

# Summary

## Musical as Memory Machine. Performing Austria's Past in Selected Musicals by Michael Kunze

The monograph analyzes *Elisabeth* and *Mozart!* – two popular Austrian musicals with books by Michael Kunze and music by Sylvester Levay – via the lenses of memory studies. These musicals reimagine important icons of the Austrian past: Empress Elisabeth – also known as Sisi – and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In my research I analyzed and described the connection between these musicals and the contemporary historical consciousness in Austria as well as other works concerned with Austrian collective memory.

The book is divided into five chapters. It also contains appendices that provide plot summaries of *Elisabeth* and *Mozart!* and describe the overall structure of Michael Kunze's musicals.

### Chapter One. The Past – History or Memory?

This chapter starts by presenting key aspects of memory studies. I summarize the ideas of key researchers in this field to show that it is based on perceiving the past as something remembered subjectively and used instrumentally in the present. I immediately apply each theory I describe to the tactics of presenting history used by Kunze in his musicals and also, to show a wider context, to the most widely known movie narratives about the same characters – Ernst Marischka's *Sissi* trilogy and Miloš Forman's movie adaptation of *Amadeus*.

I give special attention to the theories of performing the past and memory in theatre. I present Marvin Carlson's theories in great detail, explaining his view of the theatre as a medium based on the phenomenon of *ghosting* – showing elements the audience already knows in new contexts. I explain how Carlson's theories can be helpful in understanding musical theatre in general and Kunze's musicals in particular.

I finish this chapter with an analysis of the most important American musical concerned with Austrian memory – *The Sound of Music*. I show how its premise was changed in comparison with the movie it was inspired by, the West German movie *Die Trapp-Familie*, and how those changes were caused by different needs and different collective memory of German and American audiences.

## Chapter Two. What Is Austria?

In Chapter Two I start by shortly presenting Austria's history up to the eighteenth century, stressing that it has always been a part of bigger countries, usually ones important on the continental or even global scale. I point out that the idea of Austria as a separate country, not the centre of the Holy Roman Empire or even a global monarchy, was born in the eighteenth century with the Pragmatic Sanction and the ascension of Maria Theresia to the throne. This transition is also the beginning of the part of Austrian history covered by Kunze's musicals – the plot of *Mozart!* begins during Maria Theresia's reign. Thus when presenting Austria's history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I draw a comparison between historical sources and the presentation of these periods in Kunze's works. This approach allows me to present the history and these musicals at the same time as well as to demonstrate how Kunze adapts the facts, thus once again investigating his works via the lenses of memory studies.

The chapter ends with a brief description of Austria's twentieth-century history that focuses on the changes in the Austrian state and Austrians' national consciousness from the collapse of Austria-Hungary until today. Presenting this history allows me to segue into the reasons for the "memory boom" – increased popular and academic attention towards memory seen in the second half of the twentieth century. I am focusing on the connection of this "boom" to both world wars – this perspective allows me to present aspects of collective memory crucial for the German-speaking countries. I describe the coping strategies of post-World War II Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany in relation to the legacy of Nazism and the Third Reich, especially how Austria evaded a deeper reckoning with its Nazi past thanks to the victorious countries perceiving it as "Hitler's first victim".

Analyzing this status of Austria allows me to describe a wider phenomenon of Austria's so-called "amnesia", seen in averting discussion about the more problematic aspects of this country's history and basing its image on its prestigious, pleasant and non-political aspects – including music. As a counterpoint to this trend I present the works of so-called *Nestbeschmutzern*, Austrian writers from the second half of the twentieth century who "foul their own nest" by commenting on Austria's past and politics very harshly. In further chapters I regularly compare their works to *Elisabeth* and *Mozart!*

## Chapter Three. Memory on Musical Stages

I start this chapter by presenting the difficulties and contradictions that arise when one tries to define the genre of musical. I demonstrate that building a definition of this genre based on its formal qualities is almost impossible and propose to see the musical as a marketing term instead – one used to inform the audience that a given music-infused theatre piece will be relatively accessible.

Using this perspective I analyze reasons for which Michael Kunze wants his shows to be called musicals (and not, say, operas or music dramas). I explain that Kunze values the comprehensibility of his musicals very highly and that he wants to communicate with his audiences primarily by means of emotions. I analyze the concept of a "drama musical" and the formal structure of Kunze's shows, designed to show the action and the characters' development effectively.

In this chapter I also analyze the status of the musical and other genres of musical theatre in Vienna. I explain that opera remains the more respectable musical theatre

genre in this city and thus that people working on musicals either undermine opera's higher status or point at similarities between the two genres. At the same time lighter musical theatre pieces created in Vienna have gained more international popularity – Mozart's comic operas, operettas of the golden and silver eras of Viennese operetta and now Kunze's musicals. This fact has two important consequences. First, it makes *Elisabeth* and *Mozart!* heirs of a very important musical theatre tradition. Second, it shows that *Mozart!*'s reckoning with the way Austrian culture usually presents Mozart is a process important not only for Austrian collective memory but also for telling a more comprehensive story of popular musical theatre. In this light my thesis can be seen as a voice of resistance against considering Broadway and West End the only important places of the musical's and non-opera musical theatre's development.

#### Chapter Four. "I Belong to Me": *Elisabeth*

My analysis of *Elisabeth* has two crucial aspects. The first one is the tension arising from Kunze's desire to tell the story of the fall of Austria-Hungary but also of the emancipation of Empress Elisabeth, a person staying away from politics. The second, related one is the idea of analyzing this show synchronically instead of diachronically – focusing on key elements of the staging, reused in various scenes, instead of on a linear course of events.

