
Markéta Štědranská: August Wilhelm Ambros

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**AUGUST WILHELM AMBROS:
MUSIKAUFSÄTZE UND
-REZENSIONEN 1872–1876**

HISTORISCH-KRITISCHE AUSGABE

BAND 1:
1872 UND 1873



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“Despite all his learning, Ambros was really more suited to the role of *feuilletoniste* than that of historian.” Thus Eduard Hanslick’s judgement in one of several passages from his memoirs (*Aus meinem Leben*) in which he recalls with fondness, admiration, and also some amusement his friend and colleague August Wilhelm Ambros.^[1] The parallel outlines of their lives and careers are familiar: both born into middle-class German-speaking families in Prague, trained in music there by leading figures such as Václav Jan Tomášek, Dionys Weber, and Johann Friedrich Kittl, dividing their professional lives at first between music journalism and civil service positions, eventually gravitating toward full-time professional careers in academic appointments and journalistic criticism in Vienna. Both came to initial prominence through widely read short treatises on key music-aesthetic questions of the day: Hanslick’s *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (Leipzig: Weigel, 1854) and Ambros’s indirect response, *Die Gränzen der Musik und Poesie* (Prague: Mercy, 1855–56). While both men held positions as music historians in Vienna, Ambros is of course the one really identified with that role thanks to his historiographically central *Geschichte der Musik* (4 vols. Wrocław: Leuckart, 1862–78), an ambitious torso that breaks off with Palestrina and the late Renaissance. Thanks to Markéta Štědrónská’s splendidly researched and edited collection of Ambros’s music journalism from the Vienna years (the hefty first volume of 649 pages covering just the two years 1872–73), we are now in a much better position to assess that only partially ironic verdict of the great music critic of the era, Hanslick, about the affinity of his celebrated historian colleague for the “light” genre of the musical *feuilleton*.

Ambros’s music journalism of the 1870s gives a vivid, generous picture of musical life in Vienna during these years, covering on average somewhere between six and twelve or more musical events during most fall, winter and spring months, in addition to reviews of books, newly published music, exhibitions (the 1873 Vienna World’s Fair), and occasional historical or topical essays. A small number of the items re-printed here are brief performance reviews or notices, though even these attain a larger cumulative significance, as with the series of reviews of the Italian opera season produced under Eugenio Merelli at the Theater an der Wien (March–April 1872) featuring Adelina Patti, then at the zenith of her career.^[2] For the most part, the writings represent the essay-review genre of the *feuilleton*, especially congenial to Ambros’s critical talents in permitting an opportunity to elaborate on points of history and culture, biography, repertoire and above all to indulge in the sorts of learned anecdotes, inter-medial analogies, classical or modern literary allusions, and other sorts of cultural footnotes on which he thrived. It was just this penchant for digressive examples or comparisons and erudite (often art-historical) analogies that, to Hanslick’s mind, impeded Ambros from achieving a properly modern, scientifically directed mode of historical writing. (The centrifugal efflorescence of his style reflects something of his abiding passion for the fiction of Jean Paul.) At the same time, though, it allows the musical journalism of the Vienna years to expand well beyond the limits of mere reportage or

qualitative evaluation of repertoire and performances into a kind of supplement, albeit not chronologically linear, to the unfinished *Geschichte der Musik* (as noted Friedrich Blume), moving forward from the late Baroque through the emerging Classical-Romantic canon of Ambros's own time and place.^[3] It also supplements Hanslick's project of a local history of musical practice, a *Geschichte des Concertwesens in Wien*, and in the same sense of merging historical record with first-hand observation.^[4] (Hanslick himself realized that his own journalism was serving this purpose, so that the first formal volume of that project gradually gave way to the numerous volumes of collected criticism published from the mid 1870s to the end of his life.)



Figure 1: August Wilhelm Ambros (brush painting by Wilhelm Hecht), published in *Die österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild*, vol. 10, *Böhmen 2. Abtheilung* (Vienna: Druck und Verlag der k. und k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1896), 43.

