

## Revolution and Reconstruction

Two conferences organised by the Bern University of the Arts



A. Devéria, «Je ne crains rien de vous» im 5. Akt von Meyerbeers «Les Huguenots», erschienen im «Album de l'opéra», 1836, Paris.

This spring the Bern University of the Arts organised two international conferences in close succession. The first took place on 23 – 25 April at the Swiss Opera Studio in Biel/Bienne as part of the SNF-funded research project *Moving Meyerbeer* and was entitled *Opera through the Prism of Visuality and Kinesis (Musiktheater im Brennpunkt von Bild und Bewegung)*. As the international guests started to arrive in Biel/Bienne they felt as if they had just stepped — so to speak — into their own research: not only did the cobblestones, towers and fountains of the picturesque old town remind them of an operatic stage décor, but the local population in uproar, marching through the streets with red banners in support of their orchestra, whose subsistence was threatened by budgetary cuts, seemed to echo the tense political atmosphere and social unease so often thematised in nineteenth-century Parisian grand opéra. Indeed the conference celebrated the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791 – 1864), whose monumental, historical frescoes, although rarely performed in opera houses today, were among the most successful and

influential dramatic creations of his time.

The first panel explored ways of hearing opera with and through the body, as a means of understanding the power of movement, dance and processions in relation to dramatic music. The second panel addressed the dimension of time in opera, examining how effects of acceleration and deceleration are achieved, how temporal linearity is maintained or fragmented, and how music can bring the remains of the past into the present. The third panel focused on visual aspects of opera, its function as a «living tableau», the role of opera in perpetuating a collective memory of images, the plasticity of voice and «gesturality» of music. In a final roundtable panel, the dramaturges Jörg Königsdorf (Deutsche Oper Berlin), Merle Fahrholz (Nationaltheater Mannheim) and Xavier Zuber (Konzert Theater Bern) discussed the performance of grand opéra today, weighing the considerable efforts required against the undeniable importance and actuality of these revolutionary masterworks.

The second conference, entitled *Interpretationsforschung — Musical Performance with Reference to Historical Texts*

and *Sound Documents*, took place on 6. – 8. Mai in Bern, in collaboration with the Institute of Musicology of the University of Bern. Research on musical interpretation offers the exciting perspective of engaging directly with sounds, instruments, recordings and performers rather than merely with scores, texts and theories. The repertoire of this conference ranged widely from Girolamo Frescobaldi's *Arie musicali* (1630) to Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Mattinata* (1903), via embellishments by the castrato Luigi Marchesi (1754 – 1829) or the tenor Enrico Caruso (1873 – 1921), to rhythmic flexibility in the works of Giuseppe Verdi or Johannes Brahms. Among these diverse perspectives, unity was ensured through common methods and recurrent questionings: for example what was really meant by the terms «portamento» or «vibrato» in these various historical contexts? Or to what extent is historical reconstruction compatible with modern taste? The conference culminated in an engaging «embodiment» experiment where the Camesina Quartett interpreted Beethoven's String Quartet op. 74 in the style of early twentieth century recordings by the Klingler and Rosé Quartets.

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