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Western Civilization

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Topic: Relationship between Music and Politics in Habsburg Empire

Essential Question: How did the Habsburgs utilize music for their own political gains?

Music in the Habsburg Empire 1750-1850

The Habsburg dynasty dominated Europe for centuries. Through marriage, conquest, and political maneuvering, the Habsburgs made themselves the most powerful family in Europe. From their power base in modern Austria, the Habsburgs created an empire that included most of Catholic Europe. Habsburg political authority crossed boundaries of language, ethnicity, and religion. There was little cultural commonality or shared history between these regions. Many were not even connected by land. As Europe's traditional social order was challenged by philosophers and revolutionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Habsburg state was strained by growing unrest. Liberals and nationalists alike questioned the authority of the Habsburg to rule as absolute monarchs over diverse regions and peoples. To counteract this tide of opposition, the Habsburgs needed a way to communicate their ideas and values to their subjects. The support of various composers and musicians through a system of patronage gave them access to the hearts and minds of the masses that formed the bedrock of their continent spanning domain. In the century between 1750 and 1850, patronage of music gave the Habsburgs a way to vilify their foreign enemies, enforce domestic loyalty, and increase the prestige of their dynasty.

The Habsburgs were originally minor counts who ruled a small territory in the north of modern Switzerland, according to Dr. Wolfgang Kippes, managing director of the Schloss

Schönbrunn Kultur project (Kippes). Dr. Hugo Ellenberger, professor of cultural history at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, reports that the Habsburgs governed their small county in obscurity until Rudolph I conquered the lands of modern Austria and moved his court to Vienna in 1282. Over the next few centuries, the Habsburgs pursued a patient policy of diplomatic marriage, slowly increasing the family's influence and territory by inheriting the thrones of other countries. Among others, the Habsburgs inherited the thrones of Spain, Hungary, and Burgundy, all as a result of lucky marriages (Kippes). By 1438, the dynasty was powerful enough for a member to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor (Ellenberger VII), a title the family would retain until 1806. Such political power was matched by the Habsburgs' cultural prestige. They were regarded as the most powerful family in Europe (Ellenberger VII). However, administering the disparate duchies and kingdoms that formed the Habsburg empire was near impossible.

Although the Habsburg lands are often referred to as an empire, they were not a singular, unitary state (Kippes). They were a number of states, of varying sizes, ruled by the same individual or individuals of the same family. Different customs and laws applied in each political entity, according to Revd. Dr. James Franck Bright of the University of Oxford. During the late Middle Ages, this was not a major obstacle to dynastic rule (Kippes). Modern concepts of nationalism and personal freedoms did not exist. Religious affiliation was more important than nationality or any kind of democratic feeling (Kippes). As Catholics, the Habsburgs practiced the same faith as the vast majority of their subjects, making any kind of religiously motivated unrest unlikely. The Habsburgs were free to rule as medieval kings, as were their peers in other nations. Respect for tradition, military strength, and the approval of the Church was enough to preserve internal order. During the 18th century, however, liberal ideas about nationhood and republicanism had begun to take hold in many European cities (Kippes). As the Habsburgs were

rulers of an autocratic, multiethnic polity, their power was naturally threatened by these Enlightenment ideas. It was at this time that the Habsburg began patronizing musicians in earnest.

The term patronage refers to the financial, social, and political support and preference the Habsburgs offered numerous composers in order to shore up their own ideological claims to authority. As popular sentiment turned against the Habsburgs, they turned to music as a way to regain popular approval. During this time period, music moved out of the private sphere and became much more common in public performance. According to Dr. Hendrik Willem van Loon, before the mid 1700s, most public performance of music was religious in nature, and took place in church services (Van Loon 306). Secular music was produced by musicians working for specific noble families, often living in close proximity to them and tutoring their children (Kippes). In the decades after 1750, however, a number of opera houses and music venues opened up in Vienna, making the works of composers like Mozart and Haydn accessible to a wider audience (Ellenberger VIII). This created a culture of music in Vienna, making the city more attractive to musicians from across Europe (Ellenberger IX). The influx of composers also influenced the tastes of the common citizen. In 1800, there were around 3000 Chamber Music Societies in Vienna (Ellenberger X). Vienna was transformed into a center for composition, and countless musicians benefitted from composing for the Habsburgs or other influential figures (Van Loon 47). From 1750 to 1850, Vienna flourished as one of Europe's foremost centers of culture. As a political tool for the dissemination of information, music was highly effective due to the musical culture of the Habsburg realm.

