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Chapter One

Early Struggles, Operatic Beginnings, and the Development of the German Theater in New York City, 1840–1872

After many difficulties, a German company has been organized as the German Dramatic Society.

New Yorker Staats-Zeitung

A German Operatic Company have taken the Franklin [Theater] in Chatham Square. The troupe is said to comprise much talent and ability.

Spirit of the Times

The New York Stadt Theater . . . is occupied by a German company, who give in it German dramas on weekdays, and German music on Sunday.

New York Times

In 1928, when the German theater in New York City and America was declining, Fritz Leuchs wrote that “the birth of the German theater in New York [in the 1840s] was an extremely painful and protracted process.”¹ Its birth was painful, since the earliest efforts at German theater were sometimes crude, and protracted, because it took more than a decade to achieve ongoing success. The quotations given above illustrate this long gestation period. The first two are from 1840, when German amateur theatricals were first given on a regular basis in the city, and the third is from 1858, by which time the professional stage was fully established. The impetus for its creation came first from amateur rather than professional performers, and coincided with an upswing in German immigration to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of the leading actors on Klein Deutschland’s early stages had been caught up in the European revolutions of 1848, which led to their emigration. This early period also saw a struggle to educate the German American community about its artistic heritage, and to encourage the practice of regular theater attendance.

Though Odell documented a single performance of German plays in 1837, the history of Klein Deutschland's theater really begins with the formation of the first amateur dramatic company, at the end of 1839.² The first known regular performance of German plays given in German in New York City, on January 6, 1840, included a work by one of the most popular and prolific playwrights of his time, August von Kotzebue (1761–1819). His one-act Lustspiel (comedy) *Der gerade Weg ist der Beste* (The Straight Path Is the Best) was performed along with Theodore Körner's (1791–1813) three-act Schauspiel (drama) *Hedwig die Banditenbraut* (Hedwig, the Bandit's Bride) by the amateur Deutscher dramatischer Verein (German Dramatic Society) in a small hall at 83 Anthony (now Worth) Street in lower Manhattan. The overture to Auber's grand opera *Die Stumme von Portici* (*La muette de Portici*/The Mute Girl of Portici, 1828) and Johann André's concert overture *Die Hussiten vor Naumburg* (The Hussites before Naumburg, 1818), performed by an orchestra, were played as a curtain raiser. An enthusiastic local critic described this production as "highly successful in view of the novelty and the difficulty of the enterprise" and characterized the Auber and André overtures, and the waltzes by Johann Strauss Sr. that were played as orchestral entr'actes, as "the best German music that we have yet heard in America."³ Dances, vocal solos and ensembles, and instrumental solos on violin, guitar, and harp enlivened these early theatrical attempts. After several performances in the small hall in Anthony Street, the company moved to the larger Franklin Theater (also known as the Drury Theater) at 175 Chatham Street (between James and Oliver Streets). This space reportedly had a 550-seat capacity and was the main venue for German theatrical activity from 1840 until 1843.

That the dramatic society began its performances with a play by Kotzebue is significant because his plays were a mainstay of the repertory in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century. English translations of many of his more than 230 plays, by William Dunlap and other adapters, had been performed for decades in America before these first German performances in New York.⁴ As Bruce McConachie explains, Kotzebue's plays achieved "immense success in every country where popular audiences longed for emotional empowerment. Kotzebue's weepy dramas emphasize the pathos of ordinary people and celebrate their sentimental feelings as the key to a finale of family togetherness." Through his works, "common people validated their natural inner virtue by weeping for surrogates of themselves." Kotzebue's works were popular in the United States up to the time of the Civil War.⁵

During this same first season of 1840, Pius Alexander Wolff's frequently performed play *Preciosa* of 1820 (based on Cervantes' *La gitana* [The Gypsy Girl]), with Carl Maria von Weber's incidental music, was given five times. It would be repeated many times over the decades. One of the local German Gesangvereine (singing societies) probably provided the choral component to Weber's score for solo voice, orchestra, and chorus. Also during this first season, excerpts from Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* (The Freeshooter, 1821) were performed, and the

entire work was given several times during the second season of 1841–42. The *New York Herald* published a notice of the fledgling German theater troupe on January 22, 1842 and its performance of *Der Freischütz*. It reported that Herr Wieger conducted “a brilliant orchestra of more than thirty musicians . . . composed of the greatest talents in this city,” which accompanied Herr Meyer, Herr Selle, Frau Haak, Fräulein Emma Diemann, and the other cast members. The *New York Herald* also indicated that this production featured a large chorus, and magnificent scenery and machinery, especially for the famous “Wolf’s Glen Scene,” in which Meyer played the villain Caspar and Selle the role of Max.⁶ According to Odell, *Der Freischütz* was “repeated once or twice.”⁷ These were also probably the first complete performances in the United States of German opera sung in German. (The premiere of *Der Freischütz* in New York was the English-language performance given on March 2, 1825, and the work was performed in English on numerous occasions in the 1840s and 1850s.⁸) *Der Freischütz* was one of the German operas most frequently performed in German American theaters, though by the time of the establishment of the Metropolitan Opera in 1883 it was given less often.⁹ Its popularity during the mid-nineteenth century was due to its accessibility to a wide range of audiences, through the use of both spoken dialogue and music, the representation of the supernatural, and the combination of both folk- and art-music elements.

