

Project Group A7

The Voice of the Hero. Vocal Presentation of the Heroic in the Opera during the First Half of the 19th Century

Principal investigator: Prof. Dr. Thomas Seedorf; research associate: Carolin Hauck (née Bahr)

The project group's goal was to develop an explanatory model for the phenomenon of tenor singing as a central form for articulating (male) heroism in early- and mid-nineteenth-century opera. Using insights gained from SFB 948, the goal was to connect this phenomenon with contemporary discourses of heroism and thus bridge a gap in music research, which has generally considered the relationship between music and heroism only in isolated cases. Pertinent research had been done on Richard Wagner's relationship to the historical and philosophical concepts of the hero in his time¹ and their application to the heroic figures in his operas.² Furthermore, a sturdy foundation for our research was provided by studies on the relationship between heroism and gender discourses, on the gender-specific connotations of heroes, and on aspects of performance, voice and physicality.³ Building on this research, our comprehensive analysis of sources revealed the development of the tenor hero and his voice (which was firmly perceived as masculine) to be a manifestation of the gender dualism that was evolving around 1800. In addition, most research emphasizes dramaturgical aspects of heroic figures in opera and music drama. The ambiguity of the term 'hero', which denotes both a type part in opera singing and the figure of the hero, prompted us to consider the nexus between (vocal) musical and heroic articulation.⁴ Nevertheless, a systematic study of musical and music-aesthetic concepts of the heroic in opera – a highly relevant question from the perspective of musicology – remains a desideratum of scholarship.

The project group considered the voice of the hero in early-nineteenth-century opera, systematically embedding the musical aspects of the vocal representation of opera heroes in the context of society, genre and the history of ideas. The study aimed to identify the close interrelations between social developments in central Europe and the changing forms and structures of operatic singing technique, composition, texts and dramaturgy. One finding was that a new, socially mixed audience took shape in opera houses and theatres in the wake of a softening of boundaries between courtly and middle-class cultural spheres. This new audience's interest in recent historical events made it receptive to opera as a means of conveying interpretive models for the rapidly progressing political, social and cultural developments of the day. Related to this, a heroic type took shape, usually sung by a tenor, whose internal demeanour and external behaviour provided the audience with a variety of

¹ Janz, T. 2011: Wagner, Siegfried und die (post-)heroische Moderne, in: id. (ed.), *Wagners Siegfried und die (post-)heroische Moderne. Beiträge des Hamburger Symposions, 22.–25. Oktober 2009 (Wagner in der Diskussion 5)*, Würzburg, pp. 9–39.

² Unseld, M. 2012: "'heroisch' im weitesten Sinne". Wagners Konzeption des Helden, in: Hindinger, B. (ed.), *Der musikalisch modellierte Mann. Interkulturelle und interdisziplinäre Männlichkeitsstudien zur Oper und Literatur des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts*, Vienna, pp. 146–163.

³ Dittrich, M.-A. 2010: "Männlichkeitsbilder", 3. Held/Heroismus, in: Kreuziger-Herr, A. / Unseld, M. (eds.), *Lexikon Musik und Gender*, Kassel [et al.], pp. 353–354; Maier-Eroms, E. 2007: "Heldentum" und "Weiblichkeit" im Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit. Am Beispiel von Wolframs Parzival, Gottfrieds Tristan und Richard Wagners Musikdramen, Regensburg (diss.); Rutherford, S. 2005: "Il grido dell'anima", or "un modo di sentire". Verdi, masculinity and the Risorgimento, in: *Studi verdiani* 19, pp. 107–121; Heller, W. 1998: Reforming Achilles: gender, "opera seria" and the rhetoric of the enlightened hero, in: *Early Music* 26.4, pp. 562–581.

