

Sharing Omnipotence Fantasies between the Emperor and his Librettist in the Times of Enlightened Absolutism

HERBERT LACHMAYER

In the eighteenth century, opera was the *mise-en-scène* of a noble society which was staged throughout. The princely ruler in the audience, surrounded by his courtiers, encountered himself *in effigie* and saw himself through the mirror of the music theatre: as an individual in the “*pluralis majestatis*”, he was present in multiple ways. When the prince saw himself on stage in the mythological character of a god or as an ancient ruler, this profane epiphany conformed with the claim to his “*plural majesty*” in the symbolic forms of representation which it took to make the ruler real. In the age of enlightened absolutism of the late eighteenth century, operas were still written and composed for the rulers, even though they were no longer personally present on stage but sat in the audience watching “the follies of a day”. The privilege structure of dynastic aristocracy as a whole was tested as the prince was no longer needed in person. This especially describes the position of Joseph II who considered and imagined his subjects as “freemen,” at least from one angle, as he was also prone to princely ambivalence. “They all have to be entirely free immediately,” he said, although at the same time, he also wanted to control them *all*. No room was left for this in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Librettists and composers were artists and producers of symbols at court, and their work was vital for the “strategy of staging” and indispensable for ceremonies. After all, one could not get married in a princely family without an opera, and meals did not quite taste the same without festive table music. Thus artists were as important for everyday aristocratic celebrations as were bakers, butchers, architects or painters. Mozart the composer was not the only one who considered opera “the highest musical art form”. As a faceted mirror of reflective voyeurism and as a productive way of wasting self-stylisation on the profane “ceremonial altar” of gallantry and schemes, the opera was also the most evident way of collectively representing “ruler & court,” especially when it was performed to produce artistic pathos on the occasion of coronations, name days, peace treaties, etc. As a “media event” of symbolic relevance for the ruler, opera was the profane epiphany of the absolute ruler, especially the enlightened one.¹ Ruler and librettist met at the precarious interface of political omnipotence and of the fantasy of aesthetic omni [...]

¹ Herbert Lachmayer, “Da Ponte mit Mozart. Die reale Virtualität der Oper”, *Lorenzo Da Ponte. Aufbruch in die neue Welt*, Hg. Werner Hanak, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag 2006, pp. 11–14.