CHAPTER 6

The Indian *Parsifal*: Revisiting Felix Gotthelf's Forgotten Opera *Mahadeva*

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At the dawn of the twentieth century, Felix Gotthelf, a 30-year-old German physician and specialist in throat diseases from Mönchengladbach, gave up his medical practice to study musical composition. He then devoted ten years of his life to creating his magnum opus, *Mahadeva, Ein Mysterium in einem Vorspiel und drei Aufzügen für die Bühne in Wort und Ton (A Mystery in a Prelude and Three Acts for the Stage in Words and Music)*. Since it had involved much grappling with the metaphysical, religious, and artistic issues of the day, he dedicated his work to Paul Deussen, a philosopher, Indologist, and founder of the Schopenhauer Society. *Mahadeva* explores Schopenhauer's reflections on Buddhism and Richard Wagner's unfulfilled plans to write a Buddhist opera by combining Hindu scriptures, Buddhist legends, and their European interpretations in a poetic musical drama. The story centres on the divine creator, Mahadeva, who assumes human form to redeem humanity through coming to the aid of a young woman whom society had ostracized. Gotthelf's work opened

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in Düsseldorf in 1910, but soon disappeared from the theatre schedules. Remaining virtually unknown as a musician, Gotthelf died in Dresden in 1930.

The journey of this self-avowed composer, poet, and author of treatises on the philosophy of religion, Felix Gotthelf, says a lot about the emergence of European modernity in the years leading up to the First World War—as seen by the laggardly, the late-coming, the marginal, and the epigonic. From the vantage point of established historiographies of artistic modernism, it is obvious why the opera never really succeeded. Even at its premiere in 1910, the work clearly failed to distinguish between the old and the modern. In other words, Gotthelf's life's work did not fill any gaps in the history of opera form and contributed little to what still moves us today, either artistically or philosophically. It seemed outdated because it could not convincingly fulfil the expectation that artwork should create something new. This aesthetic judgement about an artistic creation that could not prevail comes from our lips today as quickly as it did to the critics of Felix Gotthelf's day. The central claim of artistic modernism is that the measure of a work of art is its constant ability to break with convention. However, in his works on aesthetics, French philosopher Jacques Rancière questions this avant-garde narrative. He argues that the traditional concept of modernity complicates our understanding of the shifts in art because 'it traces, in order either to exalt or deplore it, a simple line of transition or rupture between the old and the new' and 'tries to retain the forms of rupture, the iconoclastic gestures.' The hallmark of a modern aesthetic regime, by contrast, encompasses a 'co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities' (Rancière 2019). Felix Gotthelf's *Mahadeva* is precisely an example of this juxtaposition of temporality. It spoke of something that had become conceivable but could not be elaborated on. It left no trace worth mentioning. Instead, it is itself a trace of quite different continuing movements.

The trail I follow here is an attempt to read history from the back of the stage, to perform a kind of sonic archaeology on the acoustic dustbin of modernity. In doing so, it may be possible to observe what the complex machinery of the musical theatre processed, digested, and discarded between the turn of the century and the First World War, when the bourgeois lifestyle of the German Empire was at its peak. On the other hand, this also brings into view what has been preserved and sustained.

Gotthelf's opera represents a double loss—the loss of the work itself, which had become unperformable and inaudible, and the loss of what it

ought to have been but never was—the work of art that was intended to be but remained hidden because it failed. After all, this unrealized opera was once thought possible and the art critics had been eagerly anticipating it. Its religious and philosophical ideas struck a chord. It tamed the 'many-headed beast, the audience' (Gotthelf 1910), and the German theatre granted it an opportunity to show what it could do, but it was an opportunity that Gotthelf admittedly squandered. The critics gave *Mahadeva* the thumbs down, and the work never entered the canons of opera. Hope remained, however, for the much-anticipated 'work of art of the future' that *Mahadeva* should have been.

In her chapter in this volume, Isabella Schwaderer describes Gotthelf's opera in the context of negotiating religion and secularism—as a form of modernity that 'cannot be fully understood as an increasing disenchantment with and decay of a religious worldview.' With this in mind, she reconstructs the Christian interpretation of Wagner and Schopenhauer that emerges from the ideas in Gotthelf's opera. I approach this analysis from another angle, one that starts from the two facets of the work itself, namely its success and its failure – in other words, the work that was heard on the German stage in 1910 and the work that the audience hoped to hear, but did not.

However, the music for the opera, which should speak for itself, must first be recovered. Until an ensemble willing to rehearse the score can be found, this auditory event can only be reconstructed for those skilled at reading music. I shall therefore proceed mainly along experimental lines. In the autumn of 2020, I asked André Kassel, a composer and opera répétiteur at the Weimar German National Theatre, to examine the piano score of *Mahadeva* and to play some excerpts from the opera's musical passages. Based on our immediate impression of those auditory snatches, we discussed the obscurity of the work, as perceived from the year 2020, and recorded a video of our conversation. I shall rely on this recording for an intuitive understanding of Gotthelf's music, but above all, to gain the greatest possible distance from established musicological narratives on the history of German opera. The concern here is not, strictly speaking, with the history of music but with the steady realignment of the ethical, aesthetic, and scientific thoughts reverberating around the German art scene of the day. Richard Wagner had brought this realignment into full swing; the work of his apologist Felix Gotthelf reflected on and updated it and, in the process, it became plausible for Gotthelf, who had never visited India,

to 'apply the Indian spirit in all its mystical and metaphysical depth to German art' (Gotthelf 1917).

