

Dalibor

John Tyrrell

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Opera in three acts by Bedřich Smetana to a libretto by Josef Wenzig; Prague, New Town Theatre, 16 May 1868.

Vladislav <i>Czech king</i>	baritone
Dalibor <i>a knight</i>	tenor
Budivoj <i>commander of the king's castle guard</i>	baritone
Beneš <i>a gaoler</i>	bass
Vítek <i>Dalibor's messenger</i>	tenor
Milada <i>sister of the Burgrave of Ploškovice</i>	soprano
Jitka <i>a country girl on Dalibor's estates</i>	soprano
Zdeněk <i>a musician (vision)</i>	silent
Judges, the king's soldiers, Dalibor's messengers and servants, the people, priests	
<i>Setting</i> 15th century Prague, partly in the castle and its environs, partly in the lower town	

Dalibor was one of Josef Wenzig's six plays and opera librettos based on Czech history. As a Czech sympathizer but German speaker he wrote in German and his *Dalibor* and *Libuše* texts had to be translated into Czech. This was undertaken by his pupil Ervín Špindler, who preserved the line lengths and metres of the original so that, it is claimed, the operas could be performed in either Czech or German (an odd concept for such nationalist works). It seems more likely that Špindler had little option as far as *Dalibor* is concerned since Smetana began composition on 15 April 1865, even before Wenzig finalized his text (Wenzig's completed German text is dated 16 June 1865). According to references in his letters, Smetana completed Act 1 in sketch by 12 October 1865 and on 3 April 1866 he was working on Act 2. The full score is dated as follows: Act 1, 15 September 1866; Act 2, 24 October 1867; Act 3, 29 December 1867.

Dalibor was first performed on the day of the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone of the National Theatre on 16 May 1868, by which time Smetana had become chief conductor at the Provisional Theatre and conducted the opera's première. By the next performance it was clear that the work was not popular with audiences and it was attacked in the press for not sounding sufficiently 'Czech'. Its lack of success encouraged Smetana to make revisions. He made two cuts, amounting to over 70 bars, in the Act 2 scene

between Dalibor and Milada and revised and extended the end of Act 3. These changes, made in 1870, had no effect on the opera's fortunes; it was given a few times and then disappeared from the repertory. Its later popularity with Czech audiences dates from 5 December 1886 when it was performed for the first time at the Prague National Theatre.

Synopsis

ACT 1 *The castle courtyard*



Ex.1

There is no overture. A 22 bar prelude, introducing the motto theme (ex.1) of this predominantly monothematic opera, leads into a sombre chorus of 'people', waiting to hear Dalibor's fate. Individual sentiments are voiced by Jitka, an orphan whom Dalibor has cared for. The brief recapitulation of the choral/orchestral opening brings Jitka to a decision: Dalibor will be freed, and her new sentiments are conveyed by the joyous Allegro variant of ex.1, 'Ze žaláře' ('A glow beckons from jail', ex.2).

Four offstage trumpets announce the arrival of King Vladislav. His entry music, based on a descending variant of ex.1 (ex.3), is slow-paced, finely gradated and surprisingly long: 57 bars. Although about to judge Dalibor and thus placed in opposition to the opera's hero, Vladislav is depicted sympathetically and in the round. As he describes Dalibor's crime (disturbing the peace of the land, attacking the castle of Ploškovice and killing the Burgrave there), his solo goes through eight tempo changes, but the dominant manner is his first: 'con espressione' and *maestoso*.

Before sentencing Dalibor, the court invites Milada, sister of the murdered Burgrave, to speak. She is introduced by a solo harp cadenza, soon joined by a pair of clarinets. One of the glories of the Czech repertory, her speech is a substantial, multi-section declamation, its tempos and expression reflecting the different moods of the words as she pleads for vengeance and describes in vivid language the battle in which her brother fell. The part is written for a dramatic soprano with a strong lower register but capable of a thrilling climactic cry of 'Dalibor' to a top B. At the end her voice combines with that of Jitka in a new variant of ex.1 expressing the two women's different reactions. This duet provides a link to the third important entrance: that of Dalibor himself to a brief *maestoso* transformation of ex.1. All, including Milada, comment on his calm and noble bearing.



Ex.4

In recitative, Vladislav describes Dalibor's crime and invites his response. Far from denying the crime, Dalibor describes his friendship with the musician Zdeněk (ex.4, a *dolce* version of ex.1 with throbbing triplet accompaniment) and then (Marziale) how Zdeněk fell in battle in Dalibor's longstanding feud with the Burgrave. In a strongly declamatory passage Dalibor declares how, even had the king stood in his way, he would have avenged his friend's death. The judges (a unison bass chorus) pronounce that Dalibor has condemned himself to death, and confer with the king.

A lyrical episode follows: a 6/8 Lento (including a variant of ex.1) in which Dalibor reveals himself untroubled by his probable fate since his life has been empty since the death of Zdeněk. Milada, whose voice occasionally mingles with his, is appalled. Then Dalibor's sentence is confirmed by one of the judges; he is to languish in gaol until he dies. His response is ecstatic: over ex.4 he sings 'quasi in exaltazione' that he looks forward to seeing Zdeněk again. Twice the chorus punctuate his solo with their astonishment at his noble bearing.

