

Theatre-going as a consumer culture? : A socio-economic analysis of audience in the Viennese theatres in the late 18th century

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A framework for an economic-historical research of performing arts was first proposed in Frederic M. Scherer's landmark study of European musical compositions. He discussed how traditional patrons (church, court and nobility) gradually lost influence over music, while the bourgeoisie began to play a dominant role. This transition developed during the 18th and 19th centuries as a shift from a patronage-oriented to a market-oriented supply–demand relation.

Using his framework, I found this transition in the Viennese theatre scene (for plays and opera). In Vienna, during the theatre reforms (1776–1790) by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II, many regulations that had hindered active performing arts were abolished and the audience and theatres began to operate under a market mechanism. As a result, the number of audiences increased and many theatres began to succeed economically.

In this paper, I would first like to show the increase of audiences that mainly comprised the bourgeoisie during Emperor Joseph's era and would then like to emphasise some causes for this increase. I will also show the efforts taken by theatre such as changing performance contents and reducing entrance fees, and about the latter—a more complex matter—I would like to focus on the style and consciousness of the bourgeoisie's theatre-going and their socio-economic background.

Finally, to place these factors for the whole Viennese society, I would like to compare it with the consumer revolution and the commercialisation of leisure in England as we find some elements of it also in Vienna (e.g. growing middle-class, increase in luxury goods, conspicuous consumption and consumption fashion, advertising and pamphleteering, economic and population growth and decline of the class system). Indeed, the extent of this case was smaller than and its historical and religious background was different from England; moreover, at the time, prosperity in Vienna was realised after the relaxation of the regulations passed by Emperor Joseph, but there was a development of a consumer culture in the Viennese civil society, at least in the theatre scene. Daily performances in some famous theatres were popular events around Vienna; consequently, the theatre became a place for increasing social contact as well as for watching performances for the bourgeoisie and the general public. Moreover, when theatre hosted a hit play, it was swamped with people.

The prosperity of the Viennese performing arts and an emergence of a consumer culture in Vienna during the late 18th century can be linked together, and the market-oriented theatre intermediated between them.