

## *Friedrich der Grosse: An Introduction*

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Carlyle's contempt for the opera of his day was almost as boundless as his fascination with the kaleidoscopic impact that it exercised on its audience. In his essay "The Opera" (1852) he recorded his impressions of his visit to the Haymarket Theater to attend a performance of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* (first performance, 1816): "Lustres, candelabras, painting, gilding at discretion; a hall as of the Caliph Alraschid, or him that commanded the slaves of the Lamp; a hall as if fitted up by the genii, regardless of expense. Upholstery, and the outlay of human capital, could do no more. Artists, too, as they are called, have been got together, from the ends of the world, regardless likewise of expense, to do singing and dancing, some of them even geniuses in their craft" (*Works* 29: 399). For Carlyle, the gilding itself was symbolic of the degeneracy of the spectacle, which had reduced art to entertainment, and music—the purest and truest of all the arts—to cheap sentimentality and "unveracity." In a provocative comparison, Carlyle likened the singers to Negro slaves, bound by the Philistine tastes of their aristocratic masters to squander their talents on a spectacle of frippery and froth.

Yet as Karen Tongson has astutely observed, Carlyle engaged with his subject in revealing ways: "[He] uses his critical insight to peer closely at the opera, ultimately sharing its findings with a bombastic vocal force rivaling those of the singers he simultaneously critiques and mourns." Rossini's opera accurately mirrored the soul of the unheroic Haymarket audience, a "select populace, with money in its purse, and drilled a little by the posture-master" (*Works* 29: 400). But

music in general, and opera in particular, held out nobler possibilities for Carlyle, which he would soon explore in his history of *Frederick the Great* (1858–65). In his view, music was “heavenly” because it had always been identified with prophecy and the Gods. Carlyle reminded his readers that “Sophocles also sang, and showed in grand dramatic rhythm and melody, not a fable but a fact, the best he could interpret it. . . . Aeschylus, Sophocles, all noble poets were priests as well; and sang the truest . . . they had been privileged to discover here below” (*Works* 29: 398).

Opera was especially appealing to Carlyle as a historian for its fusion of drama, dance, setting, music, and plot. It was a synthesis of multiple forms of expression, all of which combined to produce “the divine art of Musical Sound and Rhythmic Motion” (*Works* 29: 400). He had already demonstrated in *The French Revolution* (1837) how operatic techniques of staging might be borrowed by the historian to solve the conundrum of narrative history: how to reconcile linearity with simultaneity in the reconstruction of the past. In “On History” (1830) Carlyle explained, “The most gifted man can observe, still more can record, only the *series* of his own impressions: his observation . . . must be *successive*, while the things done were often *simultaneous*” (7). *The French Revolution* proved to be a chaos of competing voices, with Carlyle serving as director, conductor, chorus-master, and composer to the bedlam that he had unleashed.

In *Frederick the Great*, Carlyle continued to explore the operatic parallels as a means of conveying the multitudinousness of historical experience. Music itself was central to the life of his protagonist, as well as to the cultural life of Frederick’s court. Repeatedly in his Prussian epic, Carlyle conceives scenes in the manner of Mozart or Rossini in an effort to catch a vivid glimpse of the lost world of Frederick’s past. It was this operatic aspect of the history that prompted me to persuade the novelist and poet April Lindner to take up the challenge that Carlyle issued to his readers in the opening “Proem” to *Frederick the Great*: to “try for some [new] Historical Conception of this Man and King; some answer to the question ‘What was he, then? Whence, how? And what did he achieve and suffer in the world?’” (*Works* 12: 4). The result is published in this

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journal for the first time: a synopsis of an opera, *Friedrich der Grosse*, based on Carlyle's history and now constituting an unprecedented Carlylean "Fact."

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### Works Cited

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