Gotthelf's opera was a characteristic product of post-Wagnerian German music insofar as it spelled out Wagner's ideas on art and religion for the benefit of German national culture. However, the project was carried out on the shaky ground of artistic modernism, which was shaky because it was continually reconfiguring the framework for designing and interpreting a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The success or failure of a work of art in 1910 depended on its ability not only to produce aesthetic innovation but also to address such things as the religious realm, the experience of alterity, and colonial knowledge.

An Artist's Biography

Little is known about the life of the doctor turned artist Felix Gotthelf beyond his own sparse writings. Gotthelf was born in Mönchengladbach in 1857. He studied medicine in Heidelberg and became a resident medical specialist in Dresden. In 1884, he described the premiere of Wagner's *Parsifal* in Bayreuth as awakening his interest in the arts. He then studied musical composition in Dresden under Felix Draeseke from 1887 to 1891 and subsequently became a *Kapellmeister* in Cologne for a year (Meister 1931: 371). Gotthelf spent several years in Munich, where he pursued his creative interests. Alongside his magnum opus, *Mahadeva*, he produced several carefully composed lesser works, mainly songs, a string quartet, and the symphonic fantasia *Ein Frühlingsfest*. Gotthelf also emerged as an author who wrote on musical and philosophical topics for newspapers and arts magazines. He was known in the Bayreuth Circle of Wagner devotees, and it was its members who introduced him to Schopenhauer's philosophy. In 1898 he moved to Vienna and, after the First World War, he returned to Dresden, where, having been widowed at a relatively young age, he led a secluded life with his daughter Maya (Meister 1931: 372). He died in Dresden in 1930 (Fig. 6.1).

After working on it for ten years, Gotthelf completed the libretto and score of *Mahadeva* in 1908. In 1909, part of the final act was performed in Stuttgart with the royal chamber-music singer Hedy Iracema Brügelmann (1879–1941), a famous German–Brazilian soprano from the *Hoftheater*, in the leading role of Maya. In 1910, the actual premiere of *Mahadeva* took place in Düsseldorf, where there were no fewer than eight documented opera performances during the 1910/11 season. The three

Fig. 6.1 Portrait of Felix Gotthelf. (Source: Düsseldorfer Stadttheater Nr. 22, Düsseldorf, 28 February to 7 March 1910)

performances in which Iracema-Brügelmann played Maya were noteworthy. In 1911, the Karlsruhe theatre added several performances of *Mahadeva* to its schedule. On 19 November 1916, an excerpt of *Mahadeva*, performed by the ensemble of the Vienna *Concertverein*, was probably heard on stage for the last time at the *Konzerthaus* in Vienna.

The libretto and the part for piano, which Gotthelf printed and published, are what have survived of *Mahadeva*. The score is in the Saxon State Library, which safeguards Gotthelf's several other publications and papers. His essays were published in the Schopenhauer Society's yearbooks from 1914 to 1917. Singer Hedy Brügelmann's estate has preserved lengthy correspondence with Gotthelf on the *Mahadeva* premiere. Reviews of the first performances can be found in the Düsseldorf and Karlsruhe local newspapers.

That is the extent of the sources for our listening experiment. From there, let us as impartially as possible wade into the 'thorny, impassable harmonic thicket' of Gotthelf's composition and capture an echo of *Mahadeva*.

The Tail of Wagner's Comet

Weimar, November 2020

The Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar (DNT, or German national theatre in Weimar) is one of the oldest theatres in Germany: it dates back to the eighteenth century when its director was the most famous German author of the classical period, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Today the DNT offers a broad repertoire of classical and modern operas, theatrical productions and concerts in four different venues. The day-to-day operations of the DNT in the year 2020 provide an appropriate backdrop to Gotthelf's forgotten work, which has not exactly entered the canons of contemporary theatre. The programme for the DNT's 2019/20 season featured works by Claudio Monteverdi, Jacques Offenbach, Paul Dessau, André Kassel, Richard Strauss, and Leonard Bernstein. In addition, a symposium dealt with the ties between opera and colonialism. In 2020, however, the coronavirus pandemic put an end to all productions for months on end. This granted us an unexpected moment of contemplation in which to take a closer look at a piece of music that the theatre had cast aside a hundred years ago. Since lockdown measures restricted access to the theatre, I arranged to meet André Kassel in the room in which my rock band rehearses. It has black walls, scuffed Persian rugs on the floor, and a neon sign left over from a former stage production in one corner of the room spelling out the words 'The End' – a fitting prop for the exotic pathos of the demise of Gotthelf's work to which we are about to listen. Kassel takes a seat on the piano stool and opens the score.

The Mahadeva prelude is notated in four quarters in E major. Gotthelf indicates 'moderately slow' as the tempo and 'misterioso' as the expression. The score's first chord comprises a low E and a C-sharp of the double basses in pianissimo and is sustained over 20 full measures. Above this, the first harp enters, followed by two soft timpani strokes, each concluding the first measures. Muted French horns come in with an initial motif. Thereafter, the curtain rises. Here Gotthelf has included the following instructions:

'The stage represents a surface of water, boundless in all directions and perfectly smooth, in the centre of which a white lotus blossom floats, its calyx closed. Slowly moving clouds of mist gradually fade over the surface of the water. Night falls and there is a clear but starless sky.' Invisible to the audience, the 'voice of the heights' enters with the words: 'Ma-ha-de-va, We-sens-walt-er' (Mahadeva, keeper of the essence of beings) (Fig. 6.2).