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A typical Ambros *feuilleton* will range freely back and forth between present and past, music and the other arts, Vienna and the outside world, and conclude (in the manner of most contemporary reviews) with a few words of approval or occasionally censure regarding any performances in question. Thus, for example, his ecstatic reception of Brahms's *Triumphlied*, op. 55 at a concert of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (item 88) or the orchestral *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*,

op. 56a (item 129; Philharmonic concert of November 2, 1873) entail short lectures on genres of concerted sacred music in the age of Bach and Handel and on variation form from the earliest Baroque to Bach's "Goldberg" variations through Beethoven's three periods—but not to the exclusion of trenchant remarks, in both cases, on Brahms's historically informed post-Beethovenian style of composition. Comments on formal design, vocal-choral writing, orchestration and so forth in the *Triumphlied* confirm his access to the printed score (whose published appearance he also describes), whereas the variations, whose score is not available to him, leave Ambros grasping enthusiastically, impressionistically but suggestively, at the *je ne sais quoi* that places the Haydn-Variations on a plane with Beethoven and apart from the everyday variation practice of past or present. In both cases, his scholarly ambition is unobtrusively manifest. Though never shy to demonstrate his erudition, Ambros adapts it well to the purposes of the *feuilleton*, balancing instruction with jovial wit suited to the educated bourgeois readership of the *Wiener Zeitung* and its various *Beilagen*. Sometimes his inside knowledge of the music under review can surprise: commenting on the dramatic use of a recurring *romanza* in Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* he notes, with regard to a performance during Patti's guest season at the Theater an der Wien, the absence of a scene from Act 2 in which that melody figures (item 25, 122). Typical, above all, are analogies he loves to make with painting, architecture, poetry, or drama. Raphael, Michelangelo, and Tintoretto appear with the same frequency as Josquin, Lassus, and Palestrina to illustrate some point of musical *Geistesgeschichte*. Ambros himself pokes fun at this proclivity in a rhetorical transition between works reviewed in a *feuilleton* of March 28, 1873:

From the great darkening Gothic cathedral of the old Johann Sebastian Bach we are led into a garden palace, one of those constructions in the most gracious, cheerful rococo manner where, surrounded by boxwood hedges and flowers of delightful color and fragrance, marble nymphs listen impishly, fountains play and ladies promenade ... whose style of beauty and charm we recognize from the pastel paintings of Rosalba Carriera. Plainly put, without metaphor or analogy: following the Bach cantata [BWV 4, "Christ lag in Todesbanden"] came a symphony of Joseph Haydn in C major [Hob. I:97], more "rococo" than some of his others, but charming through and through.^[5]

While somewhat more resistant to the contemporary Viennese fad for Offenbach's operettas than his colleague Hanslick, Ambros nonetheless gives popular music theater a fair hearing and makes informed distinctions in this repertoire, including the stage works of Johann Strauss Jr. and the emergent Viennese operetta. It is a testimony to the passionate cultural historian in Ambros that almost nothing is beneath his notice, or indeed, his full attention. More inclined than Hanslick to sound the alarm of musical "decline and fall" in the present age, his attitude toward Wagner, the "New Germans," and their local advocates is nonetheless also open-minded, and his remarks in this area frequently perceptive. Productions of Wagner's operas receive scant attention, however. Performances of *Die Meistersinger*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, and *Rienzi* elicit little more than a few comments on singers, a number of whom were soon to be contracted to perform in the first Bayreuth Festival, such as Franz Betz and Amalie Materna, or who had already made a reputation as Wagner interpreters (Albert Niemann, e.g.). A lengthy trio of *feuilletons* apropos a special

