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## BEDŘICH SMETANA

*John Clapham*

[Friedrich] (*b* Litomyšl, Bohemia, 2 March 1824; *d* Prague, 12 May 1884). Czech composer. The first major nationalist composer of Bohemia, he gave his people a new musical identity and self-confidence by his technical assurance and originality in handling national subjects. In his eight operas and most of his symphonic poems, he drew on his country's legends, history, characters, scenery and ideas to an extent unsurpassed by any other nationalist composer, presenting them with a freshness and colour that are sensitively and vividly preserved, even in sophisticated musical forms, by means of his essentially dramatic gift.

### 1. YOUTH AND EARLY CAREER

His father, František Smetana (1777-1857), was an ambitious German-speaking master brewer in the service of Counts Waldstein and Czernin and other noblemen in eastern Bohemia. He was a keen amateur violinist and the first music teacher of Bedřich, his 11th child and first son to survive infancy. Bedřich made such rapid strides at music under Jan Chmelík (1777-1849) that when he was six he was able to play a piano arrangement of the overture to *La muette de Portici* for the Litomyšl Philosophical Society. At Jindřichův Hradec he had lessons with František Ikavec (1801-60) and at Jihlava with Victorin Mat'ocha (1801-62), but neither of these local musicians was as gifted a pianist as their brilliant young pupil. His music education lapsed completely for eight years when he left Jihlava for Německý Brod (now Havlíčkův Brod) in 1836, but his knowledge of musical literature increased; Karel Havlíček, who became a well-known satirical poet and an ardent, though sceptical, nationalist, was his constant companion at the school until leaving for Prague in 1838. After hearing from Havlíček about the rich intellectual and cultural life of Prague Smetana contrived to transfer to the capital's Academic Gymnasium. In Prague he wrote string quartets for friends, attended concerts, and was completely captivated by Liszt's playing at a concert series in 1840; inevitably school was forgotten.

Taking a firm line, his father sent him to the Premonstratensian Gymnasium at Plzeň (1840-43), where he made up for lost opportunities and completed his scholastic education satisfactorily. During this time he was in great demand in wealthy homes as a pianist for dancing; passionately fond of dancing himself, he was frequently partnered by Kateřina Kolářová a friend from Jindřichův Hradec days. She was a good pianist, and he wrote piano pieces and duets for her. After an uneasy courtship lasting some years she became his wife.

Having decided to become a professional musician and unable to count on financial support from his father, whose fortunes were reduced after his retirement, Smetana returned to Prague to earn a living, mainly by teaching, though he could not

even afford to hire a piano. His first priority, however, was to secure systematic instruction in harmony, counterpoint and composition, and he arranged to have lessons from the distinguished teacher Josef Proksch (1794-1864), without having any money to pay for them. Fortunately a suggestion from J. B. Kittl, the director of the conservatory, led to his appointment as resident piano teacher of Count Leopold Thun's family; he held the post from January 1844 until 1 June 1847, a period of stability during which he could benefit fully from Proksch's guidance. On 23 January 1845 he wrote in his diary: 'By the grace of God and with his help I shall one day be a Liszt in technique and a Mozart in composition'. His studies culminated in 1846, when he wrote instrumental and vocal fugues, piano studies, variations and a Sonata in G minor for his professor. He may have met Berlioz, one of his heroes, at Proksch's soirée on 10 April 1846, and nine months later he met the Schumanns (he was a warm admirer of Robert's music) when they were Count Thun's guests.

Smetana arranged a concert tour in the towns and spas of western Bohemia in order to launch his career as a piano virtuoso, but the first concert on 7 August 1847 at Cheb was so poorly attended that he abandoned the project. During the winter he was favourably received when he took part in some chamber concerts in Prague. Urgently needing to augment his meagre earnings, he asked Liszt to accept the dedication of his *Six morceaux caractéristiques* op. 1, and begged him to provide financial support for the school of music he planned to open. Liszt ignored the second request, but showed interest in the pieces and persuaded Kistner to publish them in 1851, a warm friendship soon developed between the two composers. Taking a calculated risk, Smetana opened his music institute on 8 August 1848.

Two months earlier Smetana's patriotic feelings were strongly aroused by the Prague Revolution (11 June), during which he helped to defend the barricades and wrote revolutionary marches and a *Píseň svobody* ('Song of freedom'). He had always spoken German at home and at school and been able neither to speak nor write Czech. Although his first letter in Czech was written in December 1856, his diaries show that he used German as matter of course up to the end of 1861. After the revolution collapsed, German remained the official language in Bohemia; Smetana was still unaware how important it would become for him to master the Czech language and how seriously he would be handicapped if he did not do so.

The music institute failed to show much profit. Smetana supplemented his income by taking members of the Thun and Nostitz families as private pupils and by paying regular, dreary visits to Prague Castle to play for the deposed Emperor Ferdinand; this enabled him to marry Kateřina on 27 August 1849. In the years that followed his prospects improved very little. Four daughters were born, but three of them died between 1854 and 1856. He was most deeply grieved when his eldest child Jindřiška, who was already showing signs of being exceptionally musical, died of scarlet fever in 1855; this led him to compose his piano trio in her memory. Kateřina herself was not well and tuberculosis was diagnosed.

The political situation in the wake of 1848 was depressing. After the promise of liberal reform, Alexander Bach's autocratic regime came as a bitter blow to all patriotic

Czechs. For some years it was thought that Emperor Franz Joseph was going to accept and thus acknowledge the rights of the historic Bohemian crown, a gesture that would have been warmly welcomed by his Czech subjects; but their hopes rapidly dwindled. Smetana could see no certainty of any immediate improvement in the political scene or in his financial situation, so he was intrigued to learn from the virtuoso pianist Alexander Dreyschock of an opening for a piano teacher at Göteborg. He decided to go to Sweden without delay to investigate the possibilities.

## 2. SWEDISH PERIOD

Smetana arrived at Göteborg on 16 October 1856 and a week later gave his first recital there, playing Handel, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt's transcription of Schubert's *Ständchen* and his own *Polka de salon* in F# op.7 no.1. He appeared before the public more than once during November, and on 1 December opened a music school that attracted more pupils than he could enrol. He gladly accepted the conductorship of the Måndagsångövningsällskapet, an amateur society for classical choral music, which merged a year later with the choral section of the Harmoniska Sällskapet, and was active in organizing chamber concerts in which he played regularly with Josef Czapek (violin) and August Meissner (cello). The choral society performed part one of *Elijah* in March, and on 18 April he conducted Gade's *Ehverskud* and played Beethoven's Piano Concerto no.3. The public was unfamiliar with contemporary music; he persevered in educating it and was gratified by its response. Strong backing for his efforts came from the prosperous merchant and Jewish communities, who also treated him to an active social life. An intimate friendship developed with his pupil Mrs Fröjda Benecke, who became the inspiration for his *Bal vision* and other piano pieces. After the undoubted success of his first season at Göteborg, Smetana seriously considered making Sweden his home.

In the summer Smetana returned home shortly before the death of his father. In the autumn he returned to Sweden with Kateřina and their daughter Žofie and stopped on the way for a few days with Liszt at Weimar, where he heard the first performance of the *Faust Symphony*. In Göteborg again, the pattern of his activities was similar to that of the previous season: he opened a ladies' singing school, and at his concert on 14 April 1858 he introduced some choruses from *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Previously most of his compositions had been polkas, characteristic pieces and album-leaves for the piano, and his only important orchestral works were the *Jubel-Ouverture* in D (18489) and the *Triumph-Symphonie* (1853-4), written in homage to Franz Joseph but ignored by the emperor. As the direct result of his friendship with Liszt and inspiration by his ideas of programme music, Smetana completed his first symphonic poem, *Richard III*, in July 1858, and during the next winter completed another, *Wallensteins Lager*, based on Schiller's drama.