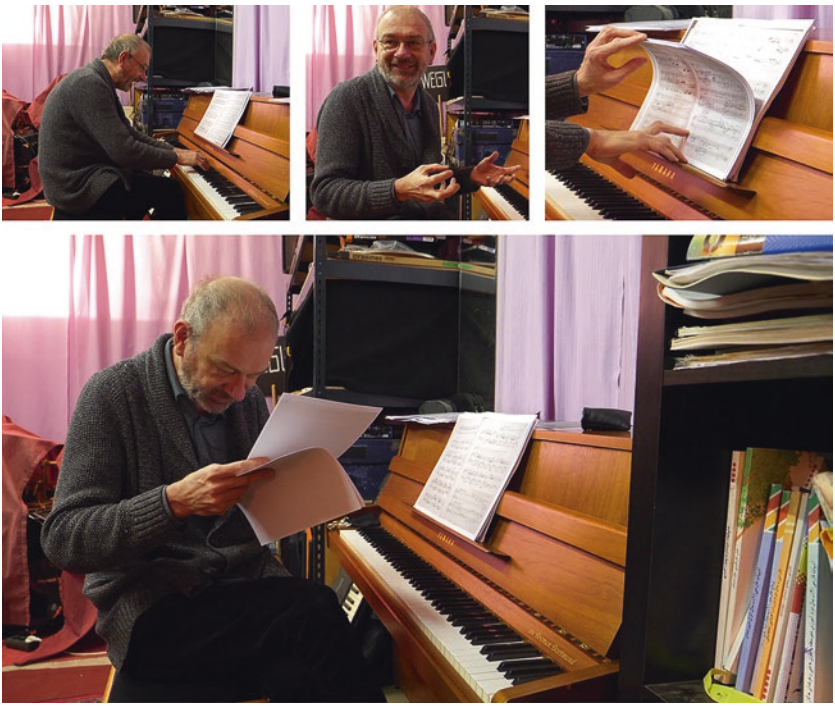

Fig. 6.2 Bringing the opera back to life with composer André Kassel. (Source: Videostills © Markus Schlaffke)

André Kassel fumbles his way through the chords of the first act, sight-reading and mimicking the cues for the singers and chorus. A somewhat grotesque echo of Gotthelf's composition can thus be heard on the slightly out-of-tune piano in the rehearsal room.

'It's really nothing special,' says Kassel, putting aside the prelude. 'Quite normal, just as a European would imagine it. Tritonal couplings of A major and E-flat major, semitones. It plods along to get people in the mood. Most importantly, the double basses do not lose count when they play there for so long.'

I wonder what the narrative of our improvised 'stand-up revision' actually is. How can the forgotten piece of art be mirrored today? How can it acquire significance? Only two argumentative thrusts come to mind – the idea of the overlooked masterpiece and the overlooked ideological scandal.

I attempt to explain the plot of the opera to André Kassel. It is difficult for me to summarize the plot without also going into the underlying cosmology. It requires great effort to convey the anachronistic assortment of characters in the opera as seen from the year 1910.

What is this strangely anachronistic piece of literary musical theatre actually about? Even in 1910, *Mahadeva*'s reviewers found it a challenge to give a coherent summary of the opera's plot. How terms like *brahmin*, 'reincarnation,' and *nirvāna* were explained in the arts section of German newspapers illustrates how vague the semantics of this vocabulary were in 1910. After all, this was not about India but about the big picture of worldly wisdom. Gotthelf condenses this into 4 h of opera in a prelude and three acts. Mahadeva appears in numerous guises—a pilgrim, priests of the Mahadeva cult, a dancer named Maya, a young warrior, the god of death Yama, temple maidens, penitents, *Veda* scholars, and conch blowers. The action takes place 'in ancient times' in the Indian city of Benares.

The god Mahadeva's awakening from the sleep of *nirvāna* sets the events in motion. When Mahadeva realizes that he has dreamt up the world and thus brought the cycle of suffering into existence, he becomes a human so that he can break the cycle through self-sacrifice. He starts by entering the temple and encountering priests and followers of his cult who do not recognize him. He then turns to Maya, a dancer who is a *cāṇḍāla*[1] (an untouchable). After thwarting Kama's insistent advances on Maya, Mahadeva spends the night with her himself (without approaching her sexually). Then he invokes the god of death and thus ends his human existence. Maya, however, is accused of murder. A public trial ensues, during which various accusations and intercessions are made. During these proceedings, an entanglement involving Maya's reincarnation is revealed. In a former life as a high-caste *brahmin*, she had betrayed Kama, who was at the time an outcast. During reincarnation, their roles were reversed. When Maya becomes aware of her guilt in the entanglement, she throws herself into the flames of the funeral pyre on which Mahadeva's body is being cremated. In a final scene, she appears united with Mahadeva in a lotus blossom.

The outline of this plot expands on something that Richard Wagner had intended to do, but never achieved in this form. Since Wagner had

[1] On the erroneous interpretation of the term *cāṇḍāla* in European academic literature, see Elst (2008).

been introduced to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, he had, as is well known, explored Buddhism.[2] Wagner first had the idea of creating an opera about Buddhism in 1856 (see Osthoff 1983). The project bore the working title *Die Sieger* (the victors), a reference to Buddha's title as the *Siegreich Vollendete* (victoriously consummate). Wagner's idea is documented in correspondence and conversations, as well as in a plot outline:

> The Buddha on his last journey. Ananda given water from the well by Prakriti, the Chandala maiden. Her tumult of love for Ananda; his consternation. Prakriti in love's agony: her mother brings Ananda to her: love's battle royal: Ananda, distressed and moved to tears, released by Shakya [the Buddha]. Prakriti goes to Buddha, under the tree at the city's gate, to plead for union with Ananda. He asks if she is willing to fulfil the stipulations of such a union. Dialogue with twofold meaning, interpreted by Prakriti in the sense of her passion; she sinks horrified and sobbing to the ground, when she hears at length that she must share Ananda's vow of chastity. Ananda persecuted by the *brahmin*s. Reproofs against Buddha's commerce with a Chandala girl. Buddha's attack on the spirit of caste. He tells of Prakriti's previous incarnation; she then was the daughter of a haughty *brahmin*; the Chandala king, remembering a former existence as Brahmin, had craved the *brahmin*'s daughter for his son, who had conceived a violent passion for her; in pride and arrogance the daughter had refused to return the love, and mocked the unfortunate. This she had now to expiate, reborn as a Chandala to feel the torments of a hopeless love, yet to renounce it, and be led to full redemption through acceptance into Buddha's flock. Prakriti answers Buddha's final question with a joyful 'Yea.' Ananda welcomes her as a sister. Buddha's last teachings. All are converted by him. He departs to the place of his redemption. (Wagner n.d.)

