The Operatic Innovations and Influence of

Weber’s Opera *Der Freischütz*

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November 22, 2010

Carl Maria von Weber (1789-1826) was a well-known German composer of the Romantic Era. His music greatly influenced the course of Romantic music. Weber’s opera *Der Freischütz* (1821) is considered the first important German Romantic opera with its national identity and pure emotionality. Although influenced by earlier opera, Weber had a strong sense that he was creating a new, distinctly German, tradition. When he became the conductor of the Dresden Court Opera in 1816, Weber had much success as a composer. *Der Freischütz* brought new changes to the 18th-century German Singspiel and greatly influenced the course of German opera and Romantic music.

Carl Maria von Weber was born on 18 December 1786 in Eutin, Oldenburg into a musical family. Weber’s father was a musician who created his own opera theatre company. His father’s varied career resulted in Weber traveling a lot throughout his childhood, leading to many changes in his teachers. Besides studying with his father, Weber also studied piano and thorough-bass with Johann Peter Heuschkel in Hildburghausen, Michael Haydn in Salzburg, and Johann Nepomuk Kalcher in Munich. While studying with Kalcher in 1798, Weber’s first compositions included an opera, a mass, string trios, piano sonatas and variations.

In 1799, Carl Mara von Weber was given a libretto by Chevalier von Steinsberg in Carlsbad. By 1800, at the age of 13, Weber completed his first opera, *Das stumme Waldmädchen*, a romantic comic opera.[[1]](#endnote-1) Weber’s third opera was *Peter Schmoll*, a German *Singspiel*. All of Weber’s music-dramas are *Singspiel* except his later work, *Euryanthe*, which represents German *Singspiel* as well as Mozartian characteristics. *Peter Schmoll* did not receive much success, and because of this failure Weber acknowledged that he still had much to learn about operatic technique and the elements necessary to ensure success in the creation of such works. [[2]](#endnote-2)

In 1804, Weber was appointed conductor of the theatre in Breslau. The 18th century characteristics of opera were still very prevalent, however, Weber worked hard to bring changes and to heighten the musical standards of the theatre. One of the predominant changes was the rearrangement of the orchestra. He wanted the strings to the right and left of the conductor with the winds in the center towards the back. At first, this change was not well received because of the increase of sound and new tonal effects different than the previous overall sound that was much more pure and simple. However, this orchestral set-up was eventually accepted and is still used in orchestras today.

In January of 1813, Weber was appointed by manager Liebich to become the musical director of the Prague theatre. His main task for this position was to reorganize and stabilize the Prague Opera. By 1815, Weber decided to terminate this appointment and began traveling to send out manuscripts of his compositions in hopes of receiving a financial award or even possibly a new appointment. During his travels, Weber spent a brief time in Carlsbad, where Count Heinrich Vitzhum von Eckstädt, the Intendant of the royal Saxon theatre, approached him about directing a new German-language opera company that the court hoped to establish in Dresden.[[3]](#endnote-3) In July of 1816, Weber accepted the post of Kapellmeister to institute a German opera in Dresden.

Weber met with the well-known poet, Friedrich Kind, in 1816 to discuss the *Gespenster-Geschiechten* (Ghost Stories) by Apel and Laun*.* Weber first fell in love with the story of *Der Freischütz* in 1810 after reading this new collection of *Gespenster-Geschiechten*. Kind also was intrigued by the dramatic quality of the story and agreed to write a libretto for Weber. Both Kind and Weber wanted to change the original ending of the story to create a happier ending, a clearly Romantic characteristic of the opera. Weber received the finished libretto from Kind within three weeks of this meeting.

Weber submitted the finished libretto to his wife, opera singer Caroline Brandt to review. She suggested an elimination of multiple scenes. Kind was initially unhappy with this suggestion and wanted to withdraw the work, however, he eventually understood the reason for the scene cuts.[[4]](#endnote-4) Satisfied with the libretto, Weber offered to purchase the libretto from Kind. After much hesitation in selling his work, Kind sold the libretto to Weber. While Weber received the completed libretto by March of 1817, he was unable to begin musical composition until July. Although his duties as Kapellmeister kept him busy, Weber spent a lot of time thinking about his opera. He was unable to transcribe his musical ideas at this time, but he continued to develop them in his head.