Thus I focus on a few scenes that introduce key elements of the staging and present the storyline's tensions especially well. I start the chapter with a detailed analysis of the show's Prologue. I analyze the behaviour and ontological status of the show's narrator – Luigi Lucheni, Sisi's assassin – as well as the unnatural, doll-like behaviour of most characters and the way the set is constructed from fragmented symbols of the Habsburg monarchy. Further key scenes are the finales of both acts – act finales occupy an especially important place in Kunze's drama musical theory and in *Elisabeth* they exemplify the libretto's tensions especially well. Both acts of *Elisabeth* begin with scenes that establish the situation of the protagonist as well as her surroundings, but the finales abandon the wider socio-political context and focus on Elisabeth herself.

In *Elisabeth* Kunze has shown the fall of Austria-Hungary from Elisabeth's perspective, portraying her as the main victim of the oppressive system that ruled the Habsburg state. However, the show also contains scenes in which the same oppression affects other characters – especially Rudolph, the son of Sisi and Francis Joseph, whose life is shown in a few scenes in Act Two. These few scenes appear as a separate plot within *Elisabeth*'s main plot, showing the show's premise very concisely, in a condensed repetition.

Because of the strong ties of the analyzed staging to the Viennese icons, at the end of the chapter I compare it to the staging by the Budapest Operetta Theatre, with the libretto altered to show themes related to Hungary more fully and a staging that gives more agency to Elisabeth and portrays a different relationship between the worlds of the living and the dead. I analyze the concert version of the show staged in front of the Viennese Schönbrunn palace as well. It is the newest Austrian staging of *Elisabeth* and one that has reduced the political themes present in earlier versions of the show to present the interactions between the show's main characters more fully. I propose to see this change as a symptom of how *Elisabeth* gained more popularity as a non-political period piece, not a critical voice about Austria's past.

## Chapter Five. “I Am Music”: *Mozart!*

*Mozart!* repeats many staging and plot elements of *Elisabeth*, prompting me to focus my analysis on finding the reason behind those repetitions and investigating if the vision of the Austrian past is similar in both shows as well or if there are significant differences in this regard.

I stress that *Mozart!* is focused on its protagonist much more than *Elisabeth* and portrays wider social and political events only when they influence the composer’s biography. I point out that, paradoxically, this approach opens up the possibility for a fuller diagnosis of Austrian society: *Elisabeth* is focused on events that concern the upper class only, while *Mozart!*, a show about a servant yoking under the aristocracy, portrays both the upper and the middle classes. I see it as another commonality between Kunze’s musicals and works by the Austrian *Nestbeschmutzern* – they also present very critical diagnoses of Austrian society by showing oppressive and violence-based mechanisms in single relationships or families.

I give particular attention to the key metaphor of the show, one that, just like the staging of *Elisabeth*, can be read synchronically instead of diachronically – the split of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart into two characters, an adult and an eternal child. It is the child who is wearing Mozart’s stereotypical red robe and wig, symbolizing his genius and his drive to compose.

As the plot develops, the child attacks and torments the adult when the latter does not want to devote all his time for composing. In my interpretation, this dynamics shows Mozart as a person destroyed by an incarnation of memory – both his own childhood memories and other people’s posthumous memory of him as a genius. The child harms and finally kills the adult in an attempt to become fully realized as an impersonal musical genius. This metaphorical take on the fate of Mozart corresponds well with his place in contemporary Austrian culture, where he also functions as an impersonal symbol of classical music and Vienna’s place as a city of music.

I consider this aspect of *Mozart!* the musical to be self-reflective: by showing the problems of its protagonist in that way, this musical is also pointing at Kunze’s problems as a creator whose work became popular in Vienna but doesn’t fit with the international, high-culture, non-political canon of Viennese musical theatre.

### Finishing Thoughts

On the last pages of the book I compare my analyses of *Elisabeth* and *Mozart!* with my earlier remarks on the Austrian collective memory to delineate the place those shows have in contemporary Austrian culture.

I point at how both these musicals offer a sharp critique of the Austrian society in the second half of the eighteenth (*Mozart!*) and nineteenth (*Elisabeth*) centuries, but also evade the nationality issues important for those time periods. They present the Habsburg Austria as a place oppressive for individualists and innovators, a country bound by tradition, but they also make it more ethnically similar to the contemporary Republic of Austria than it really was. They lessen the role of other nationalities in the monarchy and focus on German-language icons of Vienna, extending the history of Austria as an independent German-speaking country into times when historically it was one of the constituent parts of the Holy Roman Empire and a multinational and multilingual country.

I conclude my analysis by repeating that *Elisabeth* and *Mozart!* can be an effective prompt for discussing the problematic faces of Austrian tradition and the oppressive nature of the Habsburg state, aspects often omitted in the official representations of this country's past. Focusing on German-speaking characters and omitting other nationalities of the monarchy appears problematic from my Polish perspective, but I admit it helps to critique old Austria in a way that is easily comprehensible for contemporary Austrians, people for whom the multinational past of their country is no longer a significant memory frame.

What I am afraid, however, is that in spite of their potentials as a commentary on politics and memory both musicals were well received in Austria mostly as psychologically intricate and ambivalent shows unrelated to the Austrian national identity. I do not consider it an error on the part of Kunze but a consequence of the global lack of readiness to see musicals as relevant social commentaries. I believe that this global trend is reinforced in Austria by a belief that music should be non-political and international.