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Project Description

Studies on the Reception of Byzantine Rulers and Military Conflicts in the Italian Musical Theatre of the Early Modern Period

This project is meant to contribute to the investigation of the reception of Byzantium in the early modern period and focuses specifically on the adaptation of subjects from Byzantine history in the Italian musical theatre. Based on a libretto selection from works from the second half of the 17th and the first half of the 18th century, a cross-compositional analysis starting in Venice will be carried out in order to determine the musical and dramatic realization of war-related topics as well as their political and social contextualization.

The theoretical and methodological approach addresses present discussions on the establishment of concepts of an enemy and identity constructions by combining approaches from historical stereotype and opera research. Metaphorical correspondences between plot themes and motifs and contemporary daily developments can be detected in a detailed review of the work context. This process is, however, not limited to finding simple parallels between the various plots and the current events, but rather concentrates on the functionalization of these interpretative concepts in connection with individual identity constructions. Accordingly, the overarching question deals with the reception of historical subjects and constellations for interpretative concepts associated with conflicts in the early modern period. It is closely connected to the investigation of the image of Byzantium conveyed through the respective works themselves. Here, aspects such as the potential antiquization, mythologization, and westernization of the plot and setting take on a key role.

Gaining deeper insights into the understanding of history at that time and the emphasis on specific topics demands an examination of contemporary Italian historiographical works. Fundamentally, we have to differentiate between the respective political disposition of the opera centres. Thus, references to present-day political events are more probable at public opera houses, whereas affirmative aspects are dominating at court theatres. An overview of the repertoire at the different venues can show if adapting subjects from Byzantine history (with references to Theodosius I and II, Justin I, Theodora I, Belisarius, Constantine VI, and Basil I) was common or rather unconventional and whether we can determine the starting point of certain reception traditions.

On the level of the sources, the investigation looks out for the musical means applied for the description of the characters in different situations and explores in how far the discourse on conflict, war, combat etc. is being used for establishing or transforming musical topoi. Starting with the contents-related and thematic analysis of the respective image of Byzantium, it then moves on to the evaluation of selected musical parameters. Further relevant aspects include the treatment of inferiors, group-related processes, and the occurrence of representational symbols for the demonstration of power.