Wagner gala of May 12, 1872 devotes the first two to general discussion of the “Wagner question” and the growing literature on that subject, with a few passing comments on the concert program itself in the third installment (the most detailed remarks involve interesting reactions to tempos and orchestral balances in Wagner’s conducting of Beethoven’s *Eroica*). It is nonetheless intriguing to witness Ambros, always conscious of his role as music historian, judiciously negotiate the factors of Wagner’s current celebrity as against the possible verdicts of a later age. The “dithyrambic swoon or rather the demonic tumult” of the Venusberg music in the revised Parisian score of *Tannhäuser* impresses him while representing, not surprisingly, his limit: “It exerts an irresistible magic, but at the same time arouses a secret feeling of outrage.”^[6] That the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* is a closed book to him, as it had been to Berlioz a decade earlier, is not surprising, though one wonders in what sense he could speak of “some thoroughly beautiful individual features” while dismissing the net effect as a kind of “intellectual torment of the listener” characteristic of Wagner’s most abstruse side.^[7] Curiously, Ambros several times links the names of Wagner and Offenbach, not simply as an ironic contrast, but to suggest that the popularity of these figures from opposite ends of the musical spectrum typifies something significant and precarious about the cultural moment. The popular-satirical frivolity of Offenbach and the self-conscious world-historical ambitions of Wagner, he implies, constitute between them a singularly modern dialectic.^[8] Again we get an intriguing glimpse into the unwritten “final volume” of Ambros’s history, though surely the sober scholar in him would have balked at continuing that project so far into the all-too-unstable present.

Occasional book reviews, Handel oratorio performances from the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (directed by Brahms), or Gluck revivals at the Hofoper provide Ambros with ample opportunity to wear his music historian’s hat in public, so to speak, and share his great fund of learning with the average reader. Biographical anecdotes, notes on the genre history of opera and oratorio, comparisons of poetic and musical styles across three centuries, and various nods to musical scholarship by contemporaries such as Friedrich Chrysander or Adolf Bernhard Marx frame more immediate evocations of the works under review, giving an accessible perspective to the music as experienced in the present moment. For all his qualms about the future of the arts, Ambros delights in the historicism of his own time and place. The *Musikfreunde* of Vienna are no longer alienated by fugal choruses, melismatic vocal sequences and phrase repetitions, or drawn-out *da capo* reprises. “A distinct change has taken place,” he notes approvingly. “Not just our fine new editions of Handel, but a closer acquaintance with the whole period, with Scarlatti, Leo, Lotti, Pergolesi et al. has made this musical language comprehensible once more,” as evidenced by the rapt attention given to every moment of Handel’s *Saul* when performed on February 28, 1873.^[9] Nothing gives him greater satisfaction than to praise the same singers conscripted for Wagner’s music dramas in Vienna, Munich, or Bayreuth—such as Luise Dustmann, Emil Scaria, Gustav Walter, or Emil Krauss—for their committed, insightful performances in Handel’s *Saul* or Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Concerts of sacred music, in church or concert hall venues, invariably elicit brief scholarly elucidations of polyphonic mass composition from Dufay to Palestrina, the modern Bach renaissance, and value of the new Bach-Gesellschaft editions. Reviews of musicians’ biographies—[August Reissmann, *Franz Schubert: Sein Leben und seine Werke* \(Berlin: Guttentag, 1873\)](#)—or other recent musical scholarship also provide a platform for Ambros to continue the unfinished project of his music history. In reviewing, for example, [Gustave Chouquet’s *Histoire de la musique dramatique en France depuis ses origines jusqu’à nos jours* \(Paris: Librairie Firmin Didot, 1873\)](#), he dwells particularly on the late Renaissance and 17th-century origins of French theatrical genres, precisely where his own work had been left standing. A somewhat amateurish regional study of Czech musical history (which, somewhat in Ambros’s own manner, insists on

contextualizing this extensively in the history of European music at large) becomes the occasion for a stern lecture on historiography and the proper use of secondary sources, here by negative example.^[10] Finally, a six-part series of reports on music instrument exhibits at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair (items 121–26; July 22 through September 16) becomes a small textbook on organology, with extensive information on international piano manufacture (at a moment when the piano was just reaching its final modern form), orchestral instruments, as well as non-Western (mainly middle-Eastern and Asian) traditional instruments, which especially fascinate him.

