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## **OPERA AS NATIONAL AND TRANSCULTURAL PHENOMENON**

# Nationalism

"No matter how many times a country has been conquered, subjugated and even destroyed by enemies, there is always a certain national core preserved in its character, and, before you are aware of it, a long-familiar popular phenomenon has emerged." (J. W. von Goethe, 1998: 139)

"Nationalism is not the awakening of the nation to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist. (Ernest Gellner, 1964: 169)"

**Primordialism:** nations or ethnic identities are fixed, natural and ancient, national identity is intimately connected to ethnicity

**Instrumentalism or modernism:** ethnic identities develop and nationalism ensues in the pursuit of particular political goals together with modernity (i.e. with the Enlightenment, after the French Revolution, with industrialisation)

# Culture and transculturalism

- The idea of "national culture"
- What does the concept of "invention of" a national culture mean?
- "Invented tradition" (Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, 1983: 1): "Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."
- Legitimizing power of tradition, defining key elements of "national culture"
- Transculturalism: problematic concept, "one", implying "clearly defined" "national culture" in premordialist terms
- Alternatives: hybridity, "bricolage", ...

# Opera

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- performing genre connecting music and theatre
  - created in Italy at the end of 16th century
  - key part of Western classical music tradition and Western theatre tradition

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# Opera of the 19th century in Europe

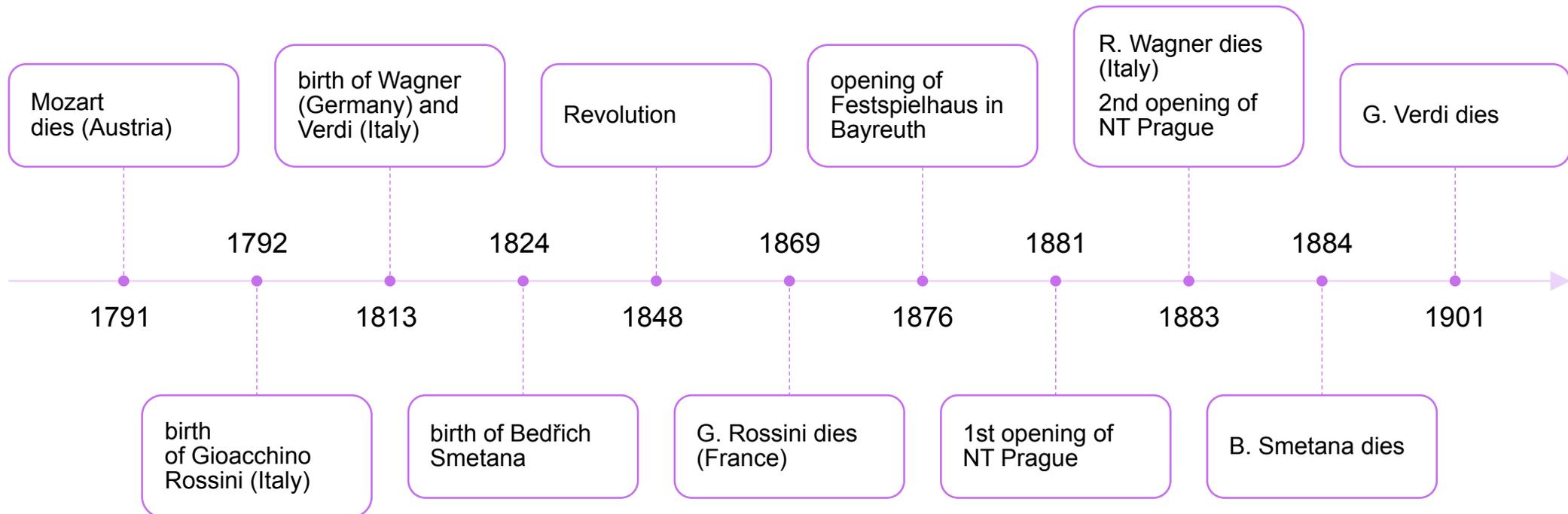
- Romanticism
- Bel canto
- Grand Opera
- Verdi and Wagner
- ...



# Opera of the 19th century in Europe

- 1803-1815 - Napoleonic Wars → "turmoil" inspirations for music (sounds, form/rhythm - e.g. march, sound of fighting...)
- 1805 and 1814 - premieres of Beethoven's Fidelio
- first half of the century - renewed interest in the opera buffa

# Opera of the 19th century in Europe



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# OPERA AS A MANIFESTATION OF NATION AND ITS PRIDE



# Concept of Music drama

- Richard Wagner (May 1813 – 1883)
- Giuseppe Verdi (October 1813 – 1901)



- "Va pensiero sull'ali d'orati" [Fly thought on golden wings]
  - *Nabucco* (Verdi), 1842
  - choir – passionate, fiery melody and rhythm
  - liberation of the Jews from Babylonian captivity
  - the choir became "liberation song", sung throughout Italy
  - correspondence with the overall mood of Italian citizens - desire for liberation from Austro-Habsburg rule and for the unification of Italy
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS6L\\_9xUT5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS6L_9xUT5E)
- Vivat VERDI! - 1860s: **Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia** (Long Live Victor Emmanuel King of Italy)

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# VIVA VERDI

Long Live Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy (Vittorio Emanuele, re d'Italia)



# Richard Wagner's revolutions – in political life and music