In August of 1819, Weber sent a copy of the libretto to Count von Brühl of Berlin. Brühl had tried to recruit Weber before he went to Dresden but the King of Prussia denied this request. In 1817, the Berlin theatre burned down and was in the process of reconstruction. After reviewing the libretto, Brühl proposed to open the new theatre that was being built with a performance of Weber’s new opera.[[5]](#endnote-5) With this new proposition, Weber began to spend all of his time and energy working towards completing his opera and set a deadline for March of 1820. Due to complications with the construction of the new theatre, the deadline was changed to the 18th of June, the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo.

*Der Probeschuss (The Trial Shot)*, was the original title thought of by Weber and Kind but was changed to *Die Jägersbraut (The Hunter’s Bride)* after a few days. *Die Jägersbraut* was completed on May 13, 1820 and presented to Count von Brühl. He was not satisfied with the title and suggested *Der Freischütz (The Free-Shooter)* which was the name that the original legend had. Weber agreed to this title and the opera was officially launched and decided that the first operatic performance in the newly constructed Berlin Schauspielhaus would be *Der Freischütz.*

Weber recruited such an experienced cast, that it was decided that only fourteen rehearsals were needed in order to prepare for the premiere of *Der Freischütz.* The final rehearsal, with Weber’s presence, had many technical difficulties. Stage machinery props were not properly functioning and Weber was unsatisfied with many of the effects he had intended for his opera. Despite the lack of success during the final rehearsal, *Der Freischütz* would still be premiered on the 18th of June, 1821.

There was so much excitement for the new opera that on opening night people waited at the opera house entrances four hours prior to the doors being opened. Interestingly enough, the court did not attend the opening-night performance, making the audience mostly students, artists, and middle-class citizens. After the production was finished, the overture and volkslied were repeated on demand in response to the audience’s reaction to the production. *Der Freischütz* was well-received and was a great success after its premiere at the Berlin Schauspielhaus.

The day after the premiere, however, music critics had mixed thoughts regarding the production of *Der Freischütz.* In his book, *Weber*, Saunders states, “Zelter wrote to Goethe in a derisive vein, and wound up his remarks by saying that out of a *small* nothing the composer had created a *colossal* nothing.” However, critics did admit, “the great musical importance of the work, the heart-stirring qualities of its melodies, the originality of the instrumental effects, and the breath of genius that breathed over the whole.” Although the critics complained that classical repose was “sacrificed to effect, the originality was monstrous, characterization bordered on caricature, and the musical impossibilities were ‘music no more,’” they did accept that the opera began a new era in dramatic musical composition. Throughout the reviews, Weber was recognized as being the top operatic composer of the time. Weber received so many honorable responses to his opera that the negative reviews did not bother him. There was one article that distressed Weber, written by his friend Hoffmann in *Vossische Deitung*, which suggested plagiarizing. Despite some of the negative remarks regarding *Der Freischütz,* Weber’s popularity continued to excel in the theatre.[[6]](#endnote-6)

After the great success of *Der Freischütz,* Weber felt guilty about buying the libretto from Kind. He had received all the praise from the production, and not a word was mentioned about the author of the words, Friedrich Kind. Although he had no obligation to do so, Weber tried to make things right with Kind by offering him a portion of his earnings from the opera. Unfortunately, “the only truly successful collaboration that he had ever achieved with any of his librettists came to an end.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Around this time, a few months after the successful premiere, as cited in Nohl’s *Letters to Distinguished Musici*ans, Weber wrote to his dear friend, Gänsbacher, expressing his loneliness and feeling of being deserted from an artistic point of view. He mentioned that “in other respects happy only with my wife,” and that he wanted to withdraw from society.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The success of *Der Freischütz* in Berlin led to its production in Breslau, Carlsruhe, Königsberg, Hanover, Pesth, and Copenhagen which surpassed the success in Berlin. The opera also appeared in Vienna as a celebration of the féte-day of the empress on October 3rd, 1821. Weber, however, was irate about this production because it had been censored and very poorly presented.[[9]](#endnote-9)

*Der Freischütz* is agreed to be the finest, noblest, and most highly sustained musical work Weber ever accomplished. German music historian Philipp Spitta commented: “With *Der Freischütz* Weber laid the foundation of German romantic opera.” Professor Sir Donald Tovey said, “The opera itself has gone through highs and lows in respect of fashion,” which is applying only to the literary and dramatic characteristics of the work, the music, however, “is of such universal permanence and appeal as to raise it infinitely above all dictates of fashion or the claims of any age or nation.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

*Der Freischütz* was not quite Weber’s first grand opera and although he brought many changes to tradition, it was still essentially in the German *Singspiel* stage. The scene of the Wolf’s Glen, in its musical aspect, is the closest to the grand opera idiom that Weber ever achieved, incorporating supernatural elements that had not been seen on stage before. The music of the Wolf’s Glen scene is strongly compared to Beethoven by its impressiveness and originality. The scene was so complex that it utilized the most advanced special effects available in 1821, including sound creating machines and multi-colored flames. Weber’s own description of this scene included three separate sound effect machines.[[11]](#endnote-11) The use of the device, melodrama, for the Wolf’s Glen scene is a French characteristic that Weber added to German opera and the idea of adding the supernatural beliefs and elements to the opera is a Romantic characteristic.

