

Czech Opera Competitions and Their Effect on the Czech (and Slovak) National Theatre

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Abstract: Opera competitions determined opera production in the Czech lands from 1860s to 1890s. In a very complex way, these competitions influenced wide social debate on the suitable repertory for the National theatre, on the appropriate shape of representative opera (features of Wagnerian music drama and grand opera were discussed above all), and behind the surface of open debate affected notion of the independence of composer and the autonomy of music as an art which significantly constituted a confident position of the Czech nation in the frame of Habsburg monarchy. Only a few operas participated on the opera competitions, but many others originated in the contest atmosphere and observed announced conditions and thus the authors could freely manipulated with suggested artistic solutions. In regular, the awarded works became officially acclaimed operas unfortunately without a stable position in the repertory. On the contrary, the other operas formed continuously everyday repertory.

Keywords: opera competitions, National Theatre, Czechoslovak opera, Smetana, Dvořák, Fibich

The Development of Czechoslovak Opera in Bratislava after World War I

The development of opera in the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava was not merely a Slovak reflection of the National Theatre in Prague; it was also a transformation of a former provincial theatre that had functioned in an international network of Austrian stages.¹ After 1918, the population of Bratislava still consisted of many national groups; one cannot forget that the city was close to Budapest and Vienna. However, now the repertory would be

1 For a detailed examination of the operation of the final years of the theatre in Prešpurk (Bratislava) before World War I, see works by Jana Laslavíková, especially. LASLAVÍKOVÁ, Jana. *Mestské divadlo v Prešporoku (1886–1899) v kontexte dobovej divadelnej praxe*. [The Municipal Theatre in Pressburg and Its Theatrical Practice]. Bratislava : Ars musica, 2018.

basically determined by the protectorate attitude of the Czechs toward Slovakia: “The concept for integrating the nation of Czechoslovakia was based on the idea that Slovakia as the eastern part of the Czechoslovak republic has, (that is, should have) actual administrative and political connection with the Czechs, as well as the basis of unified language and culture. At the same time, its distinct folklore type was considered as a mere living dialect. It was assumed that Slovak culture would attain a development to as high artistic level as that of Czech culture, and try to absorb its elements with the necessary delay of a half century, bearing in mind that that Czech music culture has already attained a professional basis for music scholarship and extensive national institutions, such as the Prague Conservatory (1811), National Theatre (1863 [sic!]), and the Czech Philharmonic (1896). It was necessary to establish such institutions in the area of Slovak music culture with the interest in strengthening the national-cultural awareness in the area of culture.”²

It is significant to consider the choice of Czech operas performed in Slovenské národné divadlo (Slovak National Theatre – from here, SND) in its early years in connection with the impatient expectations for national opera” that the Slovak public and critics demanded.³ Interpretation of Czech operas in the SND repertory was a fundamental problem. It arose in connection with the relatively straightforward transfer of the works that were written a quarter century earlier for very different and concrete staging in the Czech theatres (Provisional Theatre and National Theatre/Prozatímní divadlo and Národní divadlo). A possible key could have been the influence of opera competitions that had very strict requirements for operas. We must also recall that critics for the arts who specified the trends that composers should adopt next, particularly when writing compositions. It has been confirmed that a music critic in Slovakia assumed that “the position of Czech aesthetics preserves the school of Otakar Hostinský”⁴. This statement legiti-

2 CHALUPKA, Ľ. *Cestami k tvorivej profesionalite. Sprievodca slovenskou hudbou 20. storočia I. (1901 – 1950)*. [Journey toward Creative Professionalism. A Guide to Slovak Music Durinig the 20th Century, Vol. 1 (1901 – 1950)]. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského, Filozofická fakulta, 2015, p. 62.

3 MOJŽIŠOVÁ, M. Súdoba operná tvorba v repertoári Slovenského národného divadla 1920 – 1938. [Contemporary Opera Production in the Repertoire of the Slovak National Theatre 1920 – 1938]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2015, Vol. 63, Issue 4, pp. 357 – 376.

4 Ibid. Jana Laslavíková has made a detailed analysis of the critical stance of Antonín Hořejš, who strove to make a sharp distinction between “Čechoslovaks” and other nationalities, particularly Hungarians and Germans. His strict criteria for this evaluation was in agreement with the teachings of Zdeněk Nejedlý, p. 359. See LASLAVÍKOVÁ, J. Reflexia

mized the notion that opinions about Czech national opera should be cultivated, and particularly supported by the debate about opera competitions, and that they would later become a model for collective understanding of the steady self-confidence of the nation.