Because of Kateřina's health the Smetanas did not return to Bohemia in the summer of 1858, but made visits to the country and spent several weeks at the spa of Särö. As the northern winter drew on her illness grew worse, and Smetana longed for the arrival of spring so that he could take her back in safety to the warmth of her

hometown and her friends. He arranged a series of farewell concerts, the first of which was designed primarily to show the results of his work as teacher and conductor during his three years in Sweden; at the final concert he was given a silver baton by his grateful pupils. The family left for home on 9 April, but they were obliged to halt at Dresden because Kateřina was too ill to travel any further. She died there on 19 April.

Late in May Liszt invited Smetana to Leipzig for the silver jubilee of Schumann's paper, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and to Weimar when the celebrations were over. He heard the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* for the first time at Leipzig, his Piano Trio was publicly performed at Weimar and he showed Liszt his new symphonic poems. Later that summer he became engaged to Bettina Ferdinandová, a sister-in-law of his brother Karel.

Smetana returned to Göteborg on 22 September, and was as active there as in previous years, performing Mozart's Requiem, Handel's *Messiah* and his own *Triumph-Symphonie*, and playing the solo part in Weber's *Konzertstück*. He wrote polkas for Bettina and for Fröjda Benecke, and then turned his attention to another symphonic poem, *Hakon Jarl*, based on Oehlenschläger, which took almost a year to complete. He returned to Prague in May and married Bettina on 10 July 1860. Two months later the couple and Žofie arrived at Göteborg, but this season Smetana, feeling new strong ties to his hometown, showed less enterprise, aware that it would be his last season in Sweden. After the Austrian defeat by Napoleon III at Magenta and Solferino in June 1859, it became apparent that by hard pressure patriotic Czechs had an excellent chance of gaining substantial concessions from the emperor. Plans laid for a provisional theatre for Czech plays and operas. Count Harrach's announcement in February 1861 of his Czech national opera competition as well as other signals indicated clearly to Smetana the need to return home to play an active part in the artistic scene. After farewell concerts at Göteborg and appearances in Stockholm, including a concert before the royal family, the Smetanas arrived back in Prague.

## 3. THE BIRTH OF CZECH NATIONAL OPERA

The first of Smetana's many projects after his return home was to secure an opera text. When the poet J. J. Kolár proved dilatory he turned to Karel Sabina, an enthusiastic but incautious nationalist, who provided the libretto for *Braniboři v Čechách* ("The Brandenburgers in Bohemia") in 1862, and later that for *Prodaná nevěsta* ("The Bartered Bride"). Again in need of some financial security, he undertook an unsuccessful concert tour of Germany and Holland in the last two months of 1861. On his return he had the humiliating experience of conducting his first two symphonic poems and playing Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto to an almost empty hall, and being blamed by critics for adhering to the 'New German' school. After the concert he wrote in his diary: 'A prophet is without honour in his own land'. It was a relief to be invited back to sympathetic Göteborg, where he was regarded as a leading young musician from the hub of Europe, for concerts and teaching (March to May 1862).

Back in Prague, Smetana had hopes of being appointed conductor of the Provisional Theatre, but he was known there as a pianist and teacher, not as a conductor; as a composer he was still scarcely recognized, and traditionalists regarded him suspiciously as a disciple of Liszt. The coveted post went to J. N. Maýr, a singer with conducting experience at the Estates theatre, but an indifferent musician.



Bedřich Smetana with his second wife, Bettina

Much against his will Smetana returned to teaching, opening a music institute in collaboration with the violinist Ferdinand Heller, and he also resumed his visits to the former Emperor Ferdinand. In journals he wrote of the need for a progressive policy for concerts and opera, but he had little opportunity to put his ideas into practice until he was made conductor of the Hlahol Choral Society and elected president of the music section of the Umělecká Beseda (Artists' Circle); one of the first fruits of the latter appointment was a splendidly supported concert commemorating the Shakespeare tercentenary on 23 April 1864, at which he conducted Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. For the 1864-5 season he planned some concerts to introduce works by contemporary Czech composers, but these were poorly attended and resulted in a

financial loss. His failure to become the new director of the conservatory in succession to Kittl was a further disappointment, but in a provincial city divided by prejudices, rivalries, petty jealousies and intrigues, preference was shown for a *staročeš* (conservative patriot) rather than a *mladočeš* (radical patriot), and Ambros, the scholar and conservatory teacher, thought that had Smetana been chosen his Lisztian views would have stirred up trouble.

*The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, Smetana's first opera, was completed in 1863 and entered for the opera competition. Maýr was so uncooperative over preparations for its performance that Smetana was left to rehearse and conduct it himself. When it was mounted on 5 January 1866 it was enthusiastically received and given ten more performances. This success helped to bring about a welcome change in Smetana's prospects; he was awarded the Harrach Prize, and his next opera, *The Bartered Bride*, completed early in 1866 in its original two-act form with spoken dialogue and without dances, was speedily put into production on 30 May, an unfortunate time because war between Prussia and Austria was imminent; when revived in October the work began to find favour with Prague audiences (though, as with Smetana's other operas, foreign performances long remained rarities). Largely because Skrejšovský became vice-president of the theatre association, Smetana was appointed principal conductor of the Provisional Theatre on 15 September, in succession to Maýr. With Adolf Čech as his assistant conductor, he worked for an improvement in the balance between French, German and Italian operas, as he welcomed the new Czech works that were beginning to appear. Maýr, with no assistant, had presented 54 operas during his four-year term. Between 1866 and 1874 Smetana dropped a number of works from the repertory, but added 42 others, including *Faust*, *Roméo et Juliette* (Gounod), *Iphigénie en Aulide*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *Fidelio*, *La traviata*, *Un ballo in maschero* and 16 Czech works, among which were his own *Dalibor* and *Dvě vdovy* ('The two widows').

*Dalibor* was performed on the day the foundation stone of the permanent National Theatre was laid, 16 May 1868. Although the emotionally charged atmosphere of a historic moment aided in the new opera's enthusiastic reception, the public was quickly influenced by the hostile press, which accused Smetana of Wagnerism. Audiences dwindled and the work was withdrawn after four more performances. It was revived in 1870 and 1879, but only 14 complete performances were given during the composer's lifetime. The critics' prejudice against Smetana did him more serious harm than the fact that his music was somewhat in advance of public taste.

*The Brandenburgers* recalls a time when Bohemia was overrun with foreign troops; *Dalibor* presents a legendary hero who fought passionately for truth and justice. Smetana's aim in writing *Libuše* went far beyond such simple patriotism; it was largely intended as a wholehearted glorification of the Czech nation, thus not as a repertory opera. It was written for a great national occasion such as the hoped-for coronation of Franz Joseph in Prague, but as that never happened it was held in reserve for ten years until the festive opening of the National Theatre on 11 June 1881. It deals with the legendary founding of the Přemyslid dynasty, and culminates in Libuše's inspired

prophecies of the heroes whose deeds would be chronicled and bring lustre to the entire Czech nation.

