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Fall 12-14-2022

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#### Recommended Citation

Jaworowski, Jonathan; Tereza, Abriana; and Thomaschefsky, Rachel. "Theater auf der Wieden - History of location, audiences, and mechanics" (2022). *2022 Festschrift: Mozart's Die Zauberflöte*. <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/muscfest2022/1>

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Theater auf der Wieden - History of location, audiences, and mechanics

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MUSC 311- Styles and Literature of Music I  
December 11, 2022

Abstract

There are many historical connections between Vienna's theater scene and the original theater that Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* was performed in. This paper discusses the audiences of the Theater, the location, architecture and mechanics. Although much has changed within theaters since the 18th century, some things still remain the same.

The development of *Die Zauberflöte* in Vienna, Austria was influenced by many factors that have shaped its deep history. Located in a major operatic center, the Theater auf der Wieden established standards for high-quality performances. There were many influential individuals that contributed to the success of *Die Zauberflöte* and Viennese theater, as well as those who attended the production. In addition to the audiences and location of the Theater auf der Wieden, there were many architectural and mechanical elements that enhanced the storytelling components that the composers wanted to convey in their musical works. The production of *Die Zauberflöte* contains many features that are highly valued and used in present-day theatrical productions.

Vienna is the capital of Austria, formerly known as the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the Holy Roman Empire. This city is known as one of the most popular operatic centers in Europe, where most mature operas premiered from composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791).<sup>1</sup> The Hofburg, known as the great hall of the imperial palace, and the Viennese court were presented with more performances of opera beginning in 1662. As court opera continued to develop, it became a grand and progressively rich style.<sup>2</sup> Leopold I (1640-1705), an Austrian emperor during the Baroque period, ordered that many theaters be renovated or built because of his desire to improve the aesthetics of theaters in Vienna. “The emperor continued to spare no expense on his magnificent operatic displays. In 1667 and 1668, for example, an envoy criticized Leopold I’s extravagance over his musical displays at a time when no money was available to provide Spain with the military support it needed.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout his reign (1658-1705), there were almost four hundred performances of operas, requiems, oratorios, and ballets performed in Vienna.<sup>4</sup> After

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<sup>1</sup> Seifert, Herbert, Bruce Alan Brown, Peter Branscombe, Mosco Carner, Rudolf Klein, and Harald Goertz. “Vienna.”

<sup>2</sup> Seebohm, Andrea. *Opera in Vienna before 1869*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

his reign and beginning in 1740, Austrian Empress Maria Theresa (1717-1780) began radical reforms in the Viennese theater. The courtly opera ceremonies that were popular during the Baroque period came to an end during the Age of Enlightenment due to political and financial problems. Maria Theresa, who also had an appreciation for the theater, decided to open theaters to the common people.<sup>5</sup> Until this decision was made, theaters were only for the nobility. The action of Maria Theresa opening theaters to the common people was a major advancement as most people could now have access to this art form.

Throughout the 1780s, the new emperor, Joseph II (1765-1790), kept ballet and opera seria out of the court theaters. The emperor had enacted a policy on freedom in theaters which allowed for the establishment of theaters to be built in suburban areas. With the increase of theaters being established throughout Vienna, a well-known producer named Emanuel Schikaneder (1751-1812) arose in the Vienna theater scene. *Die Zauberflöte* was written for the Freihaus-Theater (1787), commonly known as the Theater auf der Wieden and was produced in that theater by Schikaneder. While producing *Die Zauberflöte*, Schikaneder took over multiple theaters in Vienna and used them in competition with one another to increase business.<sup>6</sup> During this time period, theaters in Vienna, including the Freihaus auf der Wieden, were more successful than other theaters in various countries. The Freihaus auf der Wieden produced the first production of *Die Zauberflöte*, which premiered on October 14th, 1787. Schikaneder then moved to the Theater auf der Wieden, which contained a spacious stage that could showcase many accomplished singers.<sup>7</sup> The production of *Die Zauberflöte* was the most successful and longest lasting performance in the Theater auf der Wieden, as it was performed two hundred and twenty three times.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>6</sup> Beales, Derek. Vienna: 1740-1806. 2001 Grove music online

<sup>7</sup> Honolka, Kurt, and Reinhard G. Pauly. Portland, Or: Amadeus Press, 1990, 75.

Within the first month, there were twenty performances of *Die Zauberflöte*, and Schikaneder had given more than two hundred performances by 1800.<sup>8</sup>

Christian Rossback (1755-1793) was another influential individual who helped contribute to the success of the Theater auf der Wieden. He traveled to Vienna from Fulda, Germany in order to build the Theater auf der Wieden.<sup>9</sup> In order to do this, he needed to submit an application which would be granted in 1787. When Rossback first arrived, he acted in a small theater booth stall in Vienna's Neuer Markt in one of the courtyards of the Friehaus. After his application was granted, he was able to begin building the Theater auf der Wieden. As the theater underwent construction, Andreas Zach, the architect for the government, drew the plans for the theater and came up with a simplistic design that could not measure up to the civic or palatial court. His design plans helped the theater go down in history as a well-crafted venue that could host high-quality productions, including the first production of Mozart-Schikaneder's *Die Zauberflöte*. During this time, New Renaissance buildings were built of solid stone and a tiled roof. At the time of the theater's construction, it was typical for the interior of the theater to be made of wood. This construction became an architectural issue because of the frequent occurrences of these theaters catching on fire.<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, European opera houses were tested and rebuilt using more efficient materials.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to constructing opera houses in Europe, The Theater auf der Wieden was built with enough room for 800 people on the main floor, along with two tiers of boxes. A balcony was later added to accommodate seating to around 1,000 people. "The ground plan of the theater is of a rectangle of 30 x 15