Wagner steadily developed his *Sieger* project from 1856 onwards, but ultimately abandoned it because he saw its central ideas largely realized in

[2] On the main ideas underlying Wagner's conception of Buddhism as influenced by Schopenhauer, see Sven Friedrich (2012: 48): 'The notion of achieving salvation by overcoming the all-controlling will through renunciation and resignation. … Insight through contemplative perception free of will, independent of Kant's principle of reason; *karma*; overcoming of the will through meditation and asceticism; identity of all living things as an *anima mundi*; knowledge of the self through compassion with creatures and others; continual recurrence through transmigration and reincarnation until redemption is achieved in nirvāna.'

his *Ring* cycle and certainly in *Parsifal*.[3] Gotthelf knew all about Wagner's plans. He was familiar with the ideas they contained and knew how Wagner had conceived his Buddhist opera and why he had abandoned the project. It is not difficult to discern that *Mahadeva* is, in many ways, a scenic translation of Wagner's *Sieger* project. The Buddhist themes in Wagner's operatic œuvre were already well-known to scholars of musicology. They were discussed in a sophisticated and cognizant manner in the reviews of Gotthelf's *Mahadeva*. Following the performances of *Mahadeva* in Karlsruhe, editor-in-chief of the *Badische Presse*, Albert Herzog (1910), wrote:

> It is well known how Richard Wagner, after turning away from Feuerbach's optimism, received in Schopenhauer the foundation of the new philosophy that had already been quietly forming within himself… . The hymn of *Tristan and Isolde* has become the artistic messenger of Wagner's worldview, which, given the many similarities between the Indian and Christian ideas of redemption, also resounds in *Parsifal*… . Yes, Wagner had even been able to conceal it in the *Nibelungen Ring*, which was composed under Feuerbach's influence, no matter how much the straightforward Germanic mythology might have resisted it… Now his passionate disciple, Felix Gotthelf, has presented the Germanic divine drama in conjunction with an Indian one. Here, too, the deity who has erred and whose guilt requires atonement.

Thus, in 1910, initiated audiences were able to hear the parallels of *Parsifal*'s ideological themes in Gotthelf's composition. From the basic idea of the human need for redemption through the protagonist's compassionate act of self-sacrifice, to how the idea of redemption is exemplified in the main female character, to the psychological characterization of the female counterpart—Kundry, like Maya, faces an entanglement from a previous life—up to the visual leitmotif of the Holy Grail, which is echoed in the opening and closing lotus blossom, *Mahadeva* was recognizable as an obvious transposition of Wagner's Grail universe into the mythical parallel world of the Upanishads.[4]

[3] 'Since undertaking *Parsifal*, I entirely abandoned the Buddhistic project (related in a weaker sense to *Parsifal*), and I have never since then had it in mind to do anything with it, much less to read it aloud.' Wagner, in Bayreuth, 10 July 1882 [to an unnamed correspondent] (Wagner 1953).

[4] Wolfgang Osthoff (1983) explains in detail how Wagner's reading of Buddhism permeates the whole work as an underlying context and is found in all dramaturgical conceptions of Wagner's operas.

I suspect that audiences were not hearing Gotthelf; they were hearing Wagner. Indeed, *Mahadeva* can at first be understood primarily as an utterly innocent attempt to carry over into the twentieth century the tremendous impression that Wagner's operatic œuvre had left on some of Germany's intellectual and artistic elite. In Rancière's (2019) terms, Gotthelf aimed to establish a new 'aesthetic regime' by reorganizing aesthetic space through a massive transfer of the ethical into the realm of poetic drama, as well as through a new relationship to history.

In this context, we must bear in mind that, in 1910, the 'culture war' surrounding Wagner was far from over and that a select band of 'prophets of the new faith' (Otto 1999) were still on their way home from the sacred halls of Bayreuth to preach the new Wagnerian gospel. In 1911, late Romanticism in music, in which Gotthelf's work can be placed, had not yet subsided. This is the genre in which people continued to argue about redefining the artist's role in society. For example, *Parsifal* was only allowed to be performed outside Bayreuth after a 30-year period expired in 1913. Thus, a large segment of the German public had yet to experience the Wagner awakening. It is, therefore, understandable that a Wagner devotee like Gotthelf was determined to revive the initial earth-shaking effect of Wagner's 'magic' by any means necessary.