Smetana's second known letter written in Czech had been sent from Sweden on 11 March 1860 to Dr Ludevít Procházka, in reply to a request for a work for male chorus for the collection *Záboj*. He wrote: 'I am not ashamed to reply to you in my mother tongue, however imperfectly, and am glad to be able to show that my fatherland means more to me than anything else'. From this time he made a great effort to improve his knowledge of Czech. Ironically, Wenzig wrote the librettos of Smetana's two most national operas, *Dalibor* and *Libuše*, in German (Špindler, however, supplied Czech translations for both works, and it was these, not the original German, that Smetana set).

František Pivoda, director of a singing school, music critic and an active supporter of Smetana in the mid-1860s, was piqued when his friend went in search of singers to Olomouc, Brno and even Vienna rather than taking his students. He was therefore silent when *Dalibor* was performed, and asserted in *Pokrok* (22 February 1870) that Smetana was taking advantage of his position as conductor to perform his own works and ignoring the claims of other native composers. This marked the beginning of a bitter five-year campaign to oust Smetana and reappoint Maýr. Smetana expressed his views forthrightly, both in conversation and in newspaper articles, and made enemies of Maýr and his champion, Ladislav Rieger, a leading *staroèech* politician and intendant of the theatre, who became Pivoda's powerful ally in the heated fighting. Public opinion unfortunately was influenced by the unbalanced and false assertions made by some of the critics. Smetana had the support of Antonín Čížek, the vice-chairman of the theatre association, Otakar Hostinský, lawyer and journalist, and Jan Neruda, the distinguished poet and journalist. The crisis came in the autumn of 1872, when his fellow composers Dvořák, Skuherský, Bendl, Fibich, Rozkošný and Hřimalý rallied to his aid; a few weeks later a call for his dismissal was signed by 86 subscribers. Smetana, however, was finally reappointed by the committee of the theatre association with an increase of salary.

The public and the critics, unaware that Smetana had been at work on *Libuše* for three years, were puzzled that he had apparently written no opera for a long time. He was persuaded to start work on *The Two Widows* in July 1873, and it was mounted eight months later. He had not been idle, for when completing *Libuše* he began planning a vast instrumental monument to his nation to complement and continue his earlier conception in the opera. This project, which occupied him for seven years, became the cycle of six symphonic poems entitled *Má vlast* ('My fatherland'). The first of these, *Vyšehrad*, was finished on 18 November 1874, and *Vltava*, *Sárka*, and *Z českých luhů a hájí* ('From Bohemian fields and groves') followed in just 11 months. It was necessary for Slánský to repeat *Vyšehrad* when he introduced it on 14 March 1875; and Adolf Čech had to do the same with *From Bohemian Fields and Groves* on 10 December 1876, although the welcome given to *Vltava* on 4 April 1875 was less enthusiastic.

#### 4. DEAFENESS

Several months before the completion of *Vyšehrad* there appeared ominous signs of a deterioration of Smetana's health. He complained successively of an ulcer, throat trouble lasting a month and a body rash, and on 28 July 1874 he reported that his ears were blocked and he felt giddy: the cause was syphilis. The paper *Dalibor* announced on 15 August that he was suffering from nervous strain and needed to take a complete rest. He wrote to Čížek on 7 September, asking him to tell the theatre committee of fear, that he might lose his hearing, and that Dr Zoufal, a Prague specialist, had ordered him to avoid every kind of musical activity. He requested them to relieve him from his duties for an indefinite period, adding that if there were any further deterioration in the next three months, he would be forced to hand in his resignation. On 8 October, four days after Zoufal had given him an ether douche, he wrote in his diary: 'For the first time for ages I can again hear the entire range of octaves in tune. Previously they were jumbled up. I can still hear nothing with my right ear'. This improvement was only temporary, for on 20 October he became totally deaf in his left ear. His former pupil Countess Elisabeth von Thun arranged a concert to raise funds for him, and his Swedish friends sent him money so that he could see specialists abroad. After consultations at Würzburg and Vienna he was again treated by Zoufal, but there was no improvement in his condition. The theatre association added to his worries by delaying payment of his annual 1200 gulden (for performing rights for *The Brandenburgers*, *The Bartered Bride*, *Dalibor* and *The Two Widows*) first in the summer of 1876, when he was forced to give up his Prague flat and live with his married daughter at Jabkenice, and again in 1877, when he was left penniless for several weeks. In November 1877 the stipend agreement was renewed, but the association also demanded the right to perform *Hubička* ('The kiss'), the opera completed in 1876 after the four symphonic poems. Smetana was bitter about this; *The Kiss* was, after *The Bartered Bride*, his most popular opera, and he was counting on receiving the royalties.

The String Quartet 'Z mého života' ('From my life') composed towards the end of 1876, suggests in its last movement the piercing whistling sound that haunted Smetana every evening during the onset of his deafness; he could not work for more than an hour at a time because a buzzing invariably developed in his ears. It became gradually more difficult for him to concentrate on composition at all, yet despite severe fits of depression (and frequent quarrels with his wife) he felt impelled to continue. He summed up his feelings in October 1877 in a letter to his librettist, Eliška Krásnohorská, written during work on his seventh opera *Tajemství* ('The secret'):

I am afraid my music is not cheerful enough [for a comedy]. But how could I be cheerful? Where could happiness come from when my heart is heavy with trouble and sorrow? I should like ...to be able to work without having to worry, but unfortunately those gentlemen of the association and fate will not allow that. ... When I continually see only poverty and misery ahead of me all enthusiasm for my work goes or at least my cheerful mood vanishes. Nevertheless please send me the second act soon. When I plunge into musical ecstasy, then for a while I forget everything that persecutes me so cruelly in my old age.

In the circumstances it is remarkable that he was able to complete his new three-act opera in little more than eight months. It was warmly received when it was performed on 18 September 1878, but the theatre association would not agree to him having more than one benefit night.

Smetana's one remaining pleasure was to visit Prague, where he enjoyed watching the crowds in the streets, scanning the newspapers in the coffee houses and attending plays and operas. He found it possible to follow musical work, that he knew well by watching the conductor's baton, and his quartet by watching the motions of the players. He played a Chopin nocturno and a polka in A minor of his own, and took part in the Piano Trio at the concert on 4 January 1880 commemorating the 50th anniversary of his first public performance. At one moment in the trio the audience was horrified to hear him cry out 'Pianissimo' in stentorian voice. Two new symphonic poems, *Tábor* and *Blaník*, written in the winter of 1878-1879, the song cycle *Večerní písně* ('Evening songs'), and *Česká píseň* ('Czech song') for chorus and orchestra were all given their first performances on this occasion.



Bedřich Smetana

On 11 June 1881, when the National Theatre was opened and Smetana's *Libuše* was performed, it was probably not an oversight that no ticket was provided for the composer, who wandered round until a seat was found for him in a box. *The Two Widows* was produced successfully at Hamburg in December, but Smetana was horrified to learn of the alterations made to the work and remarked that he had lost the wish to see his operas performed abroad. On 5 May 1882 he was honoured with a banquet celebrating the 100th performance of *The Bartered Bride*, but even this was not

a particularly happy occasion, because he remembered (and so implied in his speech) that *Dalibor*, which he valued more highly, had been misunderstood, misrepresented and ignored.

Composition had become so slow and difficult for Smetana that *Čertova stěna* ('The devil's wall'), his eighth and last opera, occupied him over a period of three years. While orchestrating the third act he complained on 11 December 1881 of 'a pounding and intense hissing in the head, day and night without ceasing, as if I were standing underneath a huge waterfall', and nine days later admitted that he had been ill continuously throughout the year. The shoddy, under-rehearsed production of the opera on 29 October 1882 was a sad disappointment, and his benefit night was poorly attended. He could at least take heart on 5 November from Adolf Čech's highly successful complete performance of *Má vlast*.

