

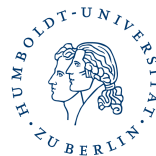
Opera Culture in European Metropolises

A Comparative Perspective on the 1920s and 1930s

Conference of the DFG research project 'Berlin Opera Culture 1925–1944'

Institute for Musicology, Humboldt University Berlin

8 to 10 April 2027



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Call for Papers

The early 20th century was the age of European metropolises, however much they may have been changed by wars and catastrophes. While there were only nine European cities with more than a million inhabitants in 1900, by 1950 there were already 22. The reorganisation of Europe after the First World War also saw the emergence of new metropolises. Long-established residences and regional centres became capitals – such as Prague in newly created Czechoslovakia –, major cities became global cities – e.g. Berlin, which grew considerably in 1920 through the incorporation of the surrounding suburbs. The European metropolitan culture that had already begun to take shape before the First World War gained considerable momentum in the early post-war period. Technological advances (radio, mass press, car, passenger aircraft) made Europe's metropolises more globally connected, while cultural exchange accelerated and deepened. At the same time, the rise of authoritarianism in many European countries inevitably had a massive impact on the societies, structures and institutions of the metropolises.

Opera, an art form with a specifically urban character that has always been international in scope, did not shut itself off from social and political change. The way we experience opera today took shape particularly during the interwar period. This included the abolition of court opera houses (for example, in the German Reich and the Soviet Union), the shift from repertoire theatre to en suite theatre, the emergence of stage direction as an art form in its own right, equal to the musical performance, and the widespread mediation of opera events through newspapers, radio and film. Simultaneously, opera institutions faced competition from privately funded musical entertainment theatres, which had a considerable impact on the dramaturgy of the operatic genre.

In the late 1920s in particular, Berlin, with its three public opera houses and lively (musical) theatre culture, could claim to be the world's leading opera metropolis. At the same time, the traditional venues in Paris were undergoing a deep financial crisis, which culminated in the nationalisation of the Opéra and Opéra-Comique in 1936/39. In Italy, on the other hand, Rome definitively joined Milan and Naples in the ranks of the great opera capitals of the still young nation partly as a result of fascist centralisation policies. Ultimately, National Socialism in the 1930s forced numerous artists to emigrate, making cities such as Prague, Zurich and Vienna important venues for opera works that were ostracised in National Socialist Germany.

The DFG project based at Humboldt University Berlin examines the eponymous 'Berlin Opera Culture 1925–1944' in cooperation with the Staatsoper Unter den Linden and the Deutsche Oper Berlin. By interlinking various sub-projects, it offers an example of comprehensive research into an opera metropolis of the interwar period. Against this backdrop, the upcoming conference aims to broaden the focus to other European epicentres of opera during the period in question. The conference is interdisciplinary in scope and spans the fields of cultural, institutional, compositional and social history of opera. Possible areas of focus within the given framework include:

- Metropolis and urbanity as an operative sujet
- Institutions and funding
- Opera venues beyond publicly-owned theatres
- Opera in the context of urban (musical) theatre landscapes
- Opera in totalitarian systems
- Agents in opera culture
- Demographics and sociology of the audience
- Repertoire research and opera canon
- Performativity, staging and performance practice
- Opera and media
- Publishing and marketing
- Mediation strategies and public relations
- Press and journalistic reception

The conference will be held in German and English and will feature 30-minute presentations followed by discussions. The contributions will be published in a collective volume shortly after the conference.

Please send your abstract of no more than 300 words as a doc or docx file by 31 May 2026 to morten.grage@hu-berlin.de and alina.lea.bernholt@hu-berlin.de. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered by the project as far as possible. We would particularly like to encourage young researchers to apply for the conference with an abstract.

We look forward to receiving your submissions!

Arne Stollberg, Morten Grage, Alina Bernholt, Lea Achmus