

ABSTRACT

This study traces the origin and performance history of Carl Maria von Weber's (1786–1826) early opera *Das Waldmädchen* (J. Anh. 1, 1800), establishing the composer's musical background and knowledge of popular German opera at the time of his collaboration with librettist and theater company director Karl Franz Guolfinger, Ritter von Steinsberg (c. 1757–1806). The opera is of particular interest as the composer's first professionally produced stage work, and also as the original version of his more mature opera, *Silvana* (J. 87, 1808–10). It has received little scholarly attention until recently, because the score was presumed lost.

In 2000, Natalia Gubkina's discovery of a full score and a complete set of orchestra parts to *Das Waldmädchen*, in the central library of the Mariinsky State Theater in St. Petersburg, brought renewed scholarly interest to this unusual opera, which Weber composed when he was only thirteen years old. Her discovery also verified a statement by Weber, in his autobiographical sketch (1818), that *Das Waldmädchen* was performed at St. Petersburg. In the past, important scholars regarded that assertion with skepticism, questioning the accuracy and completeness of the autobiographical sketch itself. In the same sketch, Weber also stated that *Das Waldmädchen* was performed at Prague in Czech. The present study confirms Weber's claim of a Czech performance at Prague, further revealing that Steinsberg, Weber's Czech-born librettist, was a former director of the German company at Prague's Nostitz Theater (Estates Theater). In light of such findings, the previously perceived unreliability of Weber's autobiographical sketch must be reconsidered.

The cultural context from which Weber's opera emerged was complex and multifaceted. Steinsberg's libretto to *Das Waldmädchen* was modeled after a popular Viennese pantomime-ballet (*Das Waldmädchen*, 1796) by Moravian-born composer Paul Wranitzky. Further, Wranitzky's ballet was inspired by contemporary reports of feral children, a topic that was of great interest to the general public, generating many books, journalistic reports, and stage works featuring mute characters living in the wilderness. Several musical and dramatic aspects of Weber's opera score are compared to Wranitzky's ballet score, demonstrating the similarity of the plots of both works and also showing that some of the conventions of Viennese pantomime-ballet are also found in Weber's music for the German opera stage.

Finally, this study follows the migration of the *Waldmädchen* story as a ballet and later as an opera from Vienna to Prague and beyond, charting the movements of theater-company personnel who were involved in various productions and revealing the influence of otherwise obscure actors, dancers, and singers on the reception of Weber's early score. Weber's *Das Waldmädchen* can now be studied within the broader context of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German theater.