Smetana complained of feeling cold throughout the summer of 1882, and reported he was stunned and drowsy and becoming dissatisfied with his own music. He was unable to remember what he had written down, and had to re-read it frequently, which meant he could 'scarcely write four bars a day'. His condition deteriorated seriously in November: twice he temporarily lost his memory and power of speech. He was forbidden any musical activity and told not to read for longer than a quarter of an hour; nevertheless by 12 March 1883 he had finished his Second String Quartet, and on 14 September he put the final touches to an introduction and polonaise for full orchestra, part of a projected suite, *Pražský karneval* ('Prague carnival'). He then returned to a long-held plan of composing an opera based on *Twelfth Night* entitled *Viola*, but his mental equilibrium was already seriously disturbed and he experienced frequent hallucinations, so that very little of the opera was sketched. He was guarded day and night in case he did himself an injury; he had violent bouts of anger, tried to escape and failed to recognize his own family. On 23 April 1884 he was taken to the Prague lunatic asylum, where he died in the afternoon of 12 May.

The funeral rites were at the Týn Church, and a great crowd followed the cortège to the National Theatre, where fanfares were sounded; he was buried at the Vyšehrad Cemetery.

## 5. OPERAS

Once Smetana became aware of the possibilities opening up for the arts in his homeland, and specifically that a theatre would soon be available for sung and spoken Czech drama, his enthusiasm was aroused and he knew that his duty lay in providing his country with the series of national operas which it lacked. His early, dramatically conceived symphonic poems on subjects from Shakespeare, Schiller and Oeh-lenschläger, together with the piano tone poem of 1859, *Macbeth a čarodějnice* ('Macbeth and the witches'), show more than a passing interest in the stage. He needed Czech librettos written on Czech subjects, and, apart from *The Two Widows* (from a French comedy, but virtually made Czech when reset in Bohemia and provided with music unmistakably Czech in style) and his last work *Viola* (from *Twelfth Night*), he kept strictly to Czech subjects (unlike Dvořák, in different circumstances a decade later).

Viewed as a whole, Smetana's operas show a single clear aim: to foster and nourish the strongly nationalistic sentiments of the time. Consequently he composed three works based on his nation's history and legends, culminating in *Libuše*, which he described as 'a glorious tableau animated by musical drama', and which was to be reserved solely for the greatest ceremonial and commemorative occasions. After *Libuše* was completed and the grandly patriotic scheme had been capped with the symphonic poem cycle *Má vlast*, there followed the witty diversion of *The Two Widows*, and then Smetana turned to lyrical, romantic subjects in *The Kiss* and *The Secret*, and in *The Devil's Wall* to a parodistic fantasy closely linked with medieval chivalry and an old Czech legend.

From the first Smetana wrote continuous music. In *The Brandenburgers* some of the joins are obvious, but by *Dalibor* they are skilfully concealed; spoken dialogue only occurs in the earlier versions of *The Bartered Bride* and *The Two Widows*. An experienced composer of instrumental music, he had, in addition to his instinctive feeling for drama, a strong sense of form and the ability when necessary to drive the music forward irresistibly, frequently using word-repetition to conclude a section. Lyrical aria-like sections alternate with recitative (both the declamatory type and *accompagnato*); and though traces of the conventional *scena* remain, the bigger solo sections are usually freely treated, often with the vocal line superimposed on a continuous backcloth of orchestral sound.

Not only was Smetana an admirer of Gluck, Meyerbeer, Verdi and Gounod and strongly drawn towards Mozart's operas and to *Fidelio* and *Der Freischütz*, he was also intensely interested in the work of Wagner. In 1868, a year before he began *Libuše*, Hostinský suggested to him that Czech opera would inevitably have to follow Wagner's lead; Smetana agreed, though adding: 'but not now, it is quite impossible at present. Progress of that kind must be prepared gradually, and at the same time we must follow our own course, one that suits our own conditions'. Thus Smetana relied on reminiscence or representational themes only to a limited extent, and was probably recalling *Der Freischütz* and *Rigoletto* when he conceived the Rarach (devil) theme for *The Devil's Wall* and the Barnabáš secret treasure motif in *The Secret*, the only significant recurring themes in these two works. He provided some, but never all, of his characters with personal themes, and it was unusual for him to develop them symphonically. Wagner's influence is most pronounced in *Libuše*, where Smetana even noted down several motifs at the beginning of his second pencil sketch and then used them in a quasi-Wagnerian fashion. The strong moving bass lines in *Dalibor* may also owe something to the mature Wagner, as may Smetana's rapidly shifting tonalities and his chromaticism, though here Liszt's impact must not be overlooked. Smetana, however, merged these features into a personal style, placing them next to musical paragraphs on his characteristic prolonged pedal points, and next to others that are purely diatonic and stay in a single key. Folklike peasant choruses occur frequently in his operas, as do vivacious dances and passages with a strong underlying dance spirit.

Smetana's achievement in creating his first opera must be measured against that of Czech opera composers up to that time. Mysliveček had composed Italian operas for

Italy, and Reicha wrote French operas For Paris. Operas in German had been composed by Paul Wranitzky, Kozeluch, Gyrowetz, Gassmann and others for Vienna, and by Jiří Benda for Gotha, but no Czech work of any significance appeared before Škroup's *Dráteník* ('The tinker') was performed in 1826. Smetana knew this slight work but not Skuherský's still unperformed (in 1862) four-set heroic opera. *Vladimír, bohů zvolenec* ('Vladimír, God's chosen one'), which would have provided a more useful model. The *Brandenburgers in Bohemia* was far more ambitious than Škroup's opera, though before composing it Smetana had written very little vocal music and practically none to Czech words. Nevertheless he was reasonably successful in setting the text, despite his imperfect command of the language (later, however, when the principles of Czech prosody were settled, editors were obliged to make improvements in the declamation of all his earlier operas). The enthusiastic reception for *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* was due partly to its subject, but much more to its musical richness and vitality, which surprised and delighted its first audiences. The experience he had had of depicting human characters and presenting dramatic scenes in his earlier symphonic poems proved valuable: the opera's naiveties were outweighed by its patriotic and revolutionary fervour. The choral writing in the third act is most effective, with muted strings and wind instruments discretely used to suggest the conspiratorial aspect of this nocturnal scene; and the nationally coloured beggars' scene in Act I has an irresistible verve.

Smetana claimed in 1882 that he wrote *The Bartered Bride*, his most popular opera, 'not out of vanity but for spite, because I was accused after *The Brandenburgers* of being a Wagnerian who was incapable of writing anything in a lighter vein'. The composer's explanation is a little confused, for the libretto of *The Bartered Bride* was in his hands on 5 July 1863 and he was certainly working on it the next year, long before *The Brandenburgers* was staged. But his assertion may be partly true: during the period when he was composing *The Brandenburgers* he was infuriated by Rieger's telling him it was easier to write a historical opera than a comic one, and that the basis of a comic opera could only be folksong. This was a direct challenge which Smetana accepted.

Sabina originally offered Smetana a one-act libretto for *The Bartered Bride*, but the composer persuaded him to rearrange it in two acts, and in the opera's first form the numbers were connected with spoken dialogue. For the production of 29 January 1869, the first act was divided into two scenes, the second opening with a new drinking-chorus. Smetana also added the polka at the beginning of Act 2 and Mařenka's 'Ten lásky sen' ('That dream of love'). A few months later, for the production on 1 June, the work was rearranged in three acts and the drinking-chorus moved to open Act 2; some new music was added, and one piece was dropped. In the final version of 25 September 1870 the spoken dialogue was replaced with recitative.