Let us first provide a list of Czech operas that were staged at SND during its first ten seasons:⁵

- 1.3. 1920 Bedřich Smetana: *Hubička* [The Kiss]
- 6. 3. 1920 Bedřich Smetana: *Dalibor*
- 10. 3. 1920 Zdeněk Fibich: *Šárka*
- 19. 3. 1920 Karel Kovařovic: *Psohlavci* [The Dogheads]
- 31. 3. 1920 Bedřich Smetana: *Dvě vdovy* [Two Widows]
- 3. 4. 1920 Bedřich Smetana: *Prodaná nevěsta* [The Bartered Bride]
- 15. 4. 1920 Leoš Janáček: *Její pastorkyňa* [Her Stepdaughter/Jenůfa]
- 26. 4. 1920 Vilém Blodek: *V studni* [In the Well]
- 30. 4. 1920 Bedřich Smetana: *Libuše*
- 5. 11. 1920 Antonín Dvořák: *Rusalka*
- 21. 12. 1920 Bedřich Smetana: *Tajemství* [The Secret]
- 28. 3. 1921 Josef Bohuslav Foerster: *Eva*
- 9. 4. 1921 Antonín Dvořák: *Čert a Káča* [The Devil and Kate]
- 4. 9. 1921 Vilém Blodek: *V studni*
- 8. 9. 1921 Bedřich Smetana: *Prodaná nevěsta*
- 21. 10. 1921 Karel Weis: *Lešetínský kovář* [The Lešetin Blacksmith]
- 3. 1. 1922 Bedřich Smetana: *Hubička*
- 6. 4. 1922 Antonín Dvořák: *Jakobín* [The Jacobin]
- 30. 4. 1922 Bedřich Smetana: *Dalibor*
- 24. 3. 1923 Leoš Janáček: *Káťa Kabanová*
- 26. 8. 1923 Bedřich Smetana: *Prodaná nevěsta*
- 31. 8. 1923 Bedřich Smetana: *Hubička*
- 29. 9. 1923 Bedřich Smetana: *Libuše*
- 21. 11. 1923 Antonín Dvořák: *Rusalka*
- 4. 1. 1924 Stanislav Duda: *U Božích muk* [At Calvary]
- 15. 2. 1924 Zdeněk Fibich: *Šárka*

opery v mezivojnovom období v Bratislave v referátoch Antonína Hořejša. [Reflections on Operas Produced in Bratislava by Antonín Hořejš between World War I and World War II]. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2017, Vol. 65, Issue 2, pp. 142 – 157, especially pp. 144 – 146.

5 See https://etheatre.sk/du_vademecum/NavbarBeanDU.action?eventPager=&_sourcePage=iTB A_9g7O9YEurwRgAXEqRbE_v4phdvgwZlchDJUm5vjEhluKlWNUAZWir09Pw33yDSnGTP-30W8wYdoB7APbwfYdspQ54sC7&rowPg=0 [cit. 13 September 2020].

22. 3. 1924 Bedřich Smetana: *Dalibor*
 10. 4. 1924 Bedřich Smetana: *Tajemství*
 14. 9. 1924 Bedřich Smetana: *Prodaná nevěsta*
 14. 10. 1924 Bedřich Smetana: *Dvě vdovy*
 28. 10. 1924 Bedřich Smetana: *Hubička*
 13. 12. 1924 Bedřich Smetana: *Čertova stěna* [The Devil's Wall]
 26. 9. 1925 Antonín Dvořák: *Čert a Káča*
 7. 3. 1926 Antonín Dvořák: *Svatá Ludmila* [St. Ludmila]
 21. 8. 1926 Leoš Janáček: *Její pastorkyňa*
 22. 9. 1926 Josef Bohuslav Foerster: *Debora*
 13. 2. 1927 Bedřich Smetana: *Tajemství*
 4. 2. 1928 Zdeněk Fibich: *Nevěsta messinská* [The Bride of Messina]
 14. 4. 1928 Antonín Dvořák: *Jakobín*
 28. 8. 1928 Leoš Janáček: *Její pastorkyňa*
 8. 9. 1928 Karel Kovařovic: *Psohlavci*
 12. 9. 1928 Bedřich Smetana: *Dalibor*
 7. 11. 1928 Josef Bohuslav Foerster: *Eva*
 17. 11. 1928 Karel Weis: *Polský žid* [Polish Jew]
 8. 2. 1929 Vilém Blodek: *V studni*
 10. 3. 1929 Vítězslav Novák: *Zvíkovský rarášek* [The Imp of Zvíkov]
 14. 3. 1929 Antonín Dvořák: *Dimitrij*
 20. 4. 1929 Antonín Dvořák: *Čert a Káča*
 11. 9. 1929 Jaromír Weinberger: *Švanda dudák* [Švanda the Bagpiper]
 25. 9. 1929 Bedřich Smetana: *Dvě vdovy*
 28. 10. 1929 Bedřich Smetana: *Hubička*
 31. 10. 1929 Zdeněk Folprecht: *Lásky hra osudná* [Fateful Game of Love]
 14. 11. 1929 Karel Rudolf: *Ilsenino srdce* [Ilsen's Heart]
 12. 4. 1930 Otakar Ostrčil: *Poupě* [The Bud]
 15. 5. 1930 Bedřich Smetana: *Prodaná nevěsta*

Opera Competitions and the Independence of the Czech Opera Stage

When they are not exclusive, opera competitions can lead to clarification of structural interaction among artists, as well as among artists and their surroundings. Even submitting a work to a competition brings publicity and prestige, and above all, a substantial financial incentive. The public expects that the prize-winning work will be successful; the press provides information about rehearsals, premieres and other performances, analytical studies

and reviews. Such humbug (if we may use the term) stimulates pretentious celebrations but also envy; acceptance but also aloofness. For a short time, a circle surrounds the composer and his actual work, giving opinions and judgements which are passed on; the composer can only escape from them with difficulty. For example, such opinions linked Bedřich Smetana and the pure national aspect of his operas; Zdeněk Fibich and Wagnerianism, Antonín Dvořák and his presumed inadequate sense of the dramaturgical requirements of opera.⁶

