

Byzantium on Stage. Heraclius as an Opera Character in the Context of Early Modern Power Representation

When exploring potential case studies for this paper¹, which is also dedicated to the reception of late antique or early Byzantine rulers, one is confronted with the fundamental and somewhat provocative question: How far does the courtly sphere actually extend? For the Viennese context, Matthias Schnettger has already shown that such references to Byzantium were made in court opera. Particularly the Christian emperors including Constantine the Great and the cross symbol were frequently taken up in the context of the Ottoman wars².

This article – quite deliberately – focuses on a German-language piece that appears to be quite different at first glance, one might almost say it forms a counter example to court opera. It is Reinhard Keiser's singspiel *Die wiederhergestellte Ruh/ oder Die gecrönte Tapferkeit des Heraclius*, which was performed at the Gänsemarktoper in Hamburg in 1712³.

Previous research has shed light on Heraclius' role in drama and music theatre from different perspectives: On the one hand, there are the observations made by Bernhard Jahn and Irmgard Scheitler in the field of German studies⁴. On the other hand, Dorothea Schröder has specifically dealt with Keiser's *Heraclius* in the context of the festive culture in Hamburg in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries⁵.

It is an extraordinary example for the following reason: Preface and epilogue are establishing connections between the courtly sphere and Byzantine history. This exemplifies that such attributions were used in the service of imperial homage, representation, and legitimation – even beyond the narrower framework of operas actually performed at court. Especially Venice and Hamburg are often described as opera centres with a strong public tendency. Undoubtedly, due to economic

requirements, the Venetian opera business did dispose of a significant public orientation, however, it was not devoid of courtly elements. As, for example, dedications to nobles show, the public and courtly spheres were not completely distinct. For the Oper am Gänsemarkt, generally considered the first exclusively public opera house, there is evidence, too, that it was a cultural institution not capable of escaping the influence of current day politics, thus not entirely independent of imperial contexts⁶.

Since the reception of Byzantine history in the music theatre of the Early Modern Period was not an isolated phenomenon, the following considerations start with some general remarks. Starting from Venice, Byzantine topics were subsequently represented in other Italian opera centres and also taken up in German-speaking countries.

According to the three-part division of Byzantine history, particularly topics from the early and middle Byzantine period, less so from the late Byzantine period were taken up frequently. And yet: Even though references to Early Byzantium were exceptionally attractive for representative purposes in the sense of an extended reception of Antiquity, the reception of such topics was by no means limited to Late Antiquity or Early Byzantium respectively. In fact, the entire range of Byzantine history was covered to the ends of Byzantium functioning as a nexus between Antiquity and the Early Modern Period. Thus, the synthesis Rome – Byzantium – Holy Roman Empire suggested a continuous line originating in Antiquity. How was this accomplished in the field of music theatre?

Neither the German-speaking world could evade the fascinating potential of functionalizing Byzantine history in sociopolitical interpretative contexts, as for example pieces

1 Although this was not an isolated case, apart from primarily work-related studies and libretto-based surveys (cf. for example Bossard, Giovanni Legrenzi. Il Giustino; Della Valle, Bisanzio all'opera; Seebald, Libretti vom »Mittelalter«; Smythe, Byzantium: A Night at the Opéra) there has so far been no detailed, extensive discourse on the reception of subjects from Byzantine history in the Italian-language music theatre.

2 For further information on the use of the cross symbol at the court of Charles VI cf. Matsche, Die Kunst im Dienst der Staatsidee 125. 126-128. 133.

3 Libretto: Johann Ulrich König / Reinhard Keiser, *Heraclius* (Hamburg 1712); score: Reinhard Keiser, *Heraclius* (Hamburg 1712).

4 Jahn, L'Adelaide und L'Heraclio; Scheitler, Metamorphosen.

5 Schröder, Zeitgeschichte.

6 For example cf. Schröder, Zeitgeschichte 2-3.

on – best known and most prevalent – Otto II and Theophanu, Constantine the Great, Theodosius II, Justin I, Heraclius, and Irene Doukaina attest⁷.