The attractive spontaneity and naturalness of *The Bartered Bride* result from a rare combination of simplicity with the skill and imagination of a sophisticated artist. A true Czech spirit, at least its optimistic side, seems to emerge from the score, with its cheerful melodiousness reminiscent of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Czech pastoral, rhythmic patterns from Czech folk song, characteristically Czech drinking-chorus, polka, furious

and *skočná* (comedians' dance), and the Czech love of direct utterance and bold contrasts of mood and dynamics. The delightful love-duet 'Věrné milování nepřeruš' (True love's bond is not broken) in Act I keeps strictly to a single key (B<sub>b</sub>), as a reflection of the young couple's steadfast love. But later the distressed Mařenka expresses her feelings in the A<sub>b</sub> aria 'Ten lásky sen', which modulates more frequently than the rest of the opera, possibly suggesting the uncertainty of her future. The vocal line is particularly eloquent and the oboe and souring violins contribute to the mood of sadness. Smetana clearly distinguished between the characters, giving each of them, especially Kecal, the marriage-broker, real substance.

After *The Bartered Bride's* successful Vienna production in 1892, it gradually became Smetana's only opera to achieve popularity outside Czech lands. With it he had made great progress towards the creation of a national musical style, but he was still barely halfway to his goal: the spirit of his nation embraced more than optimism, humour, pathos, and peasant cunning. His ambitious plans to write stage works on heroic and epic themes came to fruition in *Dalibor* and *Libuše* and *The Bartered Bride* was an interlude during which he refreshed himself for the more important task ahead. *Dalibor* is unique among his operas and gives no indication of the nature of the later comic works.

The action of *Dalibor* is set in the legendary not historical. The young knight Dalibor is imprisoned and faces death for killing the burgrave and sacking his castle in revenge for the dastardly execution of Zdeněk, Dalibor's greatest friend. The attempted rescue of the knight from the dungeon by the heroine Milada, recalls *Fidelio*. During Milada's monologue in Act 2 scene ii, there is passage remarkably similar to one in Leonore's great Act 1 aria. The situations have obvious resemblances; in both cases the key is E major and the vocal part rises by notes of the tonic chord to high G#, at which point there is a turn towards the key of the relative minor. If Smetana's critics really believe that *Dalibor* was Wagnerian, they could not have been very familiar with Wagner's works and methods. There are a few signs of his influence, but these are not important. Smetana's recurring themes are different in type from Wagner's, differently used and seldom woven in the texture symphonically, although the opera marks great advance in Smetana's reliance on the orchestra and on his mastery of imaginative scoring. He had learnt the thematic transformation from Liszt and possibly Berlioz, and had already used the procedure successfully in his symphonic poem *Wallensteins Lager*. He appears to have been the first composer to apply it to opera. The theme associated with Dalibor appears in its fully harmonized form in his *Zápisník motivů* (Notebook of themes) dated 13 May 1863, two years before he began sketching the opera.

Dalibor's motif appears first in the style of a funeral march to suggest the gloom and apprehension of a hero's followers before the trial (see ex. 1*a*). It is heard in another form (ex.1*b*) while Milada, agitated and angry, awaits Dalibor's arrival. As Dalibor enters proudly to face his judges it is given a triumphant and heroic character in F# major (ex.1*c*) and when his thoughts turn towards his beloved friend it becomes tender and lyrical (ex.1*d*); *Dalibor* is sometimes loosely described as monothematic, but

this is only true in the sense that the Dalibor theme, together with its three or four associated derivatives, acts as the focal point of the work. Other themes, it must be recognized, have considerable importance, and all the thematic ideas were conceived independently, and at different times.

Ex. 1 Dalibor

The image displays four musical staves, each representing a different variation of the Dalibor motif.   
 - Staff 1 (a): Labeled 'Largo maestoso espressivo'. The music is in G minor (one flat) and 2/4 time. It begins with a half note G3, followed by a half note Bb3, and then a series of eighth notes: A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, Bb2, A2, G2. Dynamics include 'mf' and 'p'.   
 - Staff 2 (b): Labeled 'Allegro vivo'. The music is in G major (no flats) and 2/4 time. It starts with a half note G3, followed by a half note B4, and then eighth notes: A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. Dynamics include 'p'.   
 - Staff 3 (c): Labeled 'Maestoso coll' forza'. The music is in F# major (two sharps) and 2/4 time. It begins with a half note F#3, followed by a half note A4, and then eighth notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. Dynamics include 'ff' and 'sf'.   
 - Staff 4 (d): Labeled 'Andante amoroso solo vi'. The music is in G major (no flats) and 2/4 time. It starts with a half note G3, followed by a half note B4, and then eighth notes: A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. Dynamics include 'dolce espress'.

In addition to devices involving the recurrence and transformation of themes, Smetana used other means in *Dalibor* for achieving unity: tonality (e.g. Act 1 begins in G minor and ends in G major) and the linking of numbers (or scenes) by anticipating musical material for the succeeding one towards the end of the previous one. But he was also conscious of the dramatic necessity for contrast. Milada's ecstatic second-act aria relieves the gloomy atmosphere of the gaoler's quarters, and the G major Allegro vivo in Act 1 is instantly halted by offstage trumpets in D<sub>b</sub> major announcing the king's arrival.

During Smetana's lifetime few Czechs understood how substantial a contribution *Dalibor* made towards the creation of a pure national style. After the Smetana revival in the 20th century *Dalibor* has been performed frequently in Czechoslovakia, but apart

from Vienna it has not often been mounted elsewhere, perhaps handicapped by the inevitable comparisons with *Fidelio*.

Smetana's next opera, *Libuše*, was conceived as a festival piece, a glowing apotheosis of the Czech nation, concerned with the events which, according to legendary sources, culminated in the founding of the first Bohemian dynasty, and concluding with Princess

Libuše's visions of the heroes who will bring glory to her land during the march of history. Her final prophesy: 'My beloved Czech nation will not perish; gloriously she will vanquish the terrors of Hell!' has been an inspiring message to generations of Smetana's countrymen in times of stress; during the Nazi occupation the opera was banned.

In a letter to Procházka (26 September 1877) Smetana wrote of *Libuše*, 'I regard this as my most perfect work in the field of higher drama and, I can say, as a completely original work'. He rightly did not consider that the amount of declamatory writing in the opera made it into a Wagnerian work. He had a tremendous admiration for Wagner, and in July 1870, in the middle of work on the opera, he saw a performance of *Das Rheingold* and three of *Die Walküre* while on a visit to Munich. Nevertheless he felt that Wagner's operas were too intensely German to be included in the repertory of the Provisional Theatre. *Libuše* reveals how far Smetana was prepared to go in the direction of Wagnerism in his own work.