The musical farce was one of the most popular forms on Klein Deutschland’s stages. Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy’s (1801–62) famous Zauberposse (magic farce) *Die böse Geist Lumpacivagabundus, oder Das liederliche Kleeblatt* (The Evil Spirit Lumpacivagabundus, or The Roguish Trio, 1833), with music by Adolf Müller (1801–86) (referred to hereafter as *Lumpacivagabundus*), was first performed in New York City on April 17, 1840, in the new company’s first season. It was performed in New York and other American cities at least up to the time of World War I.¹⁰ (See appendix G.) Because of its great popularity in the United States, *Lumpacivagabundus* serves as a representative piece from the earliest musical-theater repertory, and a profile of its author and a description of the play and use of music are given here.

An operatically trained bass, Nestroy appeared in 1822 at the Kärntnertor-theater in Vienna as Sarastro in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), and later spent several years in the German theater in Amsterdam. After his Wanderjahre (wandering time), during which he worked as an actor and singer in theaters throughout German-speaking Europe, Nestroy joined the company at the Viennese Vorstadt (suburban) Theater an der Wien in 1831, where he remained for many years. Nestroy wrote 85 plays (76 have survived), and many of these used music by Viennese composers such as Müller and Carl Binder (1816–60).¹¹ Among his most important musical plays besides *Lumpacivagabundus* is *Der Talisman* (The Talisman, 1840), which criticizes provincial prejudices, in this case the Austrian mistrust of redheads. In *Einen Jux will er sich machen* (He’ll Have Himself A Good Time, 1842), two provincial shop assistants travel



Plate 1.1. Johann Nestroy. Author's collection.

clandestinely to Vienna in order to go out on the town when their employer leaves them in charge of the store.¹² Of particular interest are Nestroy's operatic parodies of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1857) and *Lohengrin* (1859), with music by Binder. His *Tannhäuser* parody was premiered in Vienna the same year as the first performance there of Wagner's opera. Peter Branscombe describes Binder's music as "a brilliant, sustained commentary on Wagner's score."¹³ This *Tannhäuser* parody was also performed on German stages in New York.

According to W. Edgar Yates, Nestroy was "the supreme comic dramatist of the German language, a creative genius on a par with the other great names of international comedy. For nearly thirty years—roughly 1830 to 1860—he dominated

the commercial stage in Vienna, working in a theatrical culture turned to entertainment, and the most famous of his satirical comedies, which he wrote when he was at his peak for about a decade and a half from the late 1830s, continue to be widely performed." Yates also explains Nestroy's dramatic style: he is "distinguished by his linguistic inventiveness, playing with contrasting registers and flights of vivid metaphor in reflections on the injustice of a world governed by chance (or Providence), whose arbitrary dispositions can be set aside in the fictional world of comedy—only for the conventional happy ending to underscore the knowing improbability of the fiction."¹⁴

Nestroy was the creator as well as the star of his satirical and comic plays, but he did not compose. His principal musical collaborator was Müller, a prolific composer of musical farces and Singspiele (works with spoken dialogue and songs), who contributed the music to more than 600 stage works. Müller was the Kapellmeister (music director) at the Theater an der Wien for much of the period between 1828 and 1878. Branscombe notes: "the bulk of his output proved ephemeral, yet many of his 41 scores to Nestroy's plays are still performed in Vienna, and at his best his music has more than mere melodic charm to commend it. There are innumerable witty, effective couplets (songs), and on occasion extended concerted numbers and large-scale quodlibets; the instrumentation is neat though usually unadventurous."¹⁵ Henry and Mary Garland summarize Nestroy's complicated plot for *Lumpacivagabundus*.

The spirit Lumpacivagabundus, the patron of the drunken and dissolute, appears only in the rather slender preliminary magic scene, in which Fortuna, arguing with Amorosa, maintains that money reforms people more effectively than love. The matter is put to the test: if two or three good-for-nothings, when given a fortune, make good use of it, then Fortuna triumphs. The trio of scamps consists of the joiner Leim, the tailor Zwirn, and the cobbler Knieriem. They put up in a hostel and all three dream the same [winning] lottery number . . . and each finds himself possessed of a fortune. Knieriem and Zwirn spend all their money on drink and are soon in the condition in which they started. But Leim marries the girl he loves and turns over a new leaf. When Knieriem and Zwirn call on him he tries to change them, but they prove incorrigible. However, in a perfunctory magic scene at the end the two recalcitrants are after all transformed by love.¹⁶

Plate 1.2 illustrates the scene in which Knieriem, Leim, and Zwirn find they have won the lottery, after Dame Fortune gave each the winning number in a dream. The caption on this mid-nineteenth-century print reads "Knieriem: Hurrah! We've got the winning ticket! Drinks all around! Drinks all around!"

There are many musical numbers in *Lumpacivagabundus* (later in his career, Nestroy reduced the number of songs in his plays). The quodlibet (medley) was an important feature of the Viennese folk-style musical farces; it was often placed at the end of the second act. To provide the musical humor in the famous

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