The Habsburgs used the emotions and sympathies stirred by music to alter public perception of competing states. The most common targets of musical propaganda were also the

most visibly foreign. The oldest foes of the Habsburgs, the Ottoman Turks (Kippes), were routinely demonized in the theaters of Vienna. In 1782, Mozart wrote the opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* on commission from emperor Joseph II, claims musical historian and biographer Milton Cross. It depicts the attempt of a valiant Christian knight to rescue his betrothed from the harem of a villainous Turkish pasha. According to historian Sir Alistair Horne, the knight's virtue and valor is contrasted with the cunning and cruelty of the pasha, characterizing the pasha as an enemy not only of the protagonist, but of moral decency (Horne 126). This perpetuated the idea that the Habsburg state was morally superior to the Ottoman one, justifying future aggression and legitimizing Habsburg expansion into the Balkans (Bright 98). The opera itself was extremely successful. Mozart wrote that "The people will hear nothing else, and the theater is constantly filled to the doors" (Cross 519). The opera's popularity incited a wave of Turkophobia in Vienna (Horne 126). Within the decade, the Habsburg and Ottomans would again be at war (Kippes), spurred on by the emperor who had commissioned *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

The Habsburgs routinely sought to portray themselves as defenders of Christian Europe through music. Vienna was besieged by Turks in 1683 and memory of the siege guided Austrian foreign policy for the next century (Horne 4). A chance meeting between Joseph II and young musician Antonio Salieri in 1771 resulted in Salieri receiving a commission to write an opera to be performed at the Burgtheater (DeWitt). The result was *Armida*, a tale of lovers set in the First Crusade. It details the exploits a group of Christian knights who fall in love with Muslim warrior women who are eventually converted to Christianity. The struggles and eventual triumph against all odds of the knights mirrors the historical struggle of the Austrians against the Turks (DeWitt). The emperor was so pleased by the work, Salieri was named Kapellmeister, director of the

Habsburg backed Imperial Opera (Cross 603). He had good reason to be pleased. By equating the knights with the Habsburgs, Salieri subtly reinforced the perception that the Habsburgs were defenders of Christendom against the foreign, Muslim, and vicious Turks (DeWitt). Joseph's subjects were reminded that their lord was a protector shielding them from the mysterious threat of Turkish rapacity. The Habsburgs also called upon this connection with religion to encourage loyalty to the state.

Despite their status as supreme autocrats, the Habsburgs relied on the acquiescence of their subjects to the social hierarchy in order to maintain social order. When this hierarchy was threatened by the French Revolution, they looked to music as a way to reinforce traditional authority. In 1797, Emperor Francis II approached Joseph Haydn, a famous composer living in Vienna at the time. In 1797, Europe was embroiled in the Wars of the French Revolution (Kippes). The traditional Habsburg state was threatened not only by French troops, but the Revolution's democratic and atheistic ideals. Francis wanted a song that could be sung by troops marching to battle and reinforced the conservative values that were the ideological bedrock for the Austrian state. Haydn composed *God Save Emperor Francis*, which was named the national anthem (Cross 370). The lyrics reference both the authority of God and the emperor himself, the two most important symbols of traditional authority. Additionally, the song asks God that "Thy Law always be his Will, And may this be like laws to us" (Cross 370), calling on the empire's subjects to treat the will of the emperor as the will of God. By calling on listeners to respect religion and the emperor, the song contrasts with the irreligious and republican values espoused by the French revolutionaries (Cross 371). By expressing this ideology in song, Haydn made it accessible enough for its message to reach even the common people of the empire, not just the aristocracy. The lower classes and middle classes, who were more likely to hold liberal

sympathies, were indoctrinated through *God Save Emperor Francis* to trust the authority of the state, the church, and their emperor.

The alliance between church and state was not always respected. Joseph II used musical reform as a way to increase the power of the monarch and reduce the influence of the Catholic Church. Dr. Reinhard G. Pauly, professor of music history at Lewis and Clark College, claims the musical reform was part of a larger campaign that included the confiscation of monastic property and the censoring of anti-government sermons (Pauly 372), Joseph imposed a host of new regulations upon sacramental music in 1783 (Pauly 373). Catholic services were to be shortened, and “moderate singing or oral recitation should replace the chanting of choirs” (Pauly 373). Purely instrumental music was banned except on holidays (Pauly 373). Latin was replaced by the local vernacular in all music (Pauly 374). By shortening the amount of time his subjects spent in church, Joseph reduced their exposure to sermons that encouraged the worship of God over loyalty to the state. The abolition of choral singing ended one of the church’s most visible expressions of its power, to be replaced by songs and speeches in local languages. These languages would be easily understood by everyone present, vastly reducing individual priest’s abilities to interpret scripture in ways that favored religious over temporal authority. Although he sought to regulate religious practice, Joseph never questioned theology or Catholic belief (Pauly 374). He recognized the importance that Catholicism played in the tranquility of his country.

The Habsburgs were threatened by the conquests of Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of the French. Opposition to Bonaparte was present throughout Viennese society. Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 3* is essentially a statement of defiance against the French expansionism of his time. Beethoven himself is a paradox. Although a “son of the French Revolution, the true democrat” (Cross 54), he lived in Vienna supported mostly by employment and a pension from

members of the House of Habsburg (Cross 53). The symphony was completed in 1804 and originally subtitled “Bonaparte,” in homage to the French military leader. As an idealistic liberal in a time of widespread autocracy, Beethoven saw Bonaparte as a great defender of personal liberty, a champion of the ideals of the French Revolution. However, when Bonaparte declared himself the absolute ruler of France, Beethoven felt betrayed. He retitled the symphony “Eroica,” meaning hero in Italian. He dedicated it to “the memory of a great man” (Cross 57). The first movement of the symphony is proud and hopeful, ending in a great climax of sound. The second movement, in contrast, is a funeral march that laments the death of the republican ideals that Beethoven had such hope for (Cross 58). Because Beethoven was financed by the Habsburgs, he could not write music that criticized their domestic policies. Instead, he authored a piece that attacked their great contemporary enemy, even as the Habsburgs ruled with the same iron fist that Beethoven so fervently opposed. This iron fist was often inadequate to stifle the wave of nationalism that was sweeping central Europe, forcing the Habsburgs to find other ways to curtail growing demands for cultural expression.