Czech theatre expanded with unprecedented intensity after the October Diploma (1860). In order to obtain new, prestigious Czech operas, four opera competitions were announced by the end of the nineteenth century: Count Harrach's competition in the 1860s (won by Bedřich Smetana's opera *Braniboři v Čechách* [The Brandenburgers in Bohemia]), the second competition in the 1870s (the first prize was awarded to Smetana's *Libuše*), the competition celebrating the reopening of the National Theatre after it had burned down, which was won by Zdeněk Fibich's *Nevěsta messinská*; and finally in the 1890s, the competition that was won by Karel Kovařovic's opera *Psohlavci*. The competition requirements had significant influence on the behaviour of artists. Critics became involved in disputes that were inevitably the result of taking a strong position in the artistic field,⁷ and music was unable to escape from political issues.⁸ Multitalented critics with literary backgrounds collided with the opinions of musicians. When Karel Sabina fell out of favour, his name was omitted from the posters that advertised performances of Bedřich Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta*. The accomplishments of librettists Josef Wenzig (*Dalibor* and *Libuše*) were frankly described as unsatisfactory. In spite of the significant recognition that librettists Eliška Krásnohorská and

6 OTTLOVÁ, M., POSPÍŠIL, M. Hostinskýs und Fibichs Braut von Messina: Tschechischer Wagnerianismus. In *Schiller und die Musik* (hrsg. von H. Geyer, W. Osthoff, A. Stäber). Köln : Böhlau Verlag, 2007, pp. 113 – 122. OTTLOVÁ, M. Giacomo Meyerbeer v Praze v 19. století [Giacomo Meyerbeer in Prague during the Nineteenth Century]. In *Hudební divadlo jako výzva*. [Music Theatre as Challenge]. (Ed. H. Spurná). Praha : Národní divadlo, 2004, pp. 133 – 160.

7 The authors not only aspired to success with the public, but also to succeed in the field of music itself, “where creators continually sought the approval of other creators (and competitors).” BOURDIEU, P. *Pravidla umění. Vznik a struktura literárního pole* [Laws of Art. The Origin and Structure of the Field of Literature]. (Translated into Czech by P. Kyloušek and P. Dytrt). Brno : Host, 2010, pp. 165.

8 See POSPÍŠIL, M. Bedřich Smetana a Riegerova rodina. [Bedřich Smetana and the Rieger Family]. In *Hudební věda*, 2017, Vol. 54, Issue 2, pp. 179 – 200.

Marie Červinková-Riegrová received, these “librettists in skirts”⁹ faced continual reproach from highly regarded authorities such as Otakar Hostinský and Zdeněk Nejedlý. Even a libretto subject taken from the works of highly respected authors such as William Shakespeare, Friedrich Schiller, and Torquato Tasso did not protect outstanding composers from attacks by critics (see, for example, Jaroslav Vrchlický’s libretto for Antonín Dvořák’s *Armida*, and the libretto by Jaroslav Kvapil for Josef Nešvera’s opera *Perdita*). The solution seemed to be to choose a professional, reliable artist as a partner (for example, Zdeněk Fibich and Anežka Schulzová, Karel Kovařovic and Karel Šípek), or to combine composer and librettist into a single profession, as Leoš Janáček did. The exclusive club of musically educated persons (including Otakar Hostinský, Emanuel Chvála, Bedřich Smetana and Zdeněk Fibich) was apparently opposed by adherents of opera in Romance languages and the motto “vox populi, vox dei”, used to call attention to the threat of the destructive influence of Wagnerism (including František Pivoda, Karel Knittl, and Josef Boleška). However, this polarized view did not correspond to reality; even today, it is disturbing from various perspectives.¹⁰ And finally, we note that the significance and necessity of opera competitions can be most clearly shown by observing Antonín Dvořák’s attitude; he never wanted to have anything to do with opera competitions, even though he stubbornly wrote operas throughout his entire career.

Before the Opening of the National Theatre

The first competition announced with the requirements of the stage of the National Theatre covered the years 1869 to 1880, the second one lasted only from 1882 to 1884. The deadline for the first competition was extended at the request of the composers; then, because of the slow progress of constructing the new theatre, it was extended to 1 January 1874, then to September 1879, the end of March 1880, and finally to the end of June 1880.¹¹ The main

9 PARKER, E. T. “*The Librettist Wears Skirts*”: *Female Librettists in 19th Century Bohemia*. [Dissertation]. Santa Barbara : University of California, 2016.

10 See OTTLOVÁ, M., POSPÍŠIL, M. *Bedřich Smetana a jeho doba*. [Bedřich Smetana and His Era]. Praha : NLN, 1997.

11 See HOROVÁ, I. Operní konkursy, vypsané v souvislosti s otevřením Národního divadla v Praze [Opera Competitions Announced in Connection with the Opening of the National Theatre in Prague]. In *Hudební věda*, 1990, Vol. 27, Issue 2, pp. 152 – 159; especially pp. 152 – 154.