Detailed accounts of organ registrations, advances in the construction of piano sounding-boards by Lajos Beregszászy adopted by the Bösendorfer firm, or experiments with registral division of the damper pedal action (etc.) raise the question we might bring to any significant historical collection of performance reviews: what kinds of evidence can one find about styles, techniques, individual “interpretations,” other aspects of the ephemeral sounding products of the performers under review? The question is of especial interest for Vienna at a time when it hosted many of the greatest musical celebrities of the century, still some three decades before the advent of sound recording. Here the results are mixed. Ambros shares with many reviewers of the time a tendency to limit comments on performers to a few generic formulas of praise or censure in the final paragraphs of the *feuilleton*. Even those who arouse the most genuine admiration, such as Hans von Bülow or Clara Schumann, are treated more to enthusiastic reportage than interpretive analysis, despite the fact that their increasingly “canonic” approach to repertoire might encourage something like the latter. A cumulative reading of the more frequently reviewed performers or ensembles, such as Anton Rubinstein (as pianist and conductor), the Philharmonic orchestra, or the Florentine and Hellmesberger quartets might yield some interesting composite profile, but we find little analysis of any single performance. Vocalists present something of an exception, however. Adelina Patti's performances of Verdi's *Violetta* and *Gilda* or Rossini's *Rosina* elicit some fairly precise descriptions of vocal production and even aspects of dramatic interpretation. And while an early review of her 1872 guest appearances in Vienna begins with the unpromising statement that “about Signora Adelina Patti there is really nothing to say” (in view of her widely acknowledged vocal perfection), precisely this review includes some of Ambros's most informative descriptions of contemporary vocal technique, regarding, for example, the singer's negotiation of *bel canto* idioms in the era of Meyerbeerian and Verdian dramatic values, or (by negative example), current crowd-pleasing mannerisms of phrasing and dynamic effect deliberately avoided in Patti's lyrical delivery (98–103).



Figure 2: Adelina Patti (private portrait)

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Markéta Štědrorská's editorial work on the volume is outstanding in every respect. Each of the 138 items reprinted here is numbered for ease of reference or cross-reference (cross-referenced items in the editorial notes give this number and individual text-line numbers, as appropriate). The layout of the primary text resembles that of the Hanslick *Sämtliche Schriften* edition of Dietmar Strauß et al. (no longer to become *sämtlich*, sadly). The original periodical publication data is indicated at the start of each entry, followed by the original heading of the item, authorial attribution (whether by cipher, full name at the beginning or end of the piece, or without attribution), and the main text, largely preserving original orthography and typographical format, is provided with line numbers. In the Hanslick edition line numbers are provided only where later reprintings during the author's lifetime provide textual variants, listed at the end of each entry. Since Ambros's journalism was mostly not reprinted, apart from selections taken over in the second volume of the essay collection, *Bunte Blätter: Skizzen und Studien für Freunde der Musik und der bildenden Kunst* (Leipzig: Leuckart, 1874), Štědrorská dispenses with textual

variants, including just a brief appendix of emendations, mainly of obvious typographical errors. Then instead of the list of textual variants that follows most of the periodical items in the Hanslick edition (often extensive, but of limited interest to the reader), Štědrónská usefully provides full identification of “events reviewed” and “works reviewed.” Thanks to careful scrutiny of other contemporary press material she is able to provide a surprising level of precision to the latter, with full work titles, opus numbers, and/or numberings from modern work catalogues.^[13] Especially impressive, though, is the extensive set of annotations that concludes each entry, offering biographical data, bibliographic information for musical or other literary, artistic, or scholarly works mentioned in the text, brief explanatory glosses, and cross references to other relevant entries by item and line number. (Some cross references to items in the forthcoming second volume are also included.) Quoted material in Ambros’s reviews or essays is identified with source citations, the texts amplified and translated, as needed. Given Ambros’s propensity for all manner of allusions, quotations, and comparisons with other art forms, ancient to modern, these meticulous annotations are invaluable. They also represent a significant improvement over the aforementioned edition of Hanslick’s writings, where the *Erläuterungen* are relegated to an appendix position at the end of the volumes and consist mainly of summary paraphrases of the review content, with only limited factual data. Occasionally one might wish for more of a compromise between the two approaches, as Štědrónská generally refrains from interpretive glosses, even where ambiguities or allusions in the text could benefit from such. But considering the plethora of references filling the typical Ambros essay or review, the data-oriented approach to annotations is certainly to be preferred.