Similarly to Constantine the Great, Heraclius is inseparably connected with the cross symbol – he is connected with the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem⁸, which is at least reverberating in the metaphorical layers surrounding these performances.

Together with *L'Heraclio* (Venice 1671)⁹, *L'Eraclio* (Naples 1673)¹⁰, *L'Eraclio* (Munich 1690)¹¹, *Phocas* (Leipzig 1696)¹², *L'Eraclio* (Rome 1712)¹³, the Hamburg homage to the East Roman emperor is part of a larger reception tradition.

The libretto written by Johann Ulrich König is based on the Venetian piece from 1671, i. e. the text by Nicolò Beregan, which is patterned on Pierre Corneille's tragedy *Héraclius, empereur d'Orient* (Paris 1647).

The occasion of the performance was Charles' VI coronation as King of Hungary following the Peace of Szatmár (1711) brought about by Joseph I. Furthermore, Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel was honoured with the performance. In fact, Charles' VI wife, Elisabeth Christine, was his granddaughter. Thus, the long and descriptive title of the singspiel can be read as a short summary referring to these current political events at the same time. While the celebrations of the Hungarian coronation are directly mentioned in the title, Schröder uncovers a further intention behind the homage to Charles VI in Hamburg, namely: The conflicts ignited between the Hamburg Council and Citizenry following the reopening of the imperial commission were making it necessary to appease Charles VI¹⁴.

What is Keiser's singspiel about? Its title already provides information on the plot – peace brought about by the title hero Heraclius after times of trouble – and the *dramatis personae* names the following imperial protagonists:

»Heraclius, Nachfolger des Phocas,
Mauritius, der überwundene Kayser.
Phocas, der Tyrannische Kayser in Constantinopel«¹⁵.

Thus, three emperors and the succession of rulership connected with Mauritius' death are in the centre of attention. References to Charles VI, as can be seen in the further course of the preface, are differentiated and directly connected with the plot, i. e. they do not remain on a metaphorical level, but are openly phrased as a comparison. On top of that, a genealogical reference is included:

»und hat man den Inhalt dieses Sing=Spiels um so viel lieber aus den Geschichten der alten Griechischen Kayser entlehnen wollen/weil nach der Genealogischen Deduction des Herrn Professor Eckhardts in Helmstädt/die Aller=Durchlauchtigste Gemahlin/unsers Allergnädigsten Kaysers/von einem Griechischen Regenten/nemlich dem Ruhmwürdigsten Kayser Constantino Porphyrogenito abstammet«¹⁶.

Viewed separately, these relations between the political context and the piece itself are already interesting enough. However, with a closer look to the libretto and score, this article means to go beyond these merely context-related aspects. It does not conclude with the analysis of the paratexts included in the libretto, but first also takes a deeper look at the work itself: How do these references to the contemporary political sphere work in the inner architecture of the singspiel itself? As the research question revolves around an homage to the emperor, the analysis focuses on the rulers in the piece.

The preface describes the transformation of Phocas towards a presumptuous and hybrid tyrant:

7 The following overview gives an insight into the reception of Byzantium in German-language opera centres. It is, however, just a selection of pieces – especially the large number of Ottone adaptations cannot be fully represented in this framework.

Brunswick

Carlo Francesco Pollarolo, Ottone (1697); Johann Joseph Fux / Francesco Gasparini / Antonio Caldara, Teodosio ed Eudossa (1716); Carlo Francesco Gasparini / Antonio Lotti, Costantino (1718); George Frideric Handel, Ottone, Rè di Germania (1723, 1725); George Frideric Handel / Georg Caspar Schürmann, Justinus (1725, 1726, 1741).

Dresden

Antonio Lotti, Teofane (1719); Johann Adolph Hasse, Irene (1738).

Hamburg

Johann Philipp Förtsch, Bajazeth und Tamerlan (1690, 1695); Reinhard Keiser, Mahumeth II. (1696); Johann Christian Schiefferdecker, Justinus (1706); Reinhard Keiser, Die wiederhergestellte Ruh oder Die gecrönte Tapferkeit des Heraclius (1712); Johann Joseph Fux, Francesco Gasparini, Antonio Caldara, Teodosio (1718, 1719, 1721); George Frideric Handel, Tamerlan (1725, 1726); Georg Friedrich Händel, Georg Philipp Telemann, Otto (1726, 1727, 1729); Anon., Bajazet (1748).