reason for announcing the first competition was to obtain a prestigious work for the inauguration of the new theatre: “On 16 May 1869, the Board for Construction of the National Theatre announced four prizes for the best dramatic and operatic works for the inauguration of the National Theatre: 1000 rubles donated by the Slavonic Philanthropic Committee of Moscow for the best drama, 1000 florins for the best comedy; 1000 florins for the best opera and 1000 florins for the best comic opera; also, 300 florins for each of the two most successful libretti. The deadline for submissions is 1 June 1872. The judges will be named by the committee.”¹² The competition requirements did not provide specific information about the choice of subject or musical inspiration. Although there were frequent debates about the future of the National Theatre repertory during the 1870s, no one doubted that the work had to have a national character. As expected, the composers accepted the concise requirements that had been specified for Harrach’s competition. In 1861, Count Harrach had announced prizes for two operas “[...] of which one would be based on the *history of the Bohemian Crown*, and the second, a comic opera, would be drawn from *the national Czech-Slavonic life* in Bohemia, Moravia, or Silesia. The first and most important condition for music and voice is the support of *diligent study of traditional Czech-Slavonic folk song and that its use in music* would have a truly *national* spirit. Choruses, particularly in comic operas, are not merely listeners in the background; they should provide a living echo of national tunes in vivacious, continuing participation! National dances could also be used successfully in comic operas. The history of the time-honoured chorale in opera as a theme in choruses could be alluded to; the composer himself can best determine that with respect to the subject he has chosen. The fundamental condition is that the *composer’s family* belongs to one of the lands of the *Czech crown*.”¹³

For the second competition, there was a noticeable shift from nationalist

12 The report was published in *Dalibor*, 1869, Vol. 7, Issue 15, p. 121, 20 May 1869, and elsewhere – *Česká Thalia*, *Světozor*, etc. Cited according to HOROVÁ, I. Operní konkursy, vypsáné v souvislosti s otevřením Národního divadla v Praze [Opera Competitions Announced in Connection with the Opening of the National Theatre in Prague], p. 153. On the choice of historical themes and relationship to religious motives, see TYRRELL, J. *Czech Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 122, 145.

13 HARRACH, J. Vypsání cen za nejlepší dvě české opery a náležitě k nim texty. [Announcement of Prizes for Two Czech Operas and Texts for Them]. In *Dalibor*, 1861, Vol. 4, Issue 6, p. 45, 20 February 1861. The competition was won by Smetana’s opera *Braniboři v Čechách* [The Brandenburgers in Bohemia]; his second opera, *Prodaná nevěsta*, was not and could not be submitted to the competition, even though it fulfilled its requirements.

political goals to genuine artistic requirements and management of theatrical matters. The competition's requirements were announced on 6 February 1882: "Works can be submitted in the Czech language, or a Slavonic language in Czech translation. The material can be taken from Czech history, or at least should be well known to the Czech community. The best work will be evaluated according to whether it satisfies definite aesthetic requirements, it has a duration of an entire evening's programme, and it can be performed on the stage of the National Theatre."¹⁴ The works accepted for the first competition were Bedřich Smetana's *Libuše*, Karel Bendl's *Černohorci* [The Montenegrins], and Zdeněk Fibich's *Blaník*. The emphasis on high artistic quality that is noticeable at the beginning of the 1880s seems to be a result of this competition. Let us try to substantiate this remarkable development from historical sources, and from analytical remarks on the musical dramaturgy of these three operas.

At the end of November 1880, the opera jury met to recommend the distribution of prizes. Four judges of the five-member committee were present; František Zdeněk Skuherský, director of the organ school, was excused. The four judges were: Otakar Hostinský as presiding officer; Emanuel Chvála as scribe; Adolf Čech, conductor of the Czech theatre; Antonín Bennewitz, professor at Prague conservatory and violin virtuoso. The commission set the issue of national character aside, and concentrated on the following topics:

I. For the prize of 1000 florins for the "best serious opera," the competitors were *Libuše*, *Černohorci* [The Montenegrins], and *Blaník*: "the score of *Libuše* with its motto "For our land and nation" is worthy of the prize to the greatest measure; it displays a very solemn artistic direction and highly perfected musical techniques. Also, its entire character is particularly suitable for festival performance."

II. The only competitor for the prize of 1000 florins for "the best comic opera" was Karel Bendl's *Starý ženich* [The Old Bridegroom]. The jury compared it "with the contemporary state of Czech production in that category" and concluded: "despite all of its commendable qualities, it does not deserve this honour."

III. According to the requirements for the competition, the opera libretti were merely read to determine how the prizes should be awarded. The com-

14 HOROVÁ, I. Operní konkursy, vybrané v souvislosti s otevřením Národního divadla v Praze [Opera Competitions Announced in Connection with the Opening of the National Theatre in Prague], p. 156.

mittee disagreed with this requirement, because “According to the text of the announcement of the prizes of florins, the libretto of *Libuše* must receive a prize, but is the weakest of all four competitors [...]” The libretto that the jury considered the best was Eliška Krásnohorská’s libretto for Zdeněk Fibich’s *Blaník*. The Board for Construction of the National Theatre ignored this advice, and a prize was awarded according to the announced conditions, to the libretto of *Libuše*. A recommendation was adopted to divide the 1000 florins for the comic opera prize in half, honouring both *Černohorci* [The Montenegrins] and *Blaník*.¹⁵

It is surprising how confidently these operas were evaluated. When we consider Hostinský’s steadfast faith in artistic progress and Emanuel Chvála’s views as a critic who welcomed well-crafted, polished development of musical ideas, we can understand why the jury ignored any doubts about whether monumental works could be performed satisfactorily, as they considered their suitability for the National Theatre repertory. Their convictions about the correct path for composition also illuminates the issue of nationalistic art, which continually interested the Czech community to the end of the nineteenth century. This unusual situation caused submission of unusual works based purely on unsustainable artistic criteria, but as was soon evident after the opening of the National Theatre such criteria could nobody hold for so long. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1880s, it was possible to think that the musical world was tending toward irrevocable changes: Richard Wagner was victoriously sweeping through Europe; Charles Gounod and Georges Bizet were replacing Giacomo Meyerbeer; Giuseppe Verdi was thought to be in decline; the “eastern” national schools were catching up with the western world.