Milada is quite overcome. In a violent change of mood (Presto) she begs Vladislav to pardon him but, as the judges explain, Dalibor has threatened the king and must die. Vladislav himself, in a *tranquillo* passage with solemn brass accompaniment, declares that the law must be upheld. To a repeat of his entrance music, he withdraws with his retinue. The people disperse, leaving Milada and Jitka.



Ex.2

In a passionate 6/8 Presto Milada describes her feelings, 'Jaká, jaká to bouře ňadra mi plní' ('What a storm fills my breast!'). On her last word her voice combines with that of Jitka, who has observed her growing love for Dalibor and suggests action. This is agreed in an extended duet repetition of ex.2 as Jitka describes her plan for rescuing Dalibor from prison. Milada takes up her part; the two voices combine in what is in effect a vigorous cabaletta, a joyful pendant to their duet before Dalibor's entrance.

ACT 2.i *A road in the lower town, with an inn*

A new atmosphere is suggested by a brief prelude and by the strophic offstage chorus for soldiers – one of the few parts of the opera whose ‘Czechness’ appealed to its early audiences. Jitka meets her lover Víték, their unanimity reflected in the intertwining 3rds and 6ths of their duet. Jitka then describes how Milada has dressed as a boy and with harp in hand has charmed her way into the castle in search of Dalibor. The soldiers come out of the tavern; their chorus is heard again with added parts for the two soloists. As they go off a long orchestral interlude covers the scene change and introduces the subdued mood of the next scene; a chromatic figure leads into a Largo with ostinato quavers in the bass.

2.ii *An inner room in the castle* Budivoj questions Beneš the gaoler about his new assistant, a ‘poor musician’, then, warning him to be vigilant over Dalibor, he departs. The chromatic figure and ostinato quavers of the prelude return to preface Beneš’s aria about the hard life of a gaoler (‘Ach, jak těžký žalárníka život jest’), a simple ABA structure against the quaver ostinato.

To exuberant music (Moderato, with frequent triplets in the voice part) Milada, now dressed as a boy, runs in with food for her new employer. Before he eats, Beneš goes to fetch his old violin (Dalibor has asked for a violin to relieve his boredom). Left alone, Milada expresses her agitation at the thought of seeing Dalibor (scena) and, to a surging orchestral accompaniment, her feelings of ‘unbounded joy’ (‘Radostí nesmírnou’) in the following aria. Beneš returns with a lamp and a violin for Milada to take to the prisoner, and, after a brief duet passage, both go off. An extended interlude includes Milada’s harp cadenza from Act 1 and a new version of ex.4.

2.iii *A dark prison* Dalibor has woken from a dream about Zdeněk; in a broad Andante amoroso he expresses his thoughts about embracing him. His reverie is interrupted by the arrival of Milada. Dalibor is thrilled with the violin and cries out to Zdeněk; only then does he notice the ‘boy’ and asks who he is. To the passionate theme from her first solo in Act 1 Milada reveals herself; regretting her earlier pleas for vengeance, she has come to try and rescue him. Then in an Andante (a slow, major;key variant of ex.1) she begs forgiveness. They vow faithfulness to one another and the act concludes with their Largo duet ‘Ó nevýslovné štěstí lásky’ (‘O the unutterable happiness of love’), in which their voices intertwine as artlessly as those of the younger lovers at the beginning of the act. An orchestral postlude concludes with the Zdeněk variant (ex.4) of the motto theme.

ACT 3.i *The royal chamber, brightly lit*



Ex.3

The prelude includes Vladislav's march (ex.3), Beneš's quaver ostinato and a new *maestoso* theme. Budivoj warns King Vladislav of a rebellion by Dalibor's people and Beneš describes how his harp-playing assistant has disappeared, leaving instead a purse and a note telling him to keep silent. They withdraw. While his advisers confer, Vladislav sings a lyrical aria about the burdens of office. His advisers decree that Dalibor must die that day and Vladislav reluctantly gives instruction to Budivoj. The interlude begins with the motto theme in its original form and key (ex.1), passing on to Vladislav's march (ex.3), the concluding duet of Act 2, and Jitka's 'freedom' motif (ex.2).

3.ii *Dalibor's prison* Dalibor, now unfettered, sings a vigorous aria contemplating his impending freedom, 'Ha, kým to kouzlem' ('What magic is this'). His exultation is shortlived; just as he is about to give a signal on his violin, Budivoj appears with his soldiers and takes him off, to the strains of a march.

3.iii *In front of the prison; night, faint moonlight* Milada, Jitka, Vítek and their company are waiting for Dalibor's signal. When instead they hear an offstage chorus of monks, Milada realizes that they have been betrayed and, sword in hand, she leads her soldiers into the castle. All return, with Dalibor now bearing the mortally wounded Milada. They bid farewell to one another, and Milada dies. Budivoj and his soldiers emerge and celebrate their victory. Dalibor throws himself into battle with them and dies joyfully with the thought that Zdeněk and Milada await him.

With Milada's Leonore-like bid to rescue Dalibor from his prison, this opera has been criticized for being a Czech *Fidelio*. There are, however, striking differences. This is not an opera about marital fidelity or the brotherhood of man. Dalibor shows more interest in his dead friend Zdeněk than in his would-be rescuer Milada. With its continuous scene-change music and thematic metamorphosis, the opera's aesthetic is that of Liszt and early Wagner, not of Beethoven. And in supplying Dalibor with a violin, the opera reinforces a favourite myth about the Czechs being good musicians. As Beneš, the music-loving gaoler who supplies the instrument for his charge, declares: 'What Czech does not love music?'