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<sup>8</sup> Rushton, Julian. *Die Zauberflöte*. 2002 Grove music online

<sup>9</sup> Honolka, Kurt, and Reinhard G. Pauly. *Papageno: Emanuel Schikaneder, Man of the Theater in Mozart's Time*. Portland, Or: Amadeus Press, 1990, 73.

<sup>10</sup> D'Orazio, Dario. *Review Italian-Style Opera Houses: A Historical Review*. 2020, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

meters, and it is worth noting that the stage, which had a depth of 12 meters, required almost half of this area having been planned from the beginning for opulent scenic design.”<sup>12</sup> The building was improved in order to make the suburb easier for the Viennese to travel to, and this was done by adding 21 lamps along the sidewalk leading to the theater.<sup>13</sup>

The Theater auf der Wieden was also known for hosting operas of high standards, especially since members of the nobility attended performances. To the audiences of Vienna, the scene changes were equally as important as the other elements of operas happening on the stage. With mechanics an important thought during construction, the theater was built with these in mind. To make this as easy as possible, the theater was designed with three trap doors, moveable flats and backdrops, and devices to accommodate flying machines, storms, sea battles, and similar effects.<sup>14</sup>

Trap doors were a major aspect of theater in Vienna for their various uses. The stage of the Theater auf der Wieden contained three trap doors. While the exact locations in this theater are unknown, it is highly likely that the locations were similar to that of other theaters of the time. In the 1700s, stages were commonly built with one trap door stage left, one stage right, and one center stage. The idea with putting the trap doors in these locations allowed for there to be trap doors in each major area of the stage for the performers to use. The directors at the time would often adjust the staging, a term used to describe where the actors are on stage at a specific time, to work with the trap doors when needed. Trap doors became quite common in European theaters in the 1700s. Other theaters had up to fifteen trap doors built into the stage. To access trap doors in the theaters the actors would access them via tunnels or halls below the stage. From below the stage, they would then climb a ladder or hoist themselves onto the stage if they

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>14</sup> David J Buch, ed., *Der Stein Der Weisen* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 2007), ix.

needed to enter from the trap door. If they needed to fall into the trap door, a stagehand would often open the door and lay cushioning on the floor to help dampen their fall.<sup>15</sup>

To accommodate a flying machine and lowerable drops, the theater used an early version of a modern-day fly system, which uses pulleys and ropes to work with counterweights to easily raise and lower backdrops, people, and lights onto the stage. In the 1700s, theaters did not have this system developed as much as theaters do today, but they had started some of the advancements. To raise and lower some of the items listed above, stagehands had to do most of the work by hand by manually raising and lowering whatever was necessary in the rafters above the stage. They did not have the counterweight to help them, but they did use ropes and pulleys to assist in making the job a little easier.

Although fly systems could assist with setting the scene by holding backdrops on the stage, set designers and carpenters built large-scale stationary sets that would be used for opera productions. At the time of the premiere of *Die Zauberflöte*, there was no technology to assist with changing sets. With this lack of technology, set designers mainly designed stationary sets. With a stationary set, one set remains present on stage during the entire performance. If needed, stagehands would decorate the set with different props to show the audience that the scene was now in a new location. If a set change was necessary, they would often take a long time. Stagehands would have to unfasten platforms from one another, move them offstage, move the new platforms on, and fasten the new platforms together. With the amount of work needed for a set change, directors tried to align the set changes with intermissions. By changing the set during an intermission, the audience could have leisure time to leave the theater without having to watch the set change take place. Set changes of great length were common until the 19th

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<sup>15</sup> Mark A. Radice and Malcom S. Cole, "Mozart and Two Theaters in Josephinian Vienna," in *Opera in Context: Essays on Historical Staging from the Late Renaissance to the Time of Puccini* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1998), pp. 111-146.



century. During the 19th century, Heinrich Lefler (1863-1919) created several new technologies that were used throughout theaters in Europe. One of his first inventions was a turntable, which would sit on top of the stage with set pieces on top of it. When needed, stagehands would turn the table one hundred eighty degrees to rotate the set to unveil a new set.<sup>16</sup> This drastically changed the amount of time needed for set changes, and is still a technology used in 21st Century Theater.

The history of the Theater auf der Wieden can be examined through various means, such as Vienna as an operatic center, influential individuals, production attendees, and the mechanical construction. The consideration that was put into opera in Vienna was attributed to those who had an appreciation for the theater. After many theaters were destroyed due to mechanical issues, the Theater auf der Wieden was constructed with many elements of the production in mind and are utilized in a way that enhances the plot.

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<sup>16</sup> Andrea Seebom, Wolfgang Greisenegger, and Simon Nye, *The Vienna Opera* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 192.

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