Nevertheless, Wagner's way of using music to lend meaning to the saga of the Grail legend and the obsolete liturgical symbols of Christianity in 1884 could not simply be replicated for contemporary audiences in 1910. Discontinuities reveal themselves. When it came out, *Mahadeva* was regarded and treated not as a much-needed sequel but merely as an outdated copy of Wagner's plans. It was precisely this assessment by music critics that helped to seal its fate. For example, the trade journal *Die Musik* concluded: 'If this extraordinary volition … is not matched by its execution, as unfortunately appears to be the case, then this is primarily because Gotthelf has, in basing his music to an ever-greater extent on Wagner, nearly or completely abandoned his own individuality' (Schuster 1913). Another critic had remarked sarcastically that Gotthelf was 'so dependent on Wagner, both lyrically and tonally, that on every page of the libretto and the score, one could write Wagner's original version in the margin at any number of places' (*Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* 1910). Even today, listening to Wagner's operas in parallel remains the only way to understand how *Mahadeva* sounds. For example, the first few bars of the Rheingold prelude, in which a solitary E-flat on the double bass is sustained over four

measures, may sound quite like Gotthelf imagined the *Mahadeva* prelude as starting.

Gotthelf's project thus plays out in front of a mirror with multiple flaws—it chases after a phantom, namely the unwritten Wagner opera, which it can only apprehend in the form of a copy. It has entered the vast whirlwind of modernity, in which everything gets mixed up: 'Cartesian science gets mixed up with revolutionary patricide, the age of the masses with romantic irrationalism, the ban on representation with the techniques of mechanized reproduction, the Kantian sublime with the Freudian primal scene, the flight from the gods with the annihilation of the Jews in Europe' (Rancière 2019). And the redemption longed for by the modern individual in the guise of the opera-goer—his desire to be absorbed into a restored community founded on ethics—can only be brought about through the schizophrenic inversion of this desire, namely through an emphasis on distinct artistic individuality.

The Indian *Parsifal*

We continue to advance throughout the score. Gotthelf has composed a dance scene at a key point. The dance constitutes a major appearance of the female protagonist, Maya, initiating her mystical transformation. We are looking for clues about how Gotthelf constructed the image of the Indian Orient in musical terms. Kassel opens the score to the dance scene and plays the first few chords. He notes that Gotthelf has set this part in Dorian mode, which would, Kassel assumes, probably correspond to Gotthelf's association of Oriental sounds. We come to talk about the opera's reference to India. Kassel asks whether Gotthelf's philosophy might be a typical example of the colonial exploitation of Indian sources.

This dialogue leads us from another angle into the essence of the present in which Gotthelf constructed his artwork of the future. This was the space of the Other—the construct of the Eastern fairy tale that clads the European longing for redemption. Kassel's question about the colonial structures in this project is, by contrast, not so easy to answer. Indeed, different Orientalist strands run through the conception of Gotthelf's opera. One is Wagner's preoccupation with Buddhism, as guided by Schopenhauer. (However, this already represents a distinct path that is set apart somewhat from the actual broad current of Orientalism in German art.) In addition, Gotthelf also adapted Goethe's ballad 'Der Gott und die Bajadere' and the

long history of its critical reception and interpretation. This content stream in *Mahadeva* follows a more clearly contoured, Orientalist riverbed. Since Goethe discovered the legend in a Frenchman's travel account (Wild 1996), it had become a popular exotic subject everywhere in the European theatre.

Franz Schubert set Goethe's ballad to music in 1815 and, since then, the stages of the nineteenth century have swarmed with Indian dancers. By 1830, the subject matter had already been set to music as an opera by Daniel-François-Esprit Auber (*Le Dieu et la Bayadère*) and appeared as a ballet (*La Bayadère*) by Léon Minkus in 1877. By 1877 at the latest, however, the idea of a *bayadère* was past the peak of its popularity. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, who had already spent six months working on a new arrangement for Goethe's ballad, ultimately rejected the project because Indian themes were already well-worn.[5] Nevertheless, Gotthelf revisited this subject matter in 1910. To him, the Indian theme seemed to offer renewed promise because the critical reception of Wagner and Schopenhauer had evolved in the years leading up to the First World War.[6] The work of Schopenhauer's adherent Paul Deussen in particular, provided Gotthelf with a new way of thinking about his artistic output. In an essay, Gotthelf described Deussen's influence on his intention once again, in Wagnerian fashion, to connect an unexplored cosmos of mythical figures with an image of social morality—that is, 'to juxtapose a Germanic drama about the gods with an Indian one' (Meister 1910). As Gotthelf (1917) put it:

> He left his draft of the drama *The Victors*, which deals with a Buddhist topic, unfinished because he felt that Buddhism lacks the mystically metaphysical depth, the mystically ecstatic element that is necessary for a more elevated form of representation in music drama. However, he did merge the Buddhist spirit with the Christian and the German in his *Parsifal*. It was only after Wagner's death that the most profound essence of the *Vedanta* became accessible to us Germans, thanks to the translation and philosophical exploration of the *Upanishads* by Paul Deussen. Only now was it possible to follow the path Richard Wagner showed us to the end and to feed the Indian spirit in all its mystical and metaphysical depth into German art.

[5] See Vasily Kiselev's introduction to Tchaikovsky's correspondence with Ippolit Shpazhinsky (Tchaikovsky Research Contributors 1940: 425).

[6] Deussen had written a new translation of the Upanishads in 1895. Based on this, he worked on 'developing Schopenhauer's philosophy above and beyond him.' See Isabella Schwaderer, in this volume.

The reconceptualization of the self and the other, as pursued by Deussen, had implications for the intellectual framework of a work of art. Whereas earlier engagement with non-European intellectual traditions, such as by Goethe, revolved at first only around an interest in exploring the parallels between East and West—recognizing Christian ideas in Buddhist ethics, for example—it was now decidedly a matter of perfecting European thought based on such comparisons and constructing a new, modern universal religion. Indology was thus paving the way for a reintroduction of ethics in art. As Gotthelf (1917) continued:

> Thus, we see in this supreme result of German thought, in accordance with Indian thought, a harmonious reconciliation of religion and philosophy in the offing. The 'standpoint of the reconciliation of all contradictions' has been achieved at this moment. The revival of Greek antiquity presented modern humanity with the reconciliation of sensuality and spirituality; the Indian Renaissance will give it the reconciliation of knowledge and faith.