⁴ Mösch, St. 2011: Klangkunst vom Kothurn. Zum Vokalprofil des Heldischen in Wagners "Siegfried", in: Janz, T. (ed.), *Wagners Siegfried und die (post-)heroische Moderne. Beiträge des Hamburger Symposions, 22.–25. Oktober 2009 (Wagner in der Diskussion 5)*, Würzburg, pp. 183–215; Watson, J. 2005: *Wagner's Heldentenors: Uncovering the Myths*, Austin (diss.).

exemplary models and (re)presented moral ideals. At the same time, the synchronic juxtaposition of socially mixed audiences was mirrored on the stage in the juxtaposition of different heroic figures. These characters ran the gamut from citizens to rulers, and their behaviour ranged from transgressive, extraordinary exploits all the way to failure, thus providing a variety of characters for the audience to identify with (discussed in depth by Bahr 2015). The development of the tenor hero (or the heroic tenor) thus emerged as an especially significant manifestation of a close interrelationship between art and society.

In order to examine the phenomenon of the hero's voice more fully against this backdrop, the close relationship between preliminary designs and staging concepts was analysed on the basis of an illustrative selection of singers and works. Our research thus focused on the cultural and generic parameters in which operas were composed and the concrete genesis of specific works in connection with the profiles of tenor roles written for specific singers, as well as on questions regarding the production, performance and reception of operas. Methodologically, this required an integration of approaches from musicology (musical analysis, philological analysis of sources, studies of voice physiology) and from general cultural studies of heroes and audiences. This combination of totally disparate disciplines added great methodological value to the project. Whereas studies of singers, voice and song have tended to be carried out from the point of view of biography⁵ or voice physiology⁶ or the history of singing⁷ or gender, our work succeeded in integrating approaches usually confined to individual disciplines. Moreover, the systematic, comparative study of tenor singing in France, Italy and Germany made it possible to reveal hitherto ignored interrelations between composers, works, singers and practices of singing and performance, as well as to strengthen the trend in current musicology research to think beyond generic boundaries and emphasize processes of cultural transfer.

The evaluation of the source materials described in the initial grant application and expanded during the course of our investigation resulted in sweeping insights. For example, new aspects of the mechanisms of national and cultural transfer, identity formation and differentiation have emerged in relation to the evaluation and reception of operas and opera singers. In discourse about the heroic in opera, national affiliation (in the sense of belonging to a culturally homogeneous unit) determined horizons of expectation and experience, and thus wildly disparate statements were made about the same singer and the same operas depending on the paradigms for rendering judgement that reigned in different countries. For example, Gilbert Louis Duprez's status as the creator of a new singing technique and the inventor of the "ut de poitrine"⁸ was revealed to be a national peculiarity thanks to the comparative analysis of the constructive character of his reception. The precondition for the heroization of the man and his achievement was the obfuscation of intercultural interrelations between advances in tenor singing in Italy and Duprez's application of them to the French repertoire.

Publications produced by project group A7

⁵ Appolonia, G. 1992: *Le voci di Rossini*, Turin; Luther, E. 1998: *So singe, Held! Biographie eines Stimmfaches*, Teil 1: *Wagnertenöre der Wagnerzeit (1842–1883)*, Trossingen/Berlin.

⁶ Smith Jr., M. L. 2011: *Adolphe Nourrit, Gilbert Duprez, and the high C: The influences of operatic plots, culture, language, theater design, and growth of orchestral forces on the development of the operatic tenor vocal production*, Las Vegas (diss.); Watson, J. 2005: *Wagner's Heldenentors: Uncovering the Myths*, Austin (diss.).

⁷ Potter, J. 2009: *Tenor. History of a Voice*, New Haven/London; Rosselli, J. 1992: *Singers of Italian Opera. History of a Profession*, Cambridge [et al.]; Verdino-Süllwold, C. M. 1989: *We need a Hero! Heldenentors from Wagner's Time to the Present. A Critical History*, West New York.

⁸ Already noted in research on singing by Beghelli und Bloch (Beghelli, M. 1996: *Il "Do di petto". Dissacrazione di un mito*, in: *Il Saggiatore musicale* 3, pp. 105–149; Bloch, G. W. 2007: *The pathological voice of Gilbert-Louis Duprez*, in: *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19, pp. 11–31).

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