

## **The political *Argenia*: the opera *Die beständige Argenia* by Johann Valentin Meder against the background of the political events of its time**

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Anu Schaper

The performance in Tallinn (Reval) in 1680 of Johann Valentin Meder's *Die beständige Argenia* (*Constant Argenia*; 1680), the first opera written and performed in Estonia, at a time when opera was quite new even in Germany, may be considered an absolutely extraordinary event. As one of the earliest German operas, *Die beständige Argenia* was published in the series *Das Erbe deutscher Musik* (*The Heritage of German Music*; Braun 1973), but it is dedicated to the Swedish royal couple, and the autograph lies in the National Library of Sweden in Stockholm. Strong political, cultural and economic links with Sweden and Germany played an important role in the history of the opera. This paper considers these, establishing the chronological events relating to the performance on the basis of archive research.

The Duchy of Estonia belonged at that time to the Swedish Empire. Swedish power was represented through a Governor or Governor-General who resided in Toompea (Domberg), by Tallinn, as did the Bishop of Estonia. Tallinn made up an autonomous administrative and ecclesiastic unit, and the local elite consisted largely of German merchants and nobility. Tallinn was governed by the town council and it had its own consistory. Toompea was not part of Tallinn, and the relations between (the burghers of) Tallinn and (the nobility of) Toompea were often rather tense.

Johann Valentin Meder (1649-1719), who came from Wasungen in Thuringia, remained in Tallinn for nearly ten years; between 1674 and 1684 he held the post of *Kantor* at the *Gymnasium*. While in Tallinn, *Die beständige Argenia* was his greatest undertaking outside his official duties. The impulse for its composition was provided by the marriage in 1679 of the Swedish King Karl XI and the princess of Denmark Ulrike Eleonore, to whom the opera is jointly dedicated. However, Meder was evidently also inspired by the peace treaty between Sweden and Denmark (of which the marriage was the outcome) following the Scanian War. Braun (2010: 262ff.) and Siitan (1999: 31f.) have thoroughly demonstrated rich parallels between the opera and the real events of the war as well as with historical people.

In spite of the opera's happy ending – the two couples come together and the intriguer is punished – the potentates of the time did not welcome the connections between the subject of the opera and the recent war with their new allies at all. The performance of the opera, planned for 29<sup>th</sup> October 1680, was delayed owing to the protest of the bishop, Jakob Helwig. After censorship (which was hardly unusual at the time), which apparently resulted in some minor textual changes (see the critical edition, Braun 1973: 166ff.), repeated admonishments by the town council and an attestation by the directors of the *Gymnasium* (*Gymnasiarchas*), the performance was finally allowed to go ahead. It took place in the Great Guild Hall in November 1680 (the exact date is unknown). Difficulties continued, however, after the performance. Bishop Helwig enquired about the results of his protest (to no avail), and in his so-called “Comet-sermon” on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1681, motivated by a comet visible in Tallinn, he condemned “awkward spectacles which degrade high majesties” (Rosen 1910: 53). Last but not least, the Council of Tallinn received a letter from Swedish King on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1681 with a message that Denmark had sent a note to Sweden because of the performance of the “comedy”, in which the King of Denmark had been affronted. Hereupon Meder sent a letter to the Council, explaining in depth the background to his opera and affirming the purely fictional nature of its plot, and asking them to send his manuscript to the King of Sweden (which the council did in fact do, along with a carefully balanced diplomatic letter). As late as the spring of 1682 Meder was cited to appear before the governor, for in relation to the opera he had designated Bishop Helwig as his enemy in a letter to Sweden. Indeed, in the event no sanctions were imposed against Meder.

The permission granted for the performance by the Council and the Council's reaction to the enquiry of Bishop Helwig and to the letter of the King of Sweden must be considered in a broader context. The Council of Tallinn wanted to maintain the special status of Tallinn in all respects. Besides, the far from neighbourly relations between the town and Toompea in all probability also played a role in matters concerning the opera. Against this backdrop it is no surprise that the Council did not hurry to ban the performance or to impose sanctions against Meder, who led the town's musical life, worked at the

*Gymnasium*, a representative institution of Tallinn, and who also enjoyed a very good relationship with the Council itself. The attitude of the council in matters concerning the opera and Meder is to be interpreted as highly protective, the more so as the Council found itself in a complicated situation with Stockholm at the time. Disagreements between the Council and the Great Guild were to be settled by the King of Sweden (see more in Pezold 1975: 165–169) and, in addition, the King's autocratic rule had come into force in 1680. Both these factors reduced the autonomous power of the town.

Several authors have speculated about Meder's ambitions to use the opera as a steppingstone for a post at the Stockholm Court, maybe even that of *Kapellmeister*. Since Meder, in his later Riga years, served the Swedish Governor-General Erik Dahlberg for a short while (probably 1700–1701) (Arnhem 1910/11: 414), his self-confident claim in a letter to the organist of Stralsund Christoph Raupach, sent from Riga and dated 17<sup>th</sup> May 1707 (Mattheson 1910 [1740]: 221), that he would already have been in Stockholm as *Kapellmeister* for a long time had not His Majesty the Swedish King (by that time Karl XII) been involved in a protracted war (the Great Northern War) could indeed also be linked to this much later post in Riga.

Thus *Die beständige Argenia* did not worsen Meder's relationship with the Council of Tallinn; neither, as has sometimes been assumed, was it the reason for his resignation from the post of *Kantor* and his departure from Tallinn in 1683/4. However, as a stepping stone for a post at the Swedish Court in Stockholm the opera failed.