By 1910, however, the space in which this approach would resonate had already evolved. On the one hand, due to the rapidly growing store of colonial and ethnological knowledge, the 'real' Orient was moving from the realm of the foreign to that of the familiar, and this had far-reaching implications for art. Like the other great scaffolds of alterity—namely history and the natural environment, the imaginary Orient could no longer be used as a blank template onto which to project the effects of artistic alienation because it was no longer distant or foreign enough. Even history as a source of alterity was losing its ability to serve a purpose, for it was inexorably becoming historical. It was being reinvented as a *Zeitgeist* as well as national genealogy. Moreover, in this way, it approached the present to the same extent that the Orient did.

Gotthelf brought together Goethe's and Wagner's storylines in a way that strangely confused the categories. Maya, the dancer, is no longer the young woman Wagner had imagined, who, by falling in love with a Buddhist monk, made it possible for women to be accepted into the monastic community and for Buddha to reach the highest level of redemption, which had been the logic of the plot in Wagner's draft of *Die Sieger*. In Gotthelf's *Mahadeva*, the protagonists from the mythical Orient now intermingled with those of the real one. For example, Hedy Brügelmann, the singer who portrayed Maya, suggested Gotthelf find inspiration for his costumes in an illustrated travelogue by the Schlagintweit brothers—three

German explorers who in 1854 started researching the Earth's magnetic field and flora on behalf of the East India Company. The Schlagintweit brothers also wanted to survey the land in India, photograph its population, and establish a typology of races. Gotthelf himself, however, never visited India. He derived his image of it from reading Goethe, Wagner, Schopenhauer, and Deussen, and rounded it off with the body of knowledge that had been amassed through colonial ethnography.

> *André Kassel plays a few bars of Maya's dance in which Gotthelf had notated a progression of three sharps to five flats. For the director, he had left instructions that the dance should become increasingly passionate and ecstatic, but Kassel is unable to detect such an intensification in the music. In his opinion, Salome's dance in Richard Strauss's opera* Salome *is more interesting from a musical perspective. While Kassel says that although he was not a Strauss fan, at least Strauss's composition of the dance was filled with interesting contrasting voices that built up enormous tension not found in Gotthelf's arrangement. He notes that Maya's dance increased in tempo somewhat but always remained stuck in the same harmonic framework.*

An entire history of the subject could be told just through the role of dance. At any rate, Gotthelf embellishes his Orient in Maya's dance to give it an exotic touch. However, given the level of ethnological literacy, one can sense how the metaphorical connotations of the personages, names, and cultural practices that Gotthelf tried to flood with meaning had already evolved. The audiences of 1910 were already familiar with terms such as Upanishads, the caste system, temple dancers, and widow burnings. Indian cosmology had already started to lose its projective power and, instead, become an object of cultural comparison. Moreover, while Salome's dance brings the coexistence of incongruent worlds into focus and intensifies it, in Gotthelf's work, the controversial experiences of colonial knowledge merely accumulate without offering a new perspective.

The Final Threshold

> *André Kassel plays the final chords of the epilogue, which dissolve into a D-flat major chord. Kassel sighs and says that a single unusual note does not constitute a new piece of music. He reminds me that Schönberg was already experimenting with dodecaphonic music at that time and that the composers of the avant-garde were working towards overcoming harmonic boundaries. In 1909, a year before* Mahadeva, *Richard Strauss had premiered* Elektra, *a piece that tested*

> *the limits of harmony much more radically. However, the following year he premiered Der Rosenkavalier, which, according to Kassel, reverted to the sentimentality of Viennese Waltz. Stravinsky also wrote* The Firebird *and* The Rite of Spring*, which were very experimental, in 1910 and 1913, respectively, but then returned to traditional harmony in 1920 with* Pulcinella. *There is a turning point in the evolution of music when one has to make a decision, says Kassel. Going through* Mahadeva*, he saw nothing to suggest that Gotthelf had been musically searching for a new form. The composer had reached a border, but failed to knock at its door.*

In 1910, Gotthelf put considerable effort into ensuring the success of *Mahadeva*'s forthcoming premieres in Düsseldorf and Karlsruhe. He sent the press a scholarly description of the work that Viennese philologist Richard Meister had written for him; the local newspapers published detailed previews of *Mahadeva*; and the director and conductor introduced the work to the audience in the theatre foyer. However, the expectations thus created were not without their reservations.

On Gotthelf's intensive efforts to publicize his forthcoming production, the Karlsruhe *Volksfreund* wrote that 'experience has taught us that what is given excessive self-praise is almost always in need of that praise and, in most cases, works promoted in that way turn out to be in serious need of self-advertising and are seldom long-lived' (*Volksfreund* 1910). Thus, from the start, Gotthelf's opera was subjected to the twin pressures determining the success of a modern work of art—being a nearly original creation through the power of individual genius, yet satisfying the utterly unrealistic expectation of being universally reproducible. According to Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this expectation was further fulfilled through the interplay of poetry, music, stage design, and performance (Fig. 6.3).