The folk element that is an essential aspect of German opera is apparent in Weber’s arias in *Der Freischütz.* Weber intentionally composed the melodies used with the villagers and huntsmen in a similar manner as folk song melodies, a symbol of German culture. Other songs, such as the Bridesmaids’ Chorus, are written in new styles that Weber created and that quickly became part of German folklore and student songs. Other German *Singspiels* commonly used folksongs, yet Weber was the first to successfully and flawlessly utilize folksong throughout his opera.

The romanticism of the text is also very apparent throughout *Der Freischütz* and is another important characteristic of how this opera brought change to German opera. Weber believed that it is necessary for an opera to reflect a struggle between the forces of good and evil. He is successful in presenting this conflict as Act I begins in light, Act II descends into darkness, and Act III ascends into light again. Weber not only utilizes the time of day in the plot, but the tonality of his music reflects the darkness and light as he uses minor key and diminished chords for darkness and bright major tonalities for light.

The overture to *Der Freischütz* epitomizes the complete orchestra, describing the nature of the drama that lies ahead in the opera. Previous overtures commonly drew from thematic material from the opera they preceded, Weber’s introduction, however, is not thematically connected to the opera. Weber had many difficulties with sonata form, and by visualizing the drama of the opera, he was able to combine the demands of programmatic music to sonata form. The overture to *Der Freischütz* is in C major and C minor and successfully sets the scene for the opera and also helps to represent the good and evil that will be portrayed throughout the production. Weber also successfully uses other various keys to associate with the drama of the opera. The key of C major is used with the powers of good while C minor is used with the character, Samiel, representing evil and unnatural sources. The key of D major is associated with the natural world. The placing of a musical key to indicate underlying references is later used extensively by the well-known German Romantic composer, Richard Wagner.

It is arguable whether or not Weber successfully utilizes the *Leitmotiv* principle. Commonly used by French opera, Weber does use a reminiscence motive throughout the opera. The powers of evil are regularly expressed in the C minor tonality and Samiel is continuously expressed by an F-sharp diminished seventh chord. This concept was not new to German opera at this time; however, it had not yet reached the formality of the *Leitmotiv* used in French opera. Another French characteristic that Weber utilizes is the addition of the Entre-Act before Act III. This feature was unfamiliar in German opera at the time.

Weber planned the instrumentation for *Der Freischütz* very carefully. His outstanding ability to blend tone colors and create more drama from the music than words alone are part of what has made *Der Freischütz* a successful musical drama production. Weber understood the quality of each instrument individually and utilized the various ranges of the instruments to combine with the intensity of the words, resulting in a true dramatic production. Weber gave the instruments more independent roles as if they were live operatic characters, breaking them away from their appointed roles in the classical orchestra. He had a way to have the instruments work together to create various colors, but successfully maintains the individuality of each instrument.[[12]](#endnote-12) These methods that Weber initiated are later used and expanded by the late-Romantic Austrian composer, Gustav Mahler, in his large-scale symphonies.

Weber’s responsibility at the Dresden court is the reason that *Der Freischütz* took so long to complete, from Weber’s original idea with the completed libretto of the opera in 1816, to its premiere in June of 1821. Although influenced by French opera, Weber successfully moved beyond the limitations of German *Singspiel,* opening the doors for a new Romantic style of German opera. This production gave the German opera a work that equaled the popularity of the most frequently performed Rossini operas at the Italian opera and represented the German national identity. *Der Freischütz* changed the course of German Romantic opera and became the most performed composition in the history of the Berlin opera.

