



Aria academia

A new research project tackles the history of Berlin's Weimar and Nazi-era operas.

At Berlin's two longest-running opera houses this month, there will be the usual productions. *Carmen*, *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute* will be playing at the Deutsche Oper; *Tosca*, *The Barber of Seville* and *Turandot* will take the stage at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Behind the scenes, though, this season will mark a new beginning. This month, the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, the Deutsche Oper and the Humboldt University Department of Music will begin an important three-year research project to examine Berlin's opera culture under National Socialism. (Berlin's third-largest opera, the Komische Oper, is not part of the project, as it was only founded after the war.) Under the leadership of Arne Stollberg, a professor of music history at Humboldt University, the research aims to provide a holistic sense of Berlin's opera world between 1925 and 1944.

The National Socialists were long interested in opera. Throughout the 1920s Hitler prided himself on his contacts with Wagner's family, and the Nazi ideologue Albert Rosenberg created a theatregoers' alliance in 1928 to shape the stage in the movement's image. Once the Nazis came to power in 1933, certain opera houses became the fiefdoms of individual Nazi leaders. Herman Göring exercised control over the Staatsoper. Hitler himself requisitioned funds to support the Wagner festival in Bayreuth and the Berliner Volksoper (now Theater des Westens). Stormtroopers also interrupted operas across Germany that were not deemed fit for the Third Reich. In Berlin, the Städtische Oper and Staatsoper cancelled, respectively, performances of Berthold Goldschmidt's *The Magnificent Cuckold* and Alexander Zemlinsky's *The Chalk Circle*, both by composers of Jewish descent. And yet, German opera of this period maintained continuities with Weimar-era art, as censorship was applied unevenly; the cancelled Zemlinsky opera eventually had a run at the Staatsoper just a year later. Though perhaps no coherent National Socialist opera programme emerged, that was because of competing attention rather than too little. It is the complexity of this moment, as it came to bear on Berlin, that the project will investigate.

"You have to realise that Berlin at this time was an opera metropole such as rarely has been or will be," Stollberg says. "When we think about Berlin opera in these years, we always

think first about the Deutsche Oper – then the Charlottenburger Oper – the Staatsoper, the Krolloper. And these are, of course, very important and are for us central points. But there were also opera productions at other theatres." He points out that there were many operas staged across Berlin, like Max Reinhardt's operas at the Großes Schauspielhaus or the many that took place at less-often remembered institutions like the Jüdische Kulturbund.

And, just as the project looks not only at the most famous institutions, it also expands its time frame, beginning not in 1933 but in 1925. Stollberg explains to me that 1925 "represents a caesura in many ways". He clarifies that this has less to do with the political situation and is more about the history of opera and its institutions. For example, in 1925, Alban Berg's famed *Wozzeck* opened at the Staatsoper. That was also the year that Charlottenburg, and its Deutsche Oper, came under the control of Berlin. Also in 1925, the Volksoper in the Theater des Westens went bankrupt, paving the way for it to become, later, a National Socialist organ. "A huge amount happened in 1925," he says, "and therefore we thought, that's where we'll begin!"

Stollberg explains that it was important to look at both the Weimar and the Nazi eras to understand their continuities and differences. "It's not as if after 1933 everything was different," Stollberg says. "Of course, as we all know, Jewish artists were thrown out, clearly. And certain work from Jewish composers wasn't played any more – that is also clear. But, for example, with respect to staging, there are still modern productions after 1933. As well, there is continuity through people like Heinz Tietjen, the intendant of the Staatsoper and later of the Städtische Oper – and led institutions under both systems."

This research project promises not only to be of interest to historians but will also be a boon to the general public: great masterpieces from Weimar will take the stage again. I especially look forward to the symposia about and new productions of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* – coming to the Deutsche Oper in July 2025 – as well as *Wozzek*, which will also appear next year at the Staatsoper. Regardless of anything else this research develops, returning these works to the stage will be, itself, an act of knowledge production. ■