The opera committee could have had the courage by the new works themselves, for all of the three accepted operas strove to attain magnificent concepts. The evolution of Czech opera during last ten years was influenced by this competition. It was characterized by an intensive creative process which inherently brought much reflection and uncertainty into the work of

15 The report of the jury on 30 November 1880 is deposited in an envelope with the title “Slavnému výboru Sboru pro zřízení Národního divadla v Praze, 30 November 1880.” In Archiv Divadelního oddělení Národního muzea (from here, abbreviated as ADONM), sign. A XXVIII, Issue 172. The two composers who did not win prizes, Karel Bendl and Zdeněk Fibich, participated in the second opera competition and both received first prize in 1884: Fibich for his tragic opera *Nevěsta messinská* (on a libretto by Otakar Hostinský) and Bendl for his comic opera *Karel Škréta* (on a libretto by Eliška Krásnohorská).

the opera committee as a whole, as Otakar Hostinský recalled around 1880. The National Theatre's presentation of extraordinary operas was a shining example to the Czech public, but the composer was in the shade – it was necessary to risk, experiment, to try various solutions. When the National Theatre was inaugurated, the repertory was crammed with works which, despite their evident quality, had to fight for their place in the theatre archive and on the stage. This situation seemed to be the result of an intensive search for artistic form that was, as yet, undefined. Operas written at the close of the 1870s and during the 1880s are spread out before us like a collection of monumental statues. Many of them were buried by time, others were dropped or dismissed by music critics and musicologists.¹⁶ In exceptional cases, the composers made changes to increase the chances that their works would remain in the repertory. Zdeněk Fibich made changes to *Blaník*; Antonín Dvořák repeatedly returned to *Dimitrij*; as a mature composer, Leoš Janáček made alterations to his early opera *Šárka*.

In such an exhilarating atmosphere, composers chose demanding artistic solutions for the opera competition. They showed disregard neither for the public nor for themselves. They did not hesitate to reach for existing modern trends such as Wagnerism while using well-established, magnificent scenic effects from grand opera. It is well known that Bedřich Smetana conceived *Libuše* as a festive opera to be performed on extraordinary occasions in the history of the Czech nation. Its librettist, Josef Wenzig, suggested that the composer write closing arias. Bedřich Smetana did not agree, but he did accept Josef Wenzig's idea to finish *Libuše* with a grand opera sequence of living tableaux. And actually, it was thanks to this closing prophecy – not immediately, but through its reception over the years – that *Libuše* became a state opera. Bedřich Smetana approached its libretto as a mature composer, and tended to agree with the librettist, Josef Wenzig, about the integration of the form. But since Zdeněk Fibich, at the outset of his career, had agreed to the conditions by his librettist, Eliška Krásnohorská, he was not able to attain Bedřich Smetana's concept of historical opera in *Blaník*. However, his versatility and the experience of writing *Blaník* enabled him to follow

16 With remarkable ignorance, especially of Antonín Dvořák's works, Zdeněk Nejedlý proclaimed that Zdeněk Fibich's *Blaník* closed the series of "our heartfelt historical operas. What will come afterwards? It is just fat; it does not speak to the best instincts of the wider audience." NEJEDLÝ, Z. *Česká moderní zpěvohra po Smetanovi* [Czech modern opera after Smetana]. Praha : J. Otto, 1910, p. 35.

Bedřich Smetana's method, which can be seen in the sketches for *Libuše*.¹⁷ This method is visibly reflected in the formation of individual scenes that tend to emulate the form of grand opera, and are filled with music that follows Wagnerian leitmotive technique.

Smetana's *Libuše* won the opera competition for the festive reopening of the National Theatre in 1883. It should also have pleased its Austrian counterpart. But Crown Prince Rudolf's reaction to the program for the festive evening for reopening was negative. He did not attend the performance of *Libuše*, but a week later he attended Antonín Dvořák's *Dimitrij*.¹⁸ Zdeněk Fibich's *Blaník* did not become stable part of the repertory, but he had gained the significant creative activity that enabled his third attempt at opera, *Nevěsta messinská*.

The Second Opera Competition

The goal of the second competition is clearly explained by the comments about the work that received the prize. The competition was intended to expand the repertory of Czech works for the theatre. In the spring months of 1883, *Nevěsta messinská* was recognized as a performable opera.¹⁹ The issue of high-quality production was taken for granted, and the submitted operas helped to enlarge the basic repertory of the National Theatre. On 20 May 1883, *Nevěsta messinská* was in rehearsal, as well as Karel Bendl's comic opera *Karel Škréta*, which had been unanimously recommended for performance, and Karel Kovařovic's *Ženichové* [The bridegrooms].²⁰ Some operas were assessed as "unsuitable for performance at the National Theatre:" *Karla IV*.