The Habsburgs enlisted composers to produce works intended to cow dissident ethnic minorities into submission. After the coronation of Leopold II as Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of the Habsburg lands in 1791, fears of rebellion in Bohemia prompted court officials to commission Mozart to write a new opera extolling the virtues of the new emperor (Kippes). Mozart wrote *The Clemency of Titus*, an allegorical work set in Imperial Rome (Cross 530). The ruling emperor, Titus, is believed to be assassinated by rebellious nobles. However, they come to regret their actions as the Senate tries them for the act of treason. Moments before their execution, Titus reappears and reveals that a decoy was killed in his place. He pardons the conspirators and the opera ends as the characters praise his generosity. The opera was

intentionally premiered in Prague, the capital of Bohemia, instead of the imperial capital of Vienna (Kippes). This meant that the people of Bohemia, suspected revolutionaries among them, would be first to hear the opera's implied threats towards rebels, as well as its emphasis on the mercy and virtue of the sovereign. While they suppressed ethnic minorities, the Habsburgs sought to align themselves closely with the ideas of German nationalism that were popular with the German majority of the empire.

Vienna's musical scene was transformed in an attempt to more closely identify with the German citizens of the empire. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the concept of a united German nation state was gaining popularity (Kippes). For the past several centuries, the Habsburgs had held the title of Holy Roman Emperors, which gave them some authority throughout Germany (Ellenberger IX). However, their reign was not absolute, and the Empire had been forcefully disbanded by Napoleon in 1806 (Kippes). This meant the Habsburgs needed a way to reassert their position as heads of the German-speaking world. In 1776, Empress Maria Theresa placed the Teutsches Nationaltheater under royal administration, according to Dr. Michael Yonan, associate professor of 18th and 19th century art at the University of Missouri (Yonan 209), changing its name to the Imperial Court Theatre. She aimed to create a venue which could showcase German language plays and opera, as opposed to the Italian ones popular at the time (Yonan 210). Later, Joseph II, her successor, would change the name again, to the German National Theater (Bright 105). This was part of a wider strategy to ingratiate the empire's German subjects, and position the Habsburgs as cultural leaders of the German-speaking world, in addition to the political power they already wielded (Yonan 219). It also had the effect of turning German into a language of high culture, comparable to the status of Italian or French at

the time, and therefore increasing the German-speaking Habsburg's prestige in relation to their rivals in France and Rome.

The Habsburgs used emerging forms of music to cement Vienna as the center of the German speaking world. They turned to composers in the newly emerging movement of romanticism to accentuate their German-ness. Franz Schubert, at the time a relatively unknown musician working as a schoolteacher in Vienna, began to set popular folktales to music (Cross 679). These lieder, as they were called, often contained patriotic themes or calls for unity. In 1815, he wrote 146 such songs, attracting attention from Vienna's musical elite, including the influential singer Johann Vogl (Cross 680). It was Vogl's interest that indicated to upper crust of Viennese society that Schubert's works were worthy of recognition. Hoping to encourage German nationalism, the Habsburgs quickly used their influence to grant Schubert a public performance. Within a year, he had quit teaching and was soon being courted by some of the finest venues in the city. Both the Karntnertor Theater and the Theatre-an-der-Wien, two of the most popular theaters in Vienna (Ellenberger 24), called for his services. Access to high profile venues such as these allowed Schubert's nationalist messages to reach the masses, enhancing Vienna's reputation for cultural innovation. Above all, the policies of the Habsburgs aimed to make Vienna the center of all political and social authority in the empire, even at the expense of traditional allies like the Catholic Church.

The Habsburgs wielded music as a tool to influence the thousands of people whom they counted among their subjects. In their time, public music was accessible, fashionable, and popular. Even though the Habsburgs themselves have been out of power for almost a century, music is used to inspire and entertain in a similar fashion today. Royal families no longer subsidize the work of eminent musicians. These musicians are freed from dependency upon a

single individual or group, and are permitted to express their ideas in the way they see fit, as opposed to functioning as a mouthpiece for the official line. Despite this new freedom, the absence of a patronage system brings new restrictions. Deprived of a guaranteed income, musicians must appeal to the public. Instead of producing works meant to please a select few, artists are compelled to appease huge numbers of people in order to become successful. Just as music then reflected the whims of the Habsburg emperors, music today reflects the whims of the general populace. Just like it was in 1800, music today often reinforces rather than challenges the perception of the listener.

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