

Rethinking Opera in Nineteenth-Century Habsburg Europe – Conference Report

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Presentation of the project in the frame of conference *Towards a Common Regional History of Nation Building Strategies*. Institute for Musicology, RCH, Bartók Hall Budapest, 27th May 2022

Rethinking Opera in Nineteenth-Century Habsburg Europe presented research undertaken within the framework of the ERC-funded project “Opera and the Politics of Empire in Habsburg Europe, 1815–1914,” based at Leipzig University. Directed by Axel Körner as PI, the project team includes a scientific manager (Doreen von Oertzen Becker), two postdoctoral researchers (Barbara Babić and Dietmar Friesenegger), two doctoral researchers (Moniká Jágerová and Riccardo Mandelli), as well as a number of internal and external collaborators, working on this project for a period of five years (2021–2026).

The project investigates opera and operatic politics in the Habsburg monarchy between the Congress of Vienna and the beginnings of World War One, emphasising transnational exchanges between the Empire’s numerous peoples and crownlands, as well as the role of opera in supporting Austria’s multinational concept of state. In doing so, the project challenges traditional narratives that have tended to reduce the political function of nineteenth-century opera to a tool of national ideology. Instead, our team examines the extent to which the Empire supported opera (both the form and the repertoire) as a means to create cultural and intellectual connections between its different lands and peoples, as well as between its political centre and its many peripheries.

Following a cross-disciplinary agenda, “Opera and the Politics of Empire in Habsburg Europe” responds to two distinct fields of scholarship: the contextual analysis of opera production; and new trends in Habsburg history, which have moved away from a narrow focus on ethnic and linguistic conflict to examine, instead, the role of imperial identity and dynastic loyalty in the monarchy’s territories, the impact of national hybridity characterising the sense of belonging among the monarchy’s populations, and factors such as religion, class and gender that cut across national identities. We aim to connect these two fields of scholar-

ship – opera studies and Habsburg history – by focussing on operatic exchanges within Habsburg Europe, as well as on interactions between different levels of imperial administration, the public and the theatre industry.

From a methodological point of view, our project combines cultural, intellectual and music history to investigate five areas of opera production that deeply marked the Habsburg monarchy's life throughout the nineteenth century:

- (i) the specific role of Italian opera in the Empire's politics of representation and in forming connections across its different crownlands and nationalities;
- (ii) the use of translations and of national vernaculars in opera production, and its significance in local, regional and imperial politics;
- (iii) the function of opera as a distinctive feature in the monarchy's dynastic representation, for instance during imperial travel or on diplomatic occasions;
- (iv) the impact of *grand opéra* on the Empire's cultural and political life, standing for a genre based on grand narratives that helped audiences to relate the monarchy's historical experience to larger questions of humanity and to events elsewhere in Europe and the wider world;
- (v) a specific focus on theatres in the Empire's Southern and Eastern peripheries, where opera served to build cultural bridges with the monarchy's political centres, in particular with Vienna and Budapest.

"Opera and the Politics of Empire in Habsburg Europe," therefore, is not organised along national or local case studies, but across a range of related themes that our team examines across different regions and operatic centres. It responds to a novel agenda in Habsburg history, but also to the recent transnational turn in opera studies, which aims at looking beyond a history of music and opera reduced to national categories of analysis.

At the conference in Budapest, in addition to Axel Körner's general outline of the project's main objectives, Barbara Babić and Dietmar Friesenegger presented two interconnected case studies on operatic politics in the Empire's Adriatic region and in the crownlands of Austrian Galicia and the Bukovina.

For more information on the project see <https://www.gkr.uni-leipzig.de/en/erc-transopera>.

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