17 One of the finest sources for Bedřich Smetana's *Libuše* is OČADLÍK, M. *Vznik Smetanovy zpěvohry*. [The Origin of Smetana's Operas]. Praha : Melantrich, 1939. Stimulating ideas can also be found in OTTLOVÁ, M., POSPÍŠIL, M. *Bedřich Smetana a jeho doba* [Bedřich Smetana and His Era], pp. 80 – 95.

18 POSPÍŠIL, M. *Bedřich Smetana a Riegrova rodina*. [Bedřich Smetana and the Rieger Family], pp. 179 – 200, especially p. 194.

19 Letter from František Zdeněk Skuherský dated 16 April 1883 (after the announcement of the jury) resembles the minutes from the jury meeting held on 18 April 1883 that *Nevěsta messinská* "capable of being performed." In addition to Skuherský, the members of the jury were Emanuel Chvála, Antonín Bennewitz, Josef Foerster, and Adolf Čech. ADONM, sign. A XXVIII, box No. 12.

20 The minutes were finalized on 24 May 1883, and signed by František Zdeněk Skuherský, Emanuel Chvála, Antonín Bennewitz, Josef Foerster, and Adolf Čech (ADONM, sign. A XXVIII).

Výtvor [The Work by Charles IV], *Starosta z Mudrovan čili Prodaný nos* [The Mayor from Mudrovany or the Bartered Nose], *Vineta* [The Vignette]. No decision was made about the opera *Popelka* [Cinderella], because the score was studied very slowly by the members of the committee.²¹ The jury for assessing operas met again with František Zdeněk Skuherský presiding on 22 May 1884. It unanimously awarded the prize of 1000 florins for a serious opera to Zdeněk Fibich's *Nevěsta messinská*, and also unanimously awarded the prize of 1000 florins for a comic opera to Karel Bendl's *Karel Škréta*. They also unanimously recommended that Karel Kovařovic's comic opera *Ženichové* [The Bridegrooms] be given honourable mention.²²

The announcement of the results was delayed, in part because of the complex system of evaluation; the libretti were judged by the commission for assessing the plays. The jury for opera, according to a report dated 28 August 1883, wanted to award both prizes for libretti (for serious and comic opera) to Eliška Krásnohorská.²³ But the dramaturgical jury had expressed reservations about the quality of these libretti.²⁴ To resolve this difference of opinion, František Zdeněk Skuherský reminded the juries that the prizes were awarded by the opera jury, and the dramaturgical jury merely had the power to make recommendations.²⁵ The literary experts did not consider that any

21 A list of attached plays and operas announced by the competition on 6 February 1882 only shows titles and the signs under which the anonymous authors submitted their works to the competition. Under No. 25 we find *Nevěsta messinská*; under No. 38, there is *Starosta z Mudrovan* [Mayor of Mudrovany] (comic opera); under No. 40, *Karel IV.* [Charles IV] (opera in three acts); under No. 52, *Karel Škréta* (comic opera); under No. 54, *Vineta* [The Vignette]. The entire collection contains 54 items: 17 tragedies, 10 comedies, 11 libretti, 5 operas (3 serious, 2 comic), 8 stage plays and farces, 3 one-act plays. Dated 31 March 1883. On the last page of the list are two additions. The first addition, dated 1 April 1883, shows under No. 55 the comic opera *Ženichové* [The Bridegrooms]; under No. 56, *Popelka* [Cinderella] (comic opera); and under Nos. 57 and 58, other libretti (*Z mrtvých vstali* [Rising from the Dead], *Máje* [Maypoles]). The second addition shows the libretto of *Lesní muž* [Wood Man] as No. 59, and the historical drama *Dokonáno* [It is over] as No. 60. The collection is contained in unclassified boxes, ADONM, sign. A XXVIII.

22 Document dated 24 May 1884, ADONM.

23 Eliška Krásnohorská wrote two libretti for Karel Bendl: for the serious opera *Dítě Tábora* [The Child of Tábor], and the comic opera *Karel Škréta*. Document dated 28 August 1883, presiding officer, František Zdeněk Skuherský; scribe, Emanuel Chvála. ADONM.

24 See letters addressed to the presiding officer of the jury for drama dated 25 September 1883 and 4 January 1884. ADONM.

25 In a letter dated 4 April 1884 addressed to the Board for the Construction of the National Theatre, František Zdeněk Skuherský, as presiding officer of the jury for judging operas and libretti, announced that after the opening the envelope with the names of the libret-

of the 14 libretti were of adequate quality to win a prize. Three libretti were recommended for honourable mention: 1. *Matčina píseň* [Mother's Song], 2. *Šárka*, 3. *Dítě Tábora* [The Child of Tábor].²⁶ Like the first opera competition connected with the National Theatre, the second competition did not bring about the wished-for expansion of Czech operas – perhaps because it was evidently a public secret that Zdeněk Fibich's *Nevěsta messinská* would win the prize. That may be why Bedřich Smetana did not submit *Čertova stěna* to the debate, and why Antonín Dvořák again remained entirely aloof from the competition debate! However, the literary world had extraordinary interest in the competition, since it had turned its attention to opera libretti. Thanks to the second competition, literary standards were definitely improved for Czech libretti as the result of this change in competition requirements. The finest writers began to appear within the commercial sphere of librettists, where they could take advantage of the combination of remuneration and art.²⁷