Notes

1. William Saunders, *Weber* (London: J.M. Dent and song Ltd, 1940), 15-18.
2. Saunders, *Weber*, 19.
3. Saunders, *Weber,* 77.
4. Saunders, *Weber*, 106.
5. Saunders, *Weber*, 120.
6. Saunders, *Weber*, 130.
7. Saunders, *Weber*, 131.
8. Ludwig Nohl, ed. *Letters of Distinguished Musicians: Gluck, Haydn, P.E. Bach, Weber, Mendelssohn.* Trans. Lady Wallace. (London: Longsmans, Green, and Co., 1867), 354-356.
9. J. Palgrave Simpson *Carl Maria von Weber: The Life of an Artist from the German of his Son Baron Max Maria von Weber* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1968), 264-267.
10. Saunders, *Weber,* 198-199.
11. Mark A. Radice, *Opera in Context: Essays on Historical Staging from the Late renaissance to the Time of Puccini* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1998), 166-168.
12. John Warrack, *Carl Maria von Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 221-222.

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Brown, Clive. "Freischütz, Der." The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, edited by Stanley Sadie. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.uky.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/O007222 (accessed October 13, 2010).

Dent, Edward J. “A Weber Centenary: First Performance of *Der Freischütz*, Berlin, June 18, 1821.” *Music and Letters* 2, No. 3 (1921): 225-234.

Hill, Amelia. “Opera Guide and Synopsis: *Der Freischütz*, by Carl Maria von Weber.”http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/2274175/opera\_guide\_and\_synopsis\_der\_freischutz.html.(Accessed October 13, 2010).

Mercer-Taylor, Peter. “Unification and Tonal Absolution in *'Der Freischütz’*,” *Music & Letters* 78, No. 2 (1997): 220-232.

Meyer, Stephen C. *Carl Maria von Weber and the Search for a German Opera.*  Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

Nohl, Ludwig, Ed. *Letters of Distinguished Musicians: Gluck, Haydn, P. E. Bach, Weber, Mendelssohn.* Trans. Lady Wallace. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

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Simpson, J. Palgrave. *Carl Maria von Weber: The Life of an Artist from the German of His Son Baron Max Maria von Weber*. New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1968.

Spitta, Philipp, et al. "Weber." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.uky.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/40313pg9 (Accessed October 13, 2010).

Saunders, William. *Weber*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1940.

Tusa, Michael C. “Cosmopolitanism and the National Opera: Weber's DerFreischütz,” J*ournal of Interdisciplinary History; Opera and society I* 26, No. 3 (2006): 483-506.

Von Weber, Carl Maria. *Der Freisch*ütz. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977.

Von Weber, Carl Maria. *Der Freisch*ütz. Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1904.

Warrack, John. *Carl Maria von Weber.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

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Brown, Clive. "Freischütz, Der." The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, edited by Stanley Sadie. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.uky.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/O007222 (accessed October 13, 2010).

This article offers a synopsis of the opera and will be useful to this paper in describing the plot and other elements of *Der Freisch*ütz.

Dent, Edward J. “A Weber Centenary: First Performance of *Der Freischütz*, Berlin, June 18, 1821.” *Music and Letters* 2, No. 3 (1921): 225-234.

This article describes many opinions about *Der Freischütz* by other composers and how Weber combined music and drama to create this new opera. This article will useful for this paper as history of the production and receipt of the opera as well as how the opera was interpreted and performed many years to follow the premiere.

Hill, Amelia. “Opera Guide and Synopsis: *Der Freischütz*, by Carl Maria von Weber.”http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/2274175/opera\_guide\_and\_synopsis\_der\_freischutz.html.(Accessed October 13, 2010).

This site offers a brief synopsis of the opera and will be used in comparing the text or the opera with the original folk story and first libretto written by Kind.

Mercer-Taylor, Peter. “Unification and Tonal Absolution in *'Der Freischütz’*,” *Music & Letters* 78, No. 2 (1997): 220-232.

This article describes and explains many of the new types of chord progressions Weber uses in *Der* *Freischütz*, This will be useful for this paper when analyzing and discussing new characteristics and styles of music that Weber utilizes.

Meyer, Stephen C. *Carl Maria von Weber and the Search for a German Opera.*  Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

This book discusses the creation and standards of German opera and how Weber brought change to these standards. This book will not only be useful for this paper as an overview of the historical opera, but also for helping to describe the genre after Weber’s death.

Nohl, Ludwig, Ed. *Letters of Distinguished Musicians: Gluck, Haydn, P. E. Bach, Weber, Mendelssohn.* Trans. Lady Wallace. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

The book contains a collection of letters from Weber and will be used to help understand the creation and development of *Der Freischütz.*

Von Weber, Carl Maria. Carl Maria von Weber to Hans Georg Nägeli, May 1810. Mannheim. In *Letters of Distinguished Musicians,* edited by Ludwig Nohl, 208-211. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

This letter speaks of Weber’s opinions on the aim of an artistic composition compared to Beethoven’s to a prospective publisher.

