Chapter I

The Rise of Urban Musical Life between the Revolutions, 1789–1848

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The six decades that elapsed between the storming of the Paris Bastille on 14 July 1789 and the ultimate defeat of the Hungarian revolutionary forces at Villagos on 13 August 1849 witnessed a virtually continuous series of rapid changes not only in the political realm but also in the arts and sciences. Indeed, the very word ‘revolution’ was used in connection with music (specifically with the operas of Gluck) well before it gained political currency, conceivably because drastic changes of an aesthetic nature tend to entail considerably less personal risk than public violence. Indeed, as integral aspects of the quiet intellectual revolution that often precedes its public political counterpart, artistic manifestations may in their distinct ways anticipate socio-political cataclysms.

Beaumarchais, in his preface to the opera Tarare composed in 1787 by Antonio Salieri, postulated a new art geared to the general commitment to progress which, he felt, was the hallmark of his age:

[it] will be instanced as one of deep science and philosophy, rich in discoveries, full of energy and reason. The mind of the nation seems to be in a happy kind of crisis: a bright light over all things makes each one feel that everything could be better... everything grows, prospers, and improves. Let us, if possible, see if we can improve a great type of entertainment.¹

But in the end it was an overriding philosophical concern that motivated men and women of Beaumarchais’ ilk – the concern for human dignity and the rights of individuals irrespective of their ancestry or inherited social status. Tarare, Beaumarchais declared,

is the title of my opera, but it is not the subject. The subject is that of the following maxim, which is at once severe and comforting:

1. Map of Europe after the Congress of Vienna in 1815