References

1. Eduard Hanslick, *Aus meinem Leben*, ed. Peter Wapnewski (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1987), 213. ↑
2. See items 19, 20, 24, 25, 27, and 31. The numbering of the individual reprinted items in the volume is a useful tool for reference and cross reference. ↑
3. Friedrich Blume, “Ambros, August Wilhelm,” in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1949–51), 1:412. ↑
4. The two volumes Hanslick published under this title (Vienna: Braumüller, 1869–70) move from a second-hand narrative of institutions and performers (vol. 1) to first-hand reviews (vol. 2) covering the period 1750–1868, such that Ambros’s Viennese journalism picks up almost exactly where these leave off. Of course, the remainder of Hanslick’s journalism does the same, and carries on considerably beyond the date of Ambros’s death in 1876. ↑
5. “Aus dem dämmernden gothischen Riesendom des alten Johann Sebastian wurden wir in einen Gartenpalast geführt, eines jener Bauwerke im graziösesten, heitersten Rococo, wo dieser Styl seine volle Berechtigung hat, – im umgebenden Garten blühen zwischen Taxuswänden Blumen, an Farbe und Duft köstlich, marmorne Nymphen lauschen schalkhaft, Springbrunnen plätschern und wenn wir durch die Gänge Damen ... promeniren sehen, so freuen wir uns dessen, denn wir kennen von den Pastellbildern der Rosalba Carriera her die Schönheit und Anmuth der Frauen jener Zeiten sehr wohl. Ohne Bilder und Gleichnisse gesprochen: nach der Bach’schen Cantate kam eine Symphonie von Jos. Haydn in *C-dur*, mehr ‘Rococo’ als andere von ihm, aber reizend durch und durch” (429). ↑
6. “Der dithyrambische Rausch oder vielmehr der dämonische Wirbel, der die Scene in ihrer jetzigen Gestalt – durchrast, möchte ich sagen, hat in der ganzen musikalischen Literatur nicht seinesgleichen, hier steht Wagner ohne Rivalen da. Es ist ein Zauber, der übermächtig mit sich fortreißt und zugleich

geheimes Entsetzen erregt" (175). ↑

7. "Ich rechne dieses Stück, trotz einzelner überaus schöner Züge, zu dem, was ich in Wagners Musik geistreiche Tortur des Hörers nenne" (175). ↑
8. See for example 95 or especially 199, where the pairing occurs twice (see lines 89 and 120) to characterize the present "cultural moment." This *feuilleton* of June 23, 1872 previews the coming season of the Hofoper, but turns into a small essay on the cultural history of opera and musical taste. ↑
9. "Nicht bloß die neuen, schönen Händel-Ausgaben, sondern die größere Bekanntschaft mit jener ganzen Kunstzeit, mit Scarlatti, Leo, Lotti, Pergolese u. s. w. hat uns diese Tonsprache wieder verständlicher gemacht" (399). ↑
10. Item 109. His criticism is directed towards [Christian Ritter d'Elvert, *Geschichte der Musik in Mähren und Oesterr.-Schlesien, mit Rücksicht auf die allgemeine böhmische und österreichische Musik-Geschichte* \(Brno: Winiker, 1873\)](#). ↑
11. Furthermore, unlike the Hanslick edition, musical works are sub-indexed within composer entries, and in a very legible format, too. ↑