ensure its continued existence (2016: 262). In other words: the Reich’s survival was paradoxically dependent upon the very local dynamics that threatened its existence. Writing in the 1780s, Johann Stephan Pütter (1725–1807), the period’s foremost expert of Imperial law, believed that the Reich still held together as a ‘united Empire’ despite the problems caused by the interests of individual Imperial Estates (1786–87: (3)215). Nevertheless, the Reich had ‘suffered such shocks that one has repeatedly had cause to be concerned about the preservation of the Imperial system’, which all ‘must not be indifferent towards’ (Pütter, 1786–87: (3)215). It was this same concern that played out on the musical stage.

Music theatre that projected the tense dynamics of Imperial politics leading up to the year 1806 was not the beginning of some German nationalist music ‘*Sonderweg*’ that begins with Hiller and leads to Wagner via Weber, and it should not be understood as such. Yet neither was it part of a wider Holy Roman Imperial (musical) awakening. By this point in time, the Reich was so firmly established that it did not need to fervently (re)invent its national story on the stage in the ways that Revolutionary and Republican France had as it sought to confront ties to a monarchical past after 1789 (see, for example, Darlow, 2012). Uncertainty and optimism, not rising nationalism, characterized the Empire’s reaction to a decade of conflict with France. As Smith would have it:

Contrary to popular understandings, nationalism played virtually no part in the actual anti-Napoleonic war, and war was not the experiential ground of nationalism. Defeat was. [...] Movement, change, the collapse of old structures, defeat in war more than victory: these were the essential conditions allowing German nationalism to flourish for the first time. (Smith, 2020: 90)

Only after the Empire ceased to exist in 1806 did nationalism begin to fill a void in its former Estates, especially in those that suffered humiliating defeats as Brandenburg-Prussia had at Austerlitz in December 1805. Just as it would be dangerous to subsume the Holy Roman Empire's history into (largely discredited) *Sonderweg* historiography, so would it be problematic to co-opt its music into grand narratives touting Germany's distinct national path to Wagner and beyond.

Such works as *Günther von Schwarzburg*, *Heinrich der Löwe*, *Der Retter Deutschlands*, and *Achille* together afford scholars a better means of understanding how those living within a complex early modern polity came to terms with their world at moments of great uncertainty. The conflict they portray is understood on essentially the same terms: whether quarrelling amongst one another or repelling foreign enemies, the *Völker* of individual Estates must band together in a patriotic defence of their *Vaterland* and *Nation*. The concepts of *Vaterland* and *Nation* were as entangled as the Estates and the Empire themselves. So deeply entwined were the *Vaterland* and *Nation* that it mattered little how *exactly* one understood them: to preserve the Empire's Estates was to save the Reich itself. That music theatre was set by composers of various national backgrounds and in distinct genres and languages but contained a similar message is a testament to the Holy Roman Empire as a common framework of inclusive diversity. The Reich was both a nation and a state, not a nation-state. And although nationalist historians would identify such decentralization as among the Empire's greatest weaknesses in the following century, it was a source of both anxiety as well as hope – expressed in part through music theatre – for those living through the period of war surrounding the year 1800. The pieces explored here illustrate that the Empire understood itself as a complex Imperial nation, one which staged its past and present so as to help ensure its future in the minds of audiences during an unnerving period of prolonged conflict.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to those who offered feedback on an earlier version of this paper at the conference 'Theatre on the Move in Times of Conflict (1750–1850)' and to this journal's anonymous reviewers. I would also like to thank Karl Böhmer for kindly checking my translations and the British Academy for generously supporting this research.

## Funding

This work was supported by The British Academy.

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