Leipzig

Nicolaus Adam Strungk, Phocas (1696); Johann Christian Schiefferdecker, Justinus (1700).

Munich

Giuseppe Antonio Bernabei, L'Eraclio (1690).

Vienna

Marc' Antonio Ziani / Antonio Negri / Antonio Caldara, L'Atenaide (Vienna 1714); Antonio Lotti, Costantino (Vienna 1716); Giuseppe Bonno, L'Atenaide, ovvero Gli affetti generosi (1762).

- 8 cf. Viermann, Herakleios, der schwitzende Kaiser 344.
- 9 Beregan/Ziani, L'Heraclio.
- 10 Beregan/Cicciniello/Ziani, L'Eraclio.
- 11 Bernardoni [?] / Bernabei, L'Eraclio.
- 12 Boxberg/Strungk, Phocas.
- 13 Bernardoni/Anon./Gasparini/Pollarolo, L'Eraclio.
- 14 cf. Schröder, Zeitgeschichte 145-148.
- 15 König/Keiser, Heraclius [2].
- 16 König/Keiser, Heraclius [7]. While Dorothea Schröder categorizes this reference to Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, who was in Hamburg, as a fortunate coincidence (cf. Schröder, Zeitgeschichte 149) but not the reason for the choice of this subject matter, it has to be noted that the specific mention of this genealogical relationship creates closeness to Byzantium and the imperial contexts in which its reception was functionalized.

»Phocas, ein Tyrann/welchem am Stoltz/Wollust und Grausamkeit keiner zu vergleichen/nachdem ihn sein Glück aus einem Stall-Knechte zu einem Hauptmann/die rebellierende Soldaten aber gar auff den Kayserl. Thron erhoben/wurde so hochmüthig/daß Er sich nach der erbärmlichsten Hinrichtung des von ihm verstossenen Mauriti, und der gantzen Kayserl. Familie gleichsam als einen irdischen Gott wollte verehrt wissen«¹⁷.

Accordingly, in scene I,9, Phocas attracts attention with an extremely pompous appearance expressed both on a musical level and by the scenic presentation. In this light, the setting is creating an entity isolating the figure of Phocas from his surroundings:

»Der Himmel öffnet sich unter Donner und Blitzen/Phocas erscheint auff einem Adler/in Gestalt des Jupiters/in einer helleuchtenden Wolcke/umgeben mit vielen erdichteten Göttern und Göttinnen [usw.]«¹⁸.

With the following *aria à tutti*, sung by the choir, maximum efforts are achieved not only visually throughout the scenery of the thunderstorm with lightning, but also acoustically:

»Man hört den Schall von Phocas Ruhm
Schon durch die zwölf=gestirnten Häuser;
Der Himmel wird sein Eigenthum/
Und Fama windet Lorbeer=Reiser
Zum Ruhm des Kaysers aller Kayser«¹⁹.

No power related symbol is missing, the exuberance of attributes is overstraining and resulting in an artificial self-promotion given that Phocas may be claiming all of this but is in fact not the legitimate ruler. As is well known, the eagle was the field emblem with the highest rank in the Roman legions. According to its mythological meaning, the symbol of the eagle was associated with Jupiter, being his messenger. Thus, Phocas is depicted in a loud and dazzling manner, however, leaving the impression of a vicious tyrant. The text of this *aria à tutti*, set in *da capo* form, should be kept in mind for later because it will reoccur in another place. As the conversation in the following recitative reveals, this tribute is indeed merely a superficial homage. Communication is carried out on two layers: On the surface, there is an impressive tribute to the self-proclaimed ruler, everything the tyrant himself wants to hear, whereas behind his back blasphemous words are

spreading, i. e. he is by no means openly accepted as a sincere sovereign. About himself, he speaks as if he were a god:

»Nun solstu/Schönste/wissen/
Wie Jupiter pflegt sein Gemahl zu küssen«²⁰.

All in all, this scene confirms the unapproachable, hybrid self-elevation already hinted at in the preface.