The association of musical themes with characters is more extensive in this work than in any other of Smetana's operas. For example, the two brothers, Chrudoš and Štěpán, share a theme, and each also has his own motif. Smetana rarely combined any of these themes, but a rhythmically transformed version of Krasava's appears with Štěpán's when Chrudoš says, 'and you love my brother!'; the same device occurs when the brothers become reconciled, and similarly Přemysl's and Libuše's themes are united when they make their stately entrance in the final scene. The music for *Libuše* and Přemysl is essentially diatonic, and in the court and Stadice scenes shows a marked tendency towards tonal stability. But there are modulatory sections, generally involving Krasava and Chrudoš, which display strongly chromatic features. In spite of the opera's grandiose subject, Smetana achieved some vivid characterizations. In Act 3, while *Libuše* awaits the arrival of her future consort, her very human excitement contrasts with and complements her regal nature. In *Dalibor* Smetana experienced difficulty in trying to provide music to represent the executed Zdeněk, that would be idealized and yet avoid sentimentality; in *Libuše* he had a still greater problem. The trial and other solemn scenes demanded long sections of music with an exalted and monumental character. He achieved this in the two noble and dignified arias for Přemysl in Act 2, set in the idyllic surroundings of Stadice, 'Již plane slunce' ('The sun blazes already') and 'Já ale zůstanu' ('So I remain'), and anyone who appreciates the meaning this work holds for the Czech nation cannot fail to be impressed by the magnificent climax of Act 1 scene ii, with its prolonged static (tonic) harmony followed by an extended dominant pedal, and by the glimpses of Bohemia's national heroes during *Libuše*'s inspired prophecies.

The operas after *Libuše* fulfilled an entirely different function, and in their several ways enlarged the concept of Czech opera. *The Two Widows*, a refined and frivolous salon comedy, originally had only four characters and included spoken dialogue. Later Smetana transformed it into a conventional number opera, setting the spoken text as recitative, giving Ladislav, the romantic tenor part, more substantial music and adding two minor characters. He treated the intimate story in an appropriately informal and conversational manner, which was decidedly novel for the time and which appealed strongly to Richard Strauss. Smetana's sixth opera, *The Kiss*, was his first collaboration with the librettist Eliška Krásnohorská.

The plot may be slight, and the cause of the lovers' quarrel may seem trivial; but Smetana responded readily to the genuine humanity in Krásnohorská's writing, and his musical portrayal of Lukáš and Vendulka, the two main characters, has a sensitivity unprecedented in his operas. His imagination was especially fired by the eerie atmosphere of the nocturnal forest scene, which he sketched shortly after receiving the libretto. The transition from the tender and lyrical episode in which Vendulka nurses Lukáš's child to the roistering and defiant reappearance of Lukáš provides an outstanding example of Smetana's skill in the art of dramatic contrast.

The next opera, *The Secret* to a Krásnohorská libretto set in the 18th-century Bohemian countryside, is more than those of *The Kiss*. In handling these Smetana frequently used a declamatory style of vocal writing, while attempting to maintain an unbroken line of musical thought. There are frequent passages of fragmented vocal lines over continuously lyrical orchestral writing, with an unusual reliance on contrapuntal devices. With the song of Blaženka (the daughter of Kalina's old enemy, Malina) in the last act Smetana deliberately introduced a closed form, but the ballad singer Skřivánek's song to Kalina and Malina is fully integrated into the surrounding music. The scoring shows a new richness in the writing for high strings and woodwind; but perhaps the opera's most remarkable features are its complex and rhythmically electrifying choruses and large ensembles.

A striking theme for trombones, horns, timpani and tremolando strings symbolises the deceased Friar Barnabáš's secret; as with the somewhat analogous Samiel theme in *Der Freischütz*, it is reserved for crucial moments. The monothematic overture is derived directly from it, and it reappears first in the guise of fantastic fugal dance, and finally to express general delight that the mystery has been solved and the long-standing feud between the two families brought to an end; this kind of thematic metamorphosis can be found in the symphonic poem *Wallensteins Lager*, composed 20 years earlier.

The increasingly serious state of Smetana's health slowed down his progress on *The Devil's Wall*, the last opera he was able to complete, yet there are remarkably few signs that his powers of composition were waning. This work was broadly conceived as parodying a drama set in the romantic age of chivalry, but more specifically as a satire of those in the church who scheme for wealth and power. Most original is the characterization of the hermit Beneš: he and Rarach, his devilish counterpart, appear together in monks' habits, indistinguishable from each other; but to the other



characters either one or the other is invisible. Several important recurring themes are used, one each for Vok and Hedvika, the romantic leading roles, and another associated with the Knight Jarek's oath. A fourth, built like one of Liszt's, Faust themes on a succession of augmented triads, represents Rarach.

*Viola*, an adaptation by Krásnohorská from *Twelfth Night*, using themes from his *Zápisník motivů* dating from 1871 and 1873, was Smetana's final attempt in the field of opera, and his last, fragmentary composition, the sketch breaks off after only 365 bars.

## 6. ORCHESTRA WORKS

The *Triumph-Symphonie* (1853-4), using Haydn's emperor's hymn, is Smetana's first assured, characteristic orchestral work. A few years later, having been profoundly impressed by Liszt's views on the need for progress in art, he became the first composer to follow his friend's example by writing symphonic poems. His first three, *Richard III* (1857-8), *Wallensteins Lager* (1858-9), and *Hakon Jarl* (1860-61), originated during his Swedish period, and the earliest was written a few months after he had attended the first performance of Liszt's *Faust Symphony* and *Die Ideale*: he was in close touch with Liszt at the time and had an unbounded admiration for his music, Smetana planned his works as a compact series of episodes drawn from the dramas of Shakespeare, Schiller and Oehlenschläger, and approached them as a dramatist, rather than as a poet or philosopher, hence they are more specifically programmatic than, for example, Liszt's *Orpheus*, *Hamlet*, *Prometheus*, and *Tasso: lamento e trionfo*, and in this respect show at closer affinity with Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. Smetana used representational themes for Richard and his adversaries, and for Hakon of Lade and Olaf Trygvesson. His musical portrait of Shakespeare's humpbacked king dragging one foot is particularly successful. In *Wallensteins Lager*, which is in one continuous movement but designed like a for-movement symphony, he drew only the scene of the dancing and the Capuchin friar's harangue (scherzo) directly from Schiller, but preceded it with an impression of the motley crowd at the camp at night (slow movement), reveille and a march (finale). He caricatured the pompous friar by transforming the bagpipe dance-tune, giving it to three trombones and a tuba, and changed the theme a second time to suggest the crowd mocking the Capuchin (treble instruments, and later in imitation by bassoons and basses (strings).

The cycle of six symphonic poems *Má vlast* ('My fatherland') (c 1872-9) is intimately connected with *Libuše* (1869-72); at the climax of the opera. Princess Libuše has a vision of her nation's future heroes. *Vyšehrad*, the first poem of the cycle, is similarly conceived as the composer explained. 'The harps of the sooth sayers lead into a prophetic song of the events at Vyšehrad, of the glory, splendour, tournaments, battles up to the final decline and ruin. The work ends on an elegiac note.' There is also a thematic connection, for the figure used in bar 20 and elsewhere in the symphonic poem comes from an important moments in the opera when the words 'Vyšehrad portal' are heard (Act 2 scene ii, bar 1188). The cycle aims to present the conceptus of selected aspects of Czech legend, history and scenery. One of Libuše's visions was of the Hussite wars, a landmark in Czech history that serves as the subject

of the last two poems of the cycle, *Tábor* and *Blaník*. The two Vyšehrad themes are quoted in *Vltava* and both return at the conclusion of the cycle.

*Má vlast*, written shortly after Tchaikovsky and Saint-Saëns had begun to explore new possibilities of programme music, is the most heroic instrumental work since Beethoven, and extended the scope and purpose of the symphonic poem beyond the aims of any later composer. Tchaikovsky conceived his *Romeo and Juliet* as a type of symphonic sonata structure, whereas Saint-Saëns preferred to give a musical impression of the series of events forming the basis of a Greek myth in his *Le rouet d'Omphale*. His method is therefore somewhat similar to Smetana's in *Richard III*, *Hakon Jarl* and his new work *Šárka* (no.3 of *Má vlast*). Smetana's musical impressions of scenery, in *Vltava* (no.2) and *From Bohemian Fields and Groves* (no.4), established a new type of symphonic poem, which led eventually to Sibelius's *Tapiola*. But Smetana's works offer a succession of different views: he favoured this episodic method, but unified each work by means of a single theme, as in *Vyšehrad*, *Vltava* and *Blaník*, by transformation of themes as in *From Bohemian Fields and Groves*, and with representative themes as in *Šárka*. *Tábor*, entirely based on a chorale, is the exception.