Opera Competition 1895

After the success of Czech opera at the International Music and Theatre Exhibition in Vienna in 1892, Bedřich Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* became part of the international opera repertory. At the peak of his career, František Adolf Šubert, director of the National Theatre, began to plan another extraordinary event: the Czech-Slavonic Ethnographic Exhibition, at which the Czechs could demonstrate their national and political attempts at emancipation from the Austro-Hungarian government. The Ethnographic Exhibition

tists, he found that the author of both winning libretti was Eliška Krásnohorská, and that she would receive a prize of 300 florins for each libretto. The scribe was Emanuel Chvála. The minutes from the meeting of the commission, dated 9 April 1884, are titled "The matter of awarding the prizes for libretti." They confirm the decision of the opera jury. ADONM.

26 See the letter written by František Zdeněk Skuherský, dated 15 March 1884, ADONM. The view of the literary experts raises concerns that the quality of these libretti actually was not suitable for operas. Although we do not find the author's name in the libretto of *Matčina píseň* [Mother Song, it was probably written by Marie Červinková, who later was credited for the libretto of *Jakobín* [The Jacobin]. The libretto for *Šárka* was written by the prominent literary figure Julius Zeyer, who offered it to Dvořák. However, it was Antonín Janáček who eventually took an interest in it.

27 Emulating French artists, some Czech writers kept aloof from the theatre, taking a stand "against marketing art." BOURDIEU, P. *Pravidla umění. Vznik a struktura literárního pole* [Laws of Art. The Origin and Structure of the Field of Literature], p. 181.

was held in 1895. It was a triumph for František Adolf Šubert; the star of Karel Kovařovic as conductor of the exhibition orchestra shone clearly for the first time. Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák and Zdeněk Fibich were presented at the exhibition as the three most significant Czech composers.

An announcement of another opera competition was made in the exhilarating atmosphere of the Ethnographic Exhibition. At the end of November 1895, the administrative group of the National Theatre announced prizes for comedies, libretti and operas with the following condition: “The material for this work must be, without exception, connected with the life of Czechs; it should be contemporary, not historical. The deadline for submitting works will be the end of April 1897.”²⁸ The requirements were repeated once more in more specific way. There was now a narrower definition of a successful work, as well as a definition of nationalism (blood relationship) that none of the participants could overlook: “competitors for this prize must submit works originally written in the Czech language or be composed by Czech opera composers [...] The prize will be awarded to the work [...] whose performance will be highly significant theatrical success.”²⁹

Three composers entered the competition: Zdeněk Fibich, Karel Kovařovic and Josef Bohuslav Foerster. Zdeněk Fibich’s opera was the favourite but did not win, which offended him. The works were performed for the jury as follows: on 22 February, Zdeněk Fibich’s *Šárka*; on 24 February, Karel Kovařovic’s *Psohlavci*; and on 27 February 1899, Josef Bohuslav Foerster’s *Eva*. Karel Kovařovic’s opera won.³⁰ František Adolf Šubert was still refusing to comment on the fate of Zdeněk Fibich’s *Šárka* in 1910.³¹ It is possible to reconstruct a list of the jury members and their voting: Hanuš Trneček for *Psohlavci*, Josef Richard Rozkošný for *Psohlavci*, Adolf Čech, in absentia, requested honorable mention for Josef Bohuslav Foerster’s *Eva* and agreed with Jaromír Borecký who decided to divide the prize of 1500 florins between Karel Kovařovic and Zdeněk Fibich, Antonín Bennewitz has to vote for *Psohlavci* because Zdeněk Fibich lose with a 2:3 ratio. Josef Bohuslav Foerster’s *Eva* was dropped from public discussion; most of the public

28 *Dalibor*, 1895, Vol. 17, Issue 44 – 45, p. 347, 23 November 1895.

29 *Dalibor*, 1896, Vol. 18, Issue 1 – 2, p. 9, 4 January 1896.

30 See *Dalibor*, 1897, Vol. 19, Issue 43 – 44, p. 337, 25 September 1897. The jury may have met on 3 March. (see *Dalibor*, 1899, Vol. 21, Issue 12, p. 9, 14 March 1899).

31 See ŠUBERT, F. A. Několik rysů k masce Zdeňka Fibicha. [Certain Traits of the Mask of Zdeněk Fibich]. In *Dalibor*, 1910, Vol. 32, Issue 42 – 47, pp. 345 – 346; especially p. 345, 24 September 1910.

was enchanted by *Psohlavci*. Emanuel Chvála commented: “Kovařovic did not need any publicity from Trneček to obtain public favour for this opera, or to generate the passionate opinions expressed outside of the competition by music critic J. Boleška, who circulated the motto ‘vox populi, vox dei’ among powerful and lesser personages, and led the opposition against Fibich.”³² Immediately after the announcement of the prize, Zdeněk Fibich presented a concert of his works on 7 March 1899 that included the successful premiere of his *Symphony No. 3* and the orchestral version of his melodrama *Štědrý den* [Christmas Eve], recited by Otilie Sklenářová-Malá. *Šárka* later received the Novotný prize of 393 florins, and *Eva* was given honourable mention; Otakar Hostinský, Emanuel Chvála and Josef Richard Rozkošný submitted this solution to the town council.³³ Zdeněk Fibich’s *Šárka* became an established opera in the National Theatre repertory, and was soon performed on other Prague stages.³⁴ In the course of time, Josef Bohuslav Foerster’s *Eva* demonstrated that the theme of village tragedy could be viewed as resembling French lyric opera, which is still successful; similarly, Leoš Janáček’s *Její pastorkyňa* found a connection with verismo opera. Despite the splendid success of Karel Kovařovic’s *Pohlavci* [The Dogheads], it embraced the solutions of grand opera too closely, and it had dropped out of the repertory by the second half of the twentieth century.