Von Weber, Carl Maria. Carl Maria von Weber to Gänsbacher, August 1816, Prague. In *Letters of Distinguished Musicians,* edited by Ludwig Nohl 318-322. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

This letter is to a dear friend and colleague of Weber and discusses Weber’s offer to go to Dresden as the Royal Cappellmesiter and director of the German opera.

Von Weber, Carl Maria. Carl Maria von Weber to Gänsbacher, March 1817, Dresden. In *Letters of Distinguished Musicians,* edited by Ludwig Nohl 332-335. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

The letter announces the appointment of Weber as Royal Saxon Capellmeister and director of the German opera in Berlin in December 1816 as well as Weber’s intentions to begin his new opera “*Freischütz*.” It will be used when discussing the life of Weber and his inspiration for *Der Freischütz.*

Von Weber, Carl Maria. Carl Maria von Weber to Gänsbacher, July 1817, Dresden. In *Letters of Distinguished Musicians,* edited by Ludwig Nohl, 35-341. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

This letter discusses the progress made on “*Freischütz*” and desires for counsel and approval from his dear friend. It was written at a time when Weber was ill, however, many of his new pieces were being performed and well received. This will help for this paper when speaking about the development of the opera and Weber’s other compositions.

Von Weber, Carl Maria. Carl Maria von Weber to Gänsbacher, August 1818, Hotterwitz near Pillnitz, Dresden. In *Letters of Distinguished Musicians,* edited by Ludwig Nohl, 341-348. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

This letter speaks of Weber not being able to work on his opera and how the prospective premier date of December is no longer possible because his official duties take up all of his time. This letter will be used for this paper when explaining the length of time and struggle Weber had in finishing his opera.

Von Weber, Carl Maria. Carl Maria von Weber to Gänsbacher, March 1821, Dresden. In *Letters of Distinguished Musicians,* edited by Ludwig Nohl, 350-353. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

This letter speaks of and will be used to discuss Weber’s travels around Germany and the soon to be premier of his new opera, *“Der Fresichütz.”*

Von Weber, Carl Maria. Carl Maria von Weber to Gänsbacher, December 1821, Dresden. In *Letters of Distinguished Musicians,* edited by Ludwig Nohl, 354-356. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1867.

This letter talks of the rehearsal of “*Freischütz*” by royal command and will be used in discussing the creation and preparation for the premier of *Der Freisch*ütz.

Radice, Mark A. *Opera in Context: Essays on Historical Staging from the Late Renaissance to the Time of Puccini*. Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1998.

This book is full of essays on many theatre productions. Chapter six (147-169) discusses the premiere of *Der Freisch*ützas the first opera produced in Berlin’s Neues Schauspielhaus. A description as to how this opera changed the course of German Romantic opera and became the most-performed composition in the history of a Berlin Opera will also be beneficial to this paper.

Saunders, William. *Weber*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1940.

This book offers a biography of Weber and description of many of his compositions. Chapter 10 includes information on the story of *Der Freisch*ützas well as analysis of the Overture and Wolf’s Glen scene.

Simpson, J. Palgrave. *Carl Maria von Weber: The Life of an Artist from the German of His Son Baron Max Maria von Weber*. New York: Haskell House Publishers ltd., 1968.

This book discusses and will be used to discuss the inspiration and the development of the opera.

Spitta, Philipp, et al. "Weber." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.uky.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/40313pg9 (accessed October 13, 2010).

This source provides a detailed biography of Carl Maria von Weber as well as a description of many of his compositions. It will be used in this paper when describing the life of Weber.

Tusa, Michael C. “Cosmopolitanism and the National Opera: Weber's Der Freischütz,” J*ournal of Interdisciplinary History; Opera and Society I* 26, No. 3 (2006): 483-506.

This article discusses the contrast between the opera's reception as essentially German and its interpretation as an example of cosmopolitanism. It will be useful for this paper in discussing the opera’s reception as well as the status of *Der Freischütz* being a ‘national opera.’

Von Weber, Carl Maria. *Der Freisch*ütz. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977.

This is a full orchestral score of the opera and will be used for analysis of the text and music.

Von Weber, Carl Maria. *Der Freisch*ütz. Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1904.

This is a piano reduction score of the opera and will be used for analysis of the text and music.

Warrack, John. *Carl Maria von Weber.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

This book offers a description of the life of Weber and his compositions. Chapters 10 and 11 will be useful to this paper discussing his beginning time in Dresden and the creation of *Der Freisch*ütz.

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