The elevated spirit of *Vyšehrad* is immediately apparent in the austere Vyšehrad motif played by the harps alone. Later, at the height of the battle and fall of the castle, the Vyšehrad motif, descending sequentially by whole tones while being imitated half a bar later at the 4th below, creates an unexpectedly powerful dramatic effect. Smetana wrote programme notes for each of the symphonic poems in a letter to F. A. Urbánek of May 1879; they appear in the introduction to the collected edition score, but are less readily available than unauthorized versions. He noted some additional points in the 1880 full score of *Vltava* that supplement his description of this work.

Smetana treated *Šárka* dramatically, along the lines of his earlier Swedish symphonic poems, as a series of short scenes that sum up the essential features of the old legend; and as before he gave the chief characters, Šárka and Ctirad, personal themes. Although Šárka's theme has clearly recognizable features, it is fluid and capable of expressing the extreme moods of this vengeful and frenetic Amazon. Ctirad's theme is presented by a solo cello and a bassoon, and suggests how irresistibly he is drawn towards Šárka. The themes are worked into the love scene, which bears signs of the influence of Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, which Smetana had conducted 11 years earlier. His violin melody includes a reminder of Berlioz's haunting melody for horns and cellos, and the key is the same. *From Bohemian Fields and Groves* confirms again how Smetana, during a tragic period of his life, could be inspired to write sunny, optimistic music when depicting the landscape of his beloved country. Also obvious is his delight in exercising his craft, devising a pair of interrelated themes that he then transmuted, and writing deft chromatic fugatos to suggest the quiet twilight atmosphere of the forest. Even in the middle sections of this work in ternary form, where little reliance is placed on national dance rhythms, a spirit emerges that has come to be recognized as thoroughly Czech.

*Tábor* may be described as strictly monothematic; the three phrases of the celebrated early 15th-century Hussite chorale, *Ktož jsou boží bojovníci* ('Those who are

God's warriors'), provide all its thematic material. Particular emphasis is laid on the chorale's first two bars, in order to stress what the composer has referred to as the 'resolute will, ... perseverance and stubborn inflexibility' of the Hussites. Twice the majestic chorale is heard in its complete form, at the end of each half of the work (Lento and Molto vivace). Smetana achieved the unity he sought but it is questionable whether he was wise to limit the material so drastically. Although *Blaník* draws its main material from the same chorale, it avoids undue motivic repetition. There is a literary as well as a musical justification for using the chorale's third phrase for the march at the end of the work; the words, 'So that finally with him you will always be victorious', are an affirmation of faith in the future of the Czech nation paralleling the heroine's inspired declaration at the conclusion of the opera *Libuše*. *Blaník* ends, as the whole cycle began, with the two Vyšehrad motifs.

The introduction and polonaise, the only part of a large orchestral suite, *Prague Carnival*, that the composer was able to complete, was written in extremely difficult circumstances during the year before his death, when it was possible for him to work for only very short periods and he was no longer able to remember what he had written on the previous occasion. Little wonder that he was unable to keep adequate control of the musical ideas that occurred to him and to give the work unit.

## 7. CHAMBER WORKS

Smetana's only ambitious works before the Piano Trio in G minor op.15 were the G minor Piano Sonata (1846), a product of his period of intensive study with Proksch, the *Jubel-Ouverture* in D (1848-9) and the *Triumph-Symphonie* (1853-4), written in honour of Emperor Franz Joseph. One reason why the trio (1855) far surpassed all these works is that it was written in response to a deep inner urge, in memory of his favourite daughter Bedřiška, who had just died from scarlet fever. All three movements are in G minor; the first is elegiac and particularly intense. Schumann's influence is obvious at times, particularly in *Alternativo 1* of the second movement, the first four bars of which strongly suggest Schumann in one of his pensive moods. The main theme of the finale was borrowed from the Piano Sonata; towards the end of the movement its second theme returns as a funeral march, and triplets drawn from the first theme effectively suggest a muffled drum.

Undoubtedly the idea of writing an autobiographical string quartet was partly prompted by the example of Berlioz's *Symphonie jamaïque*. Nevertheless the String Quartet in E minor 'From my life, written at a time when Smetana had almost given up hope of a cure for his deafness, may be claimed with confidence as the first chamber work of this type, paving the way for two later programmatic quartets, Janáček's 'Kreutzer Sonata' and 'Intimate Letters'. The quartet is relatively orthodox in form: the first movement is in sonata form, but the main theme is not recapitulated and the rest of that section is treated with considerable freedom. The high-pitched harmonic E in the finale's coda gives a clear impression of the onset of Smetana's deafness, and is followed by reminders of the two first-movement themes. These have a special significance: the opening movement represented 'love of art in my youth, my

romantic mood, and the unspoken longing for something which I could not name or imagine clearly'. Its second theme suggested 'affection for romance in music and love', but this was now severely curbed by Smetana's physical ailments. The first theme, a passionate viola solo more than 12 bars long, stood for 'Fate's summons to take part in life's combat', and the falling 5th with which it opened, the fragment that returns in the coda, was 'a warning as it were of my future misery' (see ex.2).

Ex.2 String Quartet no.1 in E minor



This intensely human document was rejected by the Prague chamber music society for being too advanced and difficult to play, possibly partly because of intonation problems in the Trio section of the second movement (Polka): the key signature is five flats, and there is much modulation and double stopping.

There was a rapid deterioration in Smetana's health during his last years. He had found it a struggle to complete his opera *The Devil's Wall*, and during the winter of 1882-3, when he composed the String Quartet no.2 in D minor, the situation was even worse: he could write only a few bars at a time, and when able to continue, he had forgotten what he had previously. At last he was satisfied with his work. The quartet is again autobiographical, but is concerned with the years after he became deaf, when musical idea continued to swirl through his head and he found he was still able to compose. The second movement, an attractive syncopated polka, grew out of a 20-bar fragmental work which he had sketched in 1848-9. This is an unpredictable work, unorthodox and occasionally quirky, but no lacking in beauty. It can be seen to be a sincere and valiant attempt to give musical expression greater plasticity and freedom.

## 8. PIANO WORKS

For many years Smetana composed almost exclusively for the piano, the instrument for which he displayed such a remarkable aptitude at an early age. At one point he attempted to establish himself internationally as a pianist, but the plan misfired, largely because of his poor organization. He was a virtuoso who, like Liszt, could play the 'Revolutionary' Stucco with the left hand in octaves. He also had a strong admiration for the work of Schumann, Mendelssohn, Chopin and Liszt, was very familiar with

Henselt's music, had met Tausig and was acquainted with the work of the other early 19th-century virtuoso piano composers.

Smetana displayed a refined musical sense, fertile imagination and a reasonably polished compositional technique as early as the several piano works of 1844, but at the end of his studies with Proksch he wrote the four-movement Sonata in G minor, indicating that he was capable of composing more than the mere salon pieces that form a substantial part of his piano output. The sonata's broadly conceived Adagio shows considerable resource and imagination in the use of variation technique; 87 bars from the finale were borrowed for the Piano Trio in G minor. The *Six morceaux caractéristiques*, written more than a year later, demonstrate Smetana's increasing assurance; they were dedicated to and admired by Liszt.