In 1910, Felix Gotthelf was working on bringing his *Gesamtkunstwerk* to life and, as Isabella Schwaderer mentions in Chap. 5 of this volume, he spared no expense and used his own funds to pay artist Georg Hacker (1864–1945) to create two Indian landscapes as backdrops (*Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* 1910). Following Gotthelf's instructions, a giant lotus that could open and close mechanically was installed on the Düsseldorf stage. During the rehearsal phase, Gotthelf and the Düsseldorf theatre management found themselves in conflict over the unwinnable battle for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In letters to soprano Hedy Brügelmann, who played the role of Maya, Gotthelf complained that he, as the author, was not given any say in the staging. During rehearsals, he continued to revise the score and had to make numerous cuts. It was in the craftsmanship of the

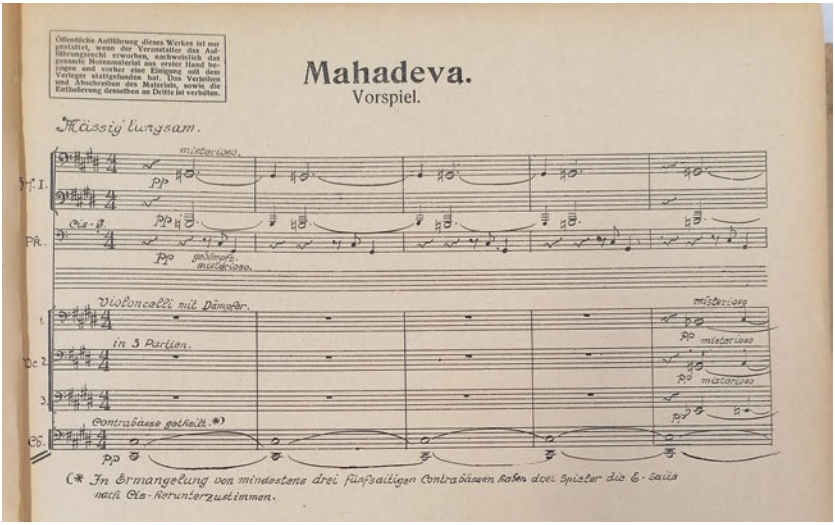

Fig. 6.3 The opening bars of the *Mahadeva* score. (Source: Felix Gotthelf, 'Mahadeva: Ein Mysterium in einem Vorspiel und drei Aufzügen für die Bühne in Wort und Ton' (Leipzig: C. F. Kahnt Nachfolger, 1909) Saxon State Library – Dresden State Library and University Library (SLUB), music department, https://katalog.slub-dresden.de/id/0-139760414X)

opera production that Gotthelf feared that the work might yet slip away from him. In long letters, he gave Brügelmann his own meticulous stage directions, noting for her, down to the measure, the exact time when she was to sink to the ground, to clasp the knee of her fellow singer, to dance around him while gracefully teasing him—and when what was initially naïve had to turn into a 'great sublime play.' These stage directions give us the best impression of how *Mahadeva* was to be realized as an actual sensual event on stage under the constraints of the theatrical production. In a letter to Hedy Brügelmann, Gotthelf (1910) wrote:

> She stands still, absorbed in herself, slowly comes forward, stands still again, etc., as you think appropriate. But do not always crawl around on the floor, as Leffler wants you to. Perhaps at the words: '*Ahnungsschauer*' [shivers of foreboding] (p. 113), you can collapse on the bed by the hut. But at '*Ha, Thörin ich!*' [Ha, a fool am I!] (p. 114), you suddenly rise again and dash into the background, left. At Kama's voice, you flinch and stand still, perplexed; after '*rettungslos verloren*' [hopelessly lost] (p. 115), you try to escape to the other side of the background, but now you run into Kama's arms. Despite your

> *vehement resistance*, he gently leads you back to the foreground and *holds you tight* (you must tell Mr. von Zawilowsky this); he is not allowed to let go of you at first, only at his words, '*Nun! Lass die Frommen*' [Now! leave the pious] (p. 116) does he let go of you, and you remain still. In Kama's words: '*die heiß mich überfluten*' [that overwhelm me with heat] (p. 120 below), he embraces you passionately, but you push him back *violently*. After the words '*O! wäre ich tot!*' [Oh! if only I were dead!] (p. 121 below), you can collapse in pain on the bench on the right. You rise again only at '*Wehe der Lust*' [woe to lust] (p. 136). From the words '*Aus Traum und Trug bin ich erwacht*' (from dream and deception I am awakened) (p. 127) onwards, you take on an increasingly ecstatic posture, absorbed in the memory of the pilgrim Mahadeva.

Onstage in Düsseldorf in March 1910, a giant lotus flower opened before the audience as if by magic. This was to be the striking framing element of the *Mahadeva* stage set, but its hidden mechanism did not always work smoothly and, in the finale, the blossom closed only haltingly, thus diminishing the sublime conclusion of the Indian *Parsifal* that Gotthelf had envisaged. The premiere of *Mahadeva* was nevertheless not a failure. There was ample applause and the press subsequently discussed the composition, text, and orchestral and vocal performances in a nuanced and informed manner, and the *Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* (1910) acclaimed Gotthelf's work as one of the 'most meaningful and stimulating lyrical works from the post-Wagnerian period of music drama.' The audience, however, experienced the performance in divergent ways. Some witnessed a well-executed production in which the 'effective grouping of the masses on stage contributed not insignificantly to winning over the audience and leaving a deep impression on them' (*Volksfreund* 1910). Others saw it as a copy of Wagnerian motifs being stretched out to four and a half hours, whose 'nearly endless solos and duets were more tiring than captivating' (*Volksfreund* 1910) and in which the singers, who were not up to the score, had to fight their way through a 'thorny, impassable undergrowth of harmony' (*Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* 1910).