Significance of the Opera Competitions

Many of the operas announced by the competitions have histories of problematic reception. Most of them had to struggle for long-term success or gradually fell out of the repertory (*Braniboři v Čechách* [The Brandenburgers in Bohemia], *Libuše*, *Blaník*, *Černohorci* [The Montenegrins], *Nevěsta messinská*, *Psohlavci* [The Dogheads], *Šárka*, *Eva*). Anyway, there are still another results of competitions! We think of works that were not submitted, although they met the competition requirements. (Why? Were they not completed

32 CHVÁLA, E. *Z mých pamětí hudebních*. [From My Musical Memories]. (Eds. F. Karlík, J. Kopecký). Olomouc : Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2019, p. 370.

33 See *Dalibor*, 1899, Vol. 20, Issue 47 – 48, p. 375, 23 December 1899.

34 František Lacina obtained Zdeněk Fibich’s *Šárka* for the Brno National Theatre and premiered it on 2 December 1898 with Leopoldina Hanusová in the title role. See *Dalibor*, 1898, Vol. 20, Issue 45, p. 352, 22 October 1898; *Dalibor*, 1898, Vol. 21, Issue 48, p. 374, 3 December 1898; *Dalibor*, 1898, Vol. 21, Issue 2 – 3, p. 22, 31 December 1898; *Dalibor*, 1899, Vol. 22, Issue 4 – 5, pp. 26 – 27, 7 January 1899.

in time? Did the composers attempt uncertain solutions, unlike those of their colleagues?) Although Bedřich Smetana based his hopes and great expectations on *Dalibor* and *Libuše*, national opera came to resemble *Prodaná nevěsta*, which Bedřich Smetana himself called a mere “plaything.” Among Antonín Dvořák’s operas, *Dimitrij* stands out as a direct competitor to *Libuše*, *Blaník*, and perhaps even *Nevěsta messinská*. Antonín Dvořák’s comic opera *Šelma sedlák* [The Cunning Peasant] established itself in the Czech repertory as a work modelled on *Prodaná nevěsta*. After returning from America and after the announcement of another opera competition, Antonín Dvořák embarked on revising *Jakobín* [The Jacobin] and composing *Čert a Káča*, finally finding a successful operatic form in *Rusalka*. Leoš Janáček, already a recognized folklorist who had influenced the events of the Ethnographic Exposition, was drafting his *Její pastorkyňa* at that time. Genres having to do with the countryside served for entertainment or followed fashionable, “hopeless” outcomes (operetta, fairy-tale opera and verismo), but in time they engendered attractive works. The operas that were submitted to opera competitions became landmarks, setting standards that composers generally did not change any more; translated versions became definitive, often quite demanding artistically. A work that endured the fires of actual performance, where thorough rehearsals were necessary and it would be exposed to relentless criticism, would prove itself to be performable for years to come.

However, the problematic relationship between the opera competitions and the public can be lost in certain circumstances. An opera can be only successfully performed when the situation is favourable. Revivals of “competing” operas are possible when it is necessary to evoke the spirit of nationalism, when they can arouse response in eras of danger and germination (as during World War I and the years between the wars). In the end, the strength of the opera competitions produced a paradox: they stimulated the emergence of other operas that were not submitted to them, and they profited from popularity of these operas.

These competitions generally had “Czechness” as one of their requirements, suggesting that operas with national character could be written for in other nations – especially the Slavic countries, but also for small or remote nations, such as Ireland and Flanders. This approach became a model for opera competitions, especially when such operas were based on entirely realistic, well-loved models. (Bedřich Smetana’s *Prodaná nevěsta* fulfilled this role at many Slavonic stages.) This process eventually entered a phase calling for other opera competitions. Slovak opera history took this path. In 1926,

the Československý umelecký klub [Czechoslovak Art Club] in New York announced a competition in which genuine representative Slovak opera were not represented yet. Nevertheless, their efforts on behalf of Slovak national opera brought forth a new intensity, achieved by strong composers such as Alexander Moyzes (*Svätopluk*, 1935) and especially Eugen Suchoň (*Krútňava* [The Whirlpool], 1949).³⁵

We always find a great deal of tension in the background of these opera competitions. External circumstances, such as the requirements of the competitions, the motivation of relatively high financial reward, were a remarkably strong stimulus to the composers' private life and psychological state. However, they were often connected with exhaustion, personal quarrels and feelings of disappointment. Yet the boundaries that the competitions placed on the artists urged them to unprecedented concentration, to finding daring concepts and choosing resolutions that composers have adopted and developed further. The beneficial contribution of the opera competitions in creating such markedly specific situations affected the entire community, and provided public debate with the subject of opera composition.

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