Following up the interest he had already shown in composing sets of pieces in a systematic succession of keys (e.g. the *Bagatelles et impromptus* and the *Six morceaux caractéristiques*), Smetana proposed to write 24 album-leaves in all the major and minor keys. The first six were published in Leipzig as *Sechs Stammbuch-Blätter* op.2, but as it seemed impossible to persuade publishers to issue further sets adhering to the correct order, he abandoned the scheme and allowed eight selected pieces to be published as *Skizzen* opp.4 and 5, and two others, *An Robert Schumann* and *Wanderlied*, to be issued separately in 1851.

Another work of the same period, *Hochzeit.s.szenen*, was written to commemorate the marriage of Smetana's pupil Marie von Thun-Hohenstein. It was from the third section, *Das Hochzeitsfest der Tanz*, that Smetana took the familiar polka heard at the beginning of *The Bartered Bride*.

The popular Czech dance, the polka, had a strong appeal for Smetana, not least as a challenge to his originality. In all he composed more than two dozen examples for the piano, mostly from 1852 to 1860. He revised four of the polkas before they were published, making the most substantial changes in the Polka in C, which he refashioned as the *Bal vision*, and in op.8 no.2, which is an expansion of only 22 bars of the original version; these bars include some chromatic writing over a pedal, which gives the piece its special fascination. Op.13 no.2, a poetic polka for the salon and quite unsuited for the ballroom, has some fascinating harmonic touches and unexpected key contrasts, as well as an underlying vitality and *joie de vivre*. It is unquestionably the boldest of Smetana's polkas.

About that time Smetana wrote the transcription of Schubert's *Der Neugierige*, the *Konzert-Etüde* in C, *Am Seegestade* and the Fantasia on Czech National Songs, all virtuoso compositions, with an obvious debt to Liszt. *Macbeth and the Witches*, dating from 1859 was conceived on similar lines to Smetana's first three symphonic poems, which date from the same period. It was completed in short score, but never orchestrated, and it remains uncertain whether it was intended as another symphonic poem or even a programmatic work for piano and orchestra. As left by Smetana it makes an effective virtuoso piano piece.

An interval of 13 years separated these work, from the next important set of pieces, *Réves*, during which time Smetana, by then deaf for a year, had made tremendous

strides as a composer. Traces of salon elements remain, but these have been greatly refined; the style of expression is more introspective, and decorative elements are used with greater discretion. A new spirit is also conspicuous in the *České tance* ('Czech dances') that followed: Smetana's conception of the polka had changed, and particularly those in A minor and B major are pensive, individual and beautifully shaped. The polkas are followed by ten varied dances, five of which are based on folk melodies; in *Oves* the entire piece springs from only five bars of traditional melody, while the bagpipe tune in the *Dupák* is actually original, though it could easily pass as a folk melody.

## 9. ACHIEVEMENT AND POSTHUMOUS REPUTATION

Smetana became known at a time when musical achievement in Bohemia stood at a mediocre level. As subjects of the Habsburg empire, geographically placed in the heart of Europe. Czech musicians were in relatively close touch with contemporary musical developments, towards which the most gifted even contributed. However, most of Smetana's predecessors were more highly regarded as performers than composers; and in the first half of the 19th century Czech opera remained at the Singspiel level, the cultivation of choral music was at a low point, and the best symphonic and chamber music was being written by such expatriate composers as Voříšek, Gyrowetz and Reicha. After first confining his composition almost entirely to piano music. Smetana followed his friend and champion Liszt in writing symphonic poems. Meanwhile his political consciousness developed slowly, and his characteristic nationalism did not appear until he was nearly 40. Only then did he turn to opera.

He provided his compatriots with virtually an entire basic operatic repertory, ranging from Singspiel and lyrical comedy to pseudo-historical tragedy and epic, before any of his contemporaries succeeded in composing a single opera of enduring value. His patriotic zeal reached a peak when he composed the opera *Libuše* and the cycle of symphonic poem, *Má vlast* with the deliberate aim of honouring and glorifying his nation. These works meant far more to him than *The Bartered Bride*, which won for him international popularity. He understood the need to create a Czech musical style, but unlike most other nationalists he refused to rely on indigenous folksong for the purpose. Consequently his style largely comprises elements and characteristics that are personal rather than national, but it is significant that these came to be almost universally accepted as Czech by his countrymen. However, among 20<sup>th</sup>-century Czech writers on music. Smetana again became a subject of controversy. One group (Zdeněk Nejedlý, Josef Bartoš and others) declared that a poetic content was essential to genuinely progressive music. Smetana as well as Fibich and Wagner satisfied their criteria, but Dvořák, Janáček, Suk, Murorgsky, Verdi and Debussy were dismissed as conservative, formalistic composers. Another group headed by Otakar Šourek rallied to the defence of Dvořák's music. Traces of the Smetana versus Dvořák schism are still found in recent literature (and not necessarily confined to Czech writers), and the belief expressed by Vladimír Heifert (originally part of the Nejedlý camp) in 1934 that

Smetana and Dvořák together must be credited with the founding of modern Czech

music has not yet been fully appreciated in Czechoslovakia.

## STAGE

*(all first produced in Prague early publications are vocal scores unless otherwise stated)*

<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Genre and libretto</i>	<i>Composed</i>	<i>First performance</i>	<i>Publication</i>	<i>Edition</i>
124	90	Braniboři v Čechách [The Brandenburgers in Bohemia]	opera, 3, K. Sabina	1862-3	PT, 5 Jan 1866	(1899)	SV
	93	Prodaná nevěsta [The bartered bride]	comic opera, Sabina				
131		orig. Version	2 acts	1863-6	PT, 30 May 1866		
137		1 <sup>st</sup> revision	2 acts	1869	PT, 29 Jan 1869		
138		2 <sup>nd</sup> revision	3 acts	1869	PT, 1 June 1869		
143		definitive version	3 acts	1869-70	PT, 25 Sept 1870	(1872)	SD full score (Berlin, 1893)
133, 144	96	Dalibor	opera, 3, J. Wenig [Ger.], Cz. trans., E. Špindler	1865-7 rev. 1870	New Town Theatre, 16 May 1868	(1884)	SV
-	107	Libuše	festival opera, 3, Wenzig, trans. Špindler	1869-72	National Theatre, 11 June 1881	(1881)	SV vi
-	109	Dvě vdovy [The two widows]	comic opera, 2, E. Zünger after P.J.F. Mallefille				
		orig. version		1873-4	PT, 27 March 1874		
		definitive version		1877	PT, 15 March 1878	–	SV vii
		addns for 1 <sup>st</sup> publication		1882	–	unauthorized version (Berlin, 1893)	
-	115	Hubička [The kiss]	popular opera, 2, E. Krásnohorská after K. Světlá	1875-6	PT, (1880) 7 Nov 1876		SV iii
-	118	Tajemství [The secret]	comic opera, 3, Krásnohorská	1877-8	New Czech Theatre, 18 Sept 1878	(1892)	SV x
-	129	Čertova stěna [The devil's less]	comic-romantic opera, 3, Krásnohorská	1879-82	New Czech Theatre, 29 Oct 1882	(1902)	SV xii
-	133	Viola, frag.	romantic opera, Krásnohorská, after Shakespeare	1874, 1883-4	–	(1902)	–

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B – nos. from Bartoš catalogue (by 1973); T – nos. from Teige catalogue (1893); PT – Provisional Theatre

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