In evaluating the composer's musical accomplishment, the critics' verdict was downright scathing. 'The musical arrangement does not enhance the very poetic niceties of the libretto. Here, the lack of genuine inventiveness and talent in combining dramatic elements is quite conspicuous,' wrote the *Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* (1910). The Karlsruhe *Volksfreund* (1910) commented:

> The pathological obsession of our modernists with imitating Wagner has thus far only been evident in music, but yesterday we also made this observation about the modern lyricist… . He fails where he aims to set the wheels of drama

> in motion and unfortunately also where he attempts to capture something like the scent of exoticism. His technique of composition and instrumentation hardly reveals an interesting feature anywhere; characteristic originality and novelty are not to be found at all. All in all, *Mahadeva* is a piece that deserves respect for its noble attitude, but respect that must not be overstated.

And, the *Volksfreund* (1910) offered a gloomy prognosis of whether the work would be a lasting success: 'judging from the performance the day before yesterday, we believe we can already predict with certainty that the same fate seems to be in store for *Mahadeva* as for so many highly modern stage productions.' The *Volksfreund* would be proven correct. Only the final act of *Mahadeva* was to be heard once more—at the *Konzerthaus* in Vienna in November 1916. Two days earlier, the Battle of the Somme of the First World War had begun on the western front, which would kill some 500,000 German and 600,000 allied soldiers. At this point, *Mahadeva*'s redemptive D-flat major final chord no longer resonated as a redemptive utopia but only as a farce directed at the new century.

Conclusion: The Possibility of Revision

> *André Kassel closes the score of* Mahadeva. *He calls Gotthelf's opera a mere product of its time—its gigantomania was characteristic, he says. There were also ideas around at the time to fill in the English Channel and connect England to the continent, as well as to build underground railways to America. Airships filled the skies, and there was absolute faith in technology and in the future.* Mahadeva *is precisely the music for that time. Kassel then mentions that this pathos for the future also touched on the colonialist idea that Germany needed a 'place in the sun' (a contemporary euphemism for German colonial claims in Africa) and territory in the East. This same pathos accompanied those about to enter the First World War. From today's perspective, says Kassel, it is impossible not to hear that history in Gotthelf's music.*

We attempted to listen to Felix Gotthelf's *Mahadeva* from three angles and periods—from that of Richard Wagner's romantic agenda of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, from that of ideological European thought experiments prior to the First World War, and from within the contemporaneous musical canon of classical modernism.

The journey of self-taught composer Felix Gotthelf reveals just how much of a desire there still was in 1910 to mend the known fragility of the world, which in his case he hoped to achieve through the holistic success of his operatic *Gesamtkunstwerk*: in other words, the significant shift of ethical and religious matters into the realm of aesthetic experience was still underway. The

proclaimed artwork of the future was still in the air; and an unwritten Wagnerian opera still seemed possible because the areas of art, religion, and politics were being reshuffled. In the process, the markers of the foreign, the transgressive, and the antecedent were being incorporated into an attempt at an intellectual recasting of Europe. In Hinduism, people were at once finding answers to questions posed by European philosophy, and the possibility of new universalistic ethics seemed nearby. However, such considerations also opened a door in two ethically problematic directions. First, there was the possibility of decoupling Christianity from its Jewish roots and underpinning it with new sources from India, but this logic concealed the latent anti-Semitic aspect of such considerations. Second, this approach paved the way towards giving German philosophy a more privileged position. The inescapable nature of the destiny of the blind volition of the world (Schopenhauer) now became an unconditional predestination to something higher, and the ultimate merging with the oneness of *nirvāna* became an omnipotence of the superior cultural nation and the triumph of instrumental reason. New social inclusion and exclusion criteria were being formed between basing one's identification of the self *on* or *in* the other.

In German cultural discourse, the consequences of this thinking were to go in two directions. On the one hand, they moved horizontally outwards, with the input of non-European ideas continuing to be entangled in romantic, social, and revolutionary thought and an enlightened ethics of compassion. On the other hand, they moved in a vertical, hierarchical direction, in which the ideas of Wagner and Schopenhauer were increasingly being reinterpreted to secure German supremacy in Europe's cultural and intellectual evolution.[7] Here lies the breaking point of the temporalities that account for the success or failure of Gotthelf's work of art.

Is this all that *Mahadeva* has to say? Is a revision possible? The answer is only where the execution of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* still leaves room for flexibility and interpretation. If the music no longer offers any transcendence, then this can only be captured in what is happening on stage. In that case, the pivotal prop would no longer be the lotus blossom floating in a void, silently opening, and closing, in which Mahadeva is serene in the slumber of oneness, but instead, the mechanism that disturbed the seamlessness of that illusion back in 1910. The protagonist in this drama would no longer be the incarnate deity of creation needing redemption, but the autodidactic modern artist of the early twentieth century who can only conceive of a perfect world in terms of the flawlessness of a work of art.

[7] On National Socialist tendencies in the Schopenhauer Society, see Ciracì (2011).

Such a drama would be driven by the artist's emphasis on venturing beyond the known—his embrace of the other and his yearning for a miracle. It would be driven by the inkling of a realm beyond rationality, by a romantic vein—fed by the continued heightened impositions of global modernity, an unrequited longing for wholeness and flawlessness, and a naïve hope in art.

Moreover, the inevitably tragic end would be ushered in by an inability to see the final step, by an inability to internalize the other over and above the self, by the struggle to endure the cool pathos of formal rupture and embrace iconoclasm, and by the sluggishness with which Europe attempts to overcome its hesitation. The antagonists in this piece would be German national sentiment, which arose too late, along with its concurrent claim to cultural supremacy, and the inevitability with which precisely those non-European ideas that guide us to the frontier of Cartesian metaphysics are, in turn, merely infused into the supremacy of the European Logos. Perhaps we can better understand the forgotten nature of Gotthelf's opera against this backdrop in the context of its own temporality—as that final renunciation before the blind will of the world that *Mahadeva* was intended to dramatize on the musical stage.

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