

Bürger-Oper and Bourgeois Theatre: The Opera of Hamburg at the Gänsemarkt (1678–1738) as a Culmination of Theatrical Practices Between Courtly Representation and Popular Traditions

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Abstract

The opera at the Gänsemarkt in Hamburg (1678–1738) was the first theatre in the German-speaking world to have a continuous cast, was run by a civic interest group, and was in principle open to everyone. Through the lens of theatre studies, in addition to a trans-regional cultural transfer, the present article focuses on theatre- and cultural-historical processes that have had a lasting effect and which can be also deduced from the eventful history of the opera house. As Hamburg's *Bürger-Oper* it is still rooted in the cultural memory, even though the Gänsemarkt-Oper, as far as its founding impulse and self-image was concerned, owed much to the demands and requirements of a courtly festive and theatrical culture. The repertoire of the opera reflects this: about one-sixth of the 300 operas performed were integrated into courtly aristocratic representations. Paradoxically, however, theoretical as well as practical interactions can be derived from these festive operas which – under the influence of a Protestant culture on the one hand, and in the interplay with popular theatre practices such as those of the Hamburg *opéras comiques* in the tradition of the *Théâtre de la Foire* on the other – foreshadowed in a remarkable manner the definition and fictional concept of the later bourgeois (straight) theatre of the Enlightenment.

The Gänsemarkt-Oper as a culmination of theatre practices and theatre discourses

Anniversaries are a welcome occasion to look back on a continuous tradition that has had a lasting effect up to the present. The commitment of the local bourgeoisie, whose determination and foresight allowed the celebrated institution to develop unimpeded by aristocratic, state or church influence, is indeed something to be celebrated. In 1978 the Free and Hanseatic city of Hamburg had the opportunity for celebrating the past (cf. Jaacks 1977; Wenzel 1978): 300 years earlier, in January 1678, an opera house had opened on the Hamburg Gänsemarkt with the "Singe-Spiel" *Der erschaffene/ gefallene und auffgerichtete Mensch* (Richter 1980 [1678]), a work commissioned from the composer Johann Theile (1646–1724) on the Old Testament story of the creation and the Fall of Man, based on Genesis 1–3. As the earliest theatre institution in the German-speaking world, it hosted local ensembles continuously. Furthermore, it was managed by a civic interest group: for the first time, theatre – a matter of the aristocratic court or the public marketplace until the early modern period, though here and there tied to festive times (cf. Baumbach 2018:

222–230) – could be experienced permanently in a German-speaking and, moreover, a Protestant-oriented city. In principle, the Gänsemarkt-Oper, run as a business, was in an apparently democratic manner open to anyone who could afford the admission – "whether Ketelklopper [worker at a ship's kettle with low social status; translator's note] or respectable merchant" (Mares 1977: 17).

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries the Hanseatic city of Hamburg was undoubtedly an outstanding place in terms of theatre history: in no other city in the German-speaking cultural area was theatre established as a permanent institution so early on. A similar continuity was not granted to other undertakings such as the Leipzig Brühl-Oper (1693–1720), to give a specific example (cf. Maul 2009: Bd. 1, 41), regardless of whether the theatre was privately financed and operated by a civic interest group or subordinate to a solvent royal court and integrated into its festive and representative context. Only in the late stage of the Gänsemarkt-Oper did a financial crisis occur as a result of various changes of tenants, a phenomenon which was, according to contemporary observers, accompanied by artistic decline (cf. Lamprecht 1937 [1736]; Schütze 1794; Rekatzky 2019: 437–445). In March 1738 the