In contrast, Heraclius and Theodosia's aria »Verzweiflung und Rachgier«²¹ in II,6, a heartfelt and also musical argument between the jealous Heraclius and Theodosia further extending to the following recitative, portrays him as a human being not devoid of weaknesses. Despite being a virtuous and heroic saviour, hit by jealousy he gets detached and is not himself here. All of Theodosia's attempts for appeasing him – musically rendered as short and frequent interjections – are failing, his passion and temper are stronger. This scene strongly differs from the (self-)depiction of the cold-hearted Phocas. Seen in the context of representative endeavours, it gets clear that it contributes to the image of a ruler one can identify with.

Similarly, Phocas is again characterized not only by simple attributes, but throughout the entire scenic context, in IV,4 and IV,5. Conspicuously set as a dream scene departing from Phocas awaiting a romantic meeting, it yields a contrast with maximum impact²². It is located in the

»Kayserliche[n] Lust Garten mit Statuen, Vases, Orangerien, Wasser-Künsten/und Bienen-Körben/hinten ein Lust-Hauss/welches den Berg Parnass mit dem Apollo und den 9. Musen abbildet«²³.

It is starting in an idyllic atmosphere, but then slips out of Phocas' control as soon as he falls asleep²⁴. Then both scenery and music are undergoing a major spectacular transformation:

»Die sanffte Music unter welcher er einschlummert/verwandelt sich in eine Symphonie Infernale, worauff das vorder Theatrum eine feurige Wohnung derer greßlichen Gespenster und Ungeheur: Der hinter Teil des Schauplatzes aber den Tempel der Ehren vorstellet/woselbst man ein prächtiges Mausoleè von verschiedenen Statuen in Lebens-Grösse/als: Der Gerechtigkeit/deß Verhängnisses / und der Göttlichen Rache ersiehet/unter welchem der Geist des Mauritius in einen verklärten Wolcken/und über demselben 2. Genien mit Lorbeer-Crüntzen schweben«²⁵.

17 König/Keiser, Heraclius [5].

18 König/Keiser, Heraclius [22].

19 König/Keiser, Heraclius [22]; Keiser, Heraclius 38-42.

20 König/Keiser, Heraclius [23]. Here, he is addressing Theodosia.

21 König/Keiser, Heraclius [28]; Keiser, Heraclius 60-62. This *aria à due* with the couple's heated dialogue stands out, as such dramatic conversations in this musical form were quite rare until well after the middle of the 18th c. (cf. Schläder, Das Opernduett 241).

22 Given that in the French tradition of the 17th c., either good or bad dreams appeared as the protagonists of ballets with an allegorical character (cf. Gier,

»Ein Traum, was sonst?« 42), the spirit of Mauritius seems to take this place here.

23 König/Keiser, Heraclius [42].

24 Being asleep, Phoca is shown in a weak state as he is exposed to his surroundings without being able to react, defend himself or flee. Cf. Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice* 338: »a sleeping character is vulnerable – to assassination, to rape, to penetration of disguise, and to involuntary disclosures via dreams«.

25 König/Keiser, Heraclius [42].

Nightmarishly, Phocas' romantic expectations, his dream, turn into a threatening situation while his misdeeds are haunting him and are impersonated by the appearance of Mauritius' spirit. From a dramaturgical point-of-view this construction is very well calculated, as this phenomenon adds another dimension. On the one hand, it incorporates the past and on the other hand, the dream scene as a whole almost seems to be a continuum where traces of time and place are dissolved. Whereas Phocas' words are set as a plain *recitativo secco*, Mauritius' entry is highlighted by orchestra accompaniment. His *recitativo accompagnato* allows for a dynamic response to the action. While directly addressing Phocas, Mauritius' ghost is evoked by the thunderstorm:

»Schläft stu [sic]/ Blutdürstiger Tyrann?
Da die Gerechtigkeit des Himmels wachet /
Und über dir mit Blitz und Straffe krachet /
Der Abgrund hat sich/mich zu rächen/auffgethan;
Auf/Mörder/auf! Kennstu Mauritius?
Der dich auch aus der Grufft verfolgen muß.
Schau Wüterich! Wie das Verhängniß dich verdammet /
Indem der Unschuld Glantz um meine Schläffe
flammet«²⁶.

His recitative resembles a live account of the events – a very powerful dramatic tool in conjunction with the flexible musical structure. For instance, the semiquaver movements following Mauritius' fourth verse of the recitative visualizes the opening of the abyss and Mauritius' powerful appearance from above. This scene then culminates in the »Entreè [sic] furies«²⁷ – an instrumental passage providing the basis for the entry of the furies. This ballet is starting with dance movements of the statues and the three furies' ascent from the abyss accompanied by fire and steam. Not only is it the cli-

max of the scene, but with the disappearance of the dancers it also brings about its solution²⁸. Given the special character of this sleep scene, this closing effect suits the dissolving of Phocas' dream. In the following scene he is furiously waking up, the echo of his misdeeds and uneasiness are feeding his anger and leading him to a downward spiral (figs 1-3).

So much can generally be said about the portrayal of the two main characters of the singspiel. Moreover, the depiction of the rulers within the piece interacts with the paratexts. Thus, the epilogue²⁹ presents a riddle to connect to the current surroundings culminating in the question »Soll ich euch den Helden nennen?/Wolt [sic] ihr diesen Kayser kennen?«³⁰ The correct answer is of course Charles. For greater emphasis, this revelation is followed by the *aria à tutti* »Man hört den Schall von Carols Ruhm« using the exact same words as the piece in the singspiel – the only difference being the exchanged name of the honoured ruler. Finally the epilogue concludes with a tribute to all dedicatees.

In the examples shown it has become clear that Phocas and Heraclius are both extremely overdrawn characters based on the baroque principle of contrast. Unlike Phocas' maliciousness, Heraclius' weaknesses are explicable and thus accepted as excusable.

Within the plot, the imperial symbols are wrongfully taken by Phocas. In the epilogue, they are granted to the rightful sovereign Charles VI and Heraclius respectively.

Asking once again for the relationship between the courtly or public character of opera and the reception of Byzantium, the example of Keiser's singspiel *Heraclius* proves that references to Byzantium fulfilled a court-related function even in centres with predominantly public tendencies, and in fact not only in paratexts, but also within the works themselves.

26 König/Keiser, *Heraclius* [42-43]; Keiser, *Heraclius* 108, 111-112.

27 The French term alludes to the French tradition of the tableau-like dream vision occurring from the end of the 17th c. to the beginning of the 19th c. A prominent example connecting music, dance, and setting can be found in Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Atys* (Saint-Germain-en-Laye 1676) (cf. Henze-Döhring, *Traumvisionen* 315). Typically, it presents good and bad dreams and can have a prophetic function predicting the outcome of the dramatic events (cf. *ibid.* 316). While the dream vision had allegorical connotations in the 17th c., the singers and dancers were directly affecting the dreamer. Thus, they would for

instance foretell a hero's triumph (cf. *ibid.* 318-319). At the same time, this new tendency also opened up the sphere of the subconscious – turning the dreamer's inside out and confronting them with their inner self (cf. *ibid.* 326).

28 cf. König/Keiser, *Heraclius* [43].

29 König/Keiser, *Heraclius* [57-59]; Keiser, *Heraclius*, last pages unpaginated, [151-154]. According to Krämer, *Text und Paratext* 73, the paratexts guided the perception of a performance and could record ceremonial events, thus creating memories of special occurrences.

30 König/Keiser, *Heraclius* [57].

108. *Scena quarta.*

*Der Regierliche Lustgarten, mit statthen, Vaser, Orangerien
 außerscheiden, und Bienen-Lücken, finden im Lustgarten
 Mithras den Brey Parnas mit dem Grobe, und
 den g. Mithras abtrot.*

Phocas.

Phoc. 1

*Alles, was ich mit Freyheit fassen dem Vortheil in
 der göttlichen Ein, was ich mit Vortheil die besten fassen,
 in, die mich dreyfassen fassen, in dem ich adollen fassen, so glücklich
 was ich zu Vortheil fassen, so soll sie sich in fassen fassen
 fassen, ich soll mich so lang zu diesen fassen. Das
 was ich fassen mit dem besten die Augen zu? auf Romme
 bald, da längst gedünstet auf.*

Fig. 1 Phocas' recitative opening the dream scene (IV,4). – (Digital reproduction of the score autograph in PL-Kj, Berol. Mus. ms. autogr. Keiser, Heraclius 108 by courtesy of Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Kraków).

111.

Scena quinta.

Phocas, und Mauritiu Geist.

Accompagnement.

Maur.

Schlaffen, blutdürstigen Augen? Da die grausigste Art der Strafe rausch und
über die mit Fleiß und Kraft Kraft, der abgerund hat sich, muß zu rufen auf ge-
hen; 12. Auf, Mörder, auf! Konst du Mauritius? Der sah auf auf der

Fig. 2 The appearance of Mauritius' spirit (IV,5). – (Digital reproduction of the score autograph in PL-Kj, Berol. Mus. ms. autogr. Keiser, Heraclius 111, by courtesy of Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Kraków).



Fig. 3 Continuation of the dream scene with entry of the furies (IV,5). – (Digital reproduction of the score autograph in PL-Kj, Berol. Mus. ms. autogr. Keiser, Heraclius 112, by courtesy of Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Kraków).

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Byzantium on Stage. Heraclius as an Opera Character in the Context of Early Modern Power Representation
References to Byzantine history appeared frequently in early modern music theatre – not only in Italy, but also in German-speaking countries. For example, Justin I, Heraclius, Otto II and Theophanu were often the focus of attention. This paper focuses on Reinhard Keiser's Singspiel »Die wiederhergestellte Ruh oder Die gecrönte Tapferkeit des Heraclius« (Hamburg 1712), which was performed at the Oper am Gänsemarkt on the occasion of the Hungarian coronation festival. It contains very explicit references to Charles VI and his wife Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, here mentioned as a descendant of Constantine VII. This example shows that such attributions in the service of representation and legitimation also took place outside the narrower framework of court opera.

Byzanz auf der Bühne. Herakleios als Opernfigur im Kontext frühneuzeitlicher Herrschaftsrepräsentation
Im frühneuzeitlichen Musiktheater tauchten immer wieder Bezüge zur byzantinischen Geschichte auf – nicht nur in Italien, sondern auch im deutschsprachigen Raum. Justin I., Herakleios, Otto II. und Theophanu standen dabei häufig im Mittelpunkt. Der vorliegende Beitrag konzentriert sich auf Reinhard Keisers Singspiel »Die wiederhergestellte Ruh oder Die gecrönte Tapferkeit des Heraclius« (Hamburg 1712), das anlässlich des ungarischen Krönungsfestes an der Oper am Gänsemarkt aufgeführt wurde. Es enthält sehr explizite Hinweise auf Karl VI. und seine Gemahlin Elisabeth Christine von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, die hier als Nachfahrin Konstantins VII. erwähnt wird. Dieses Beispiel zeigt, dass solche Zuschreibungen im Dienste der Repräsentation und Legitimation auch außerhalb des engeren Rahmens der höfischen Oper stattfanden.

Byzance sur scène. Héraclius en tant que personnage d'opéra dans le contexte de la représentation du pouvoir au début de l'époque moderne
Les références à l'histoire byzantine étaient fréquentes dans le théâtre musical du début de l'époque moderne, non seulement en Italie, mais aussi dans les pays germanophones. Par exemple, Justin I^{er}, Héraclius, Otton II et Théophano étaient souvent au centre de l'attention. Cet article se concentre sur le Singspiel »Die wiederhergestellte Ruh oder Die gecrönte Tapferkeit des Heraclius« (Hambourg 1712) de Reinhard Keiser, qui a été joué à l'Oper am Gänsemarkt à l'occasion du festival du couronnement hongrois. Il contient des références très explicites à Charles VI et à son épouse Élisabeth Christine de Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, mentionnée ici comme descendante de Constantin VII. Cet exemple montre que de telles attributions au service de la représentation et de la légitimation ont également eu lieu en dehors du cadre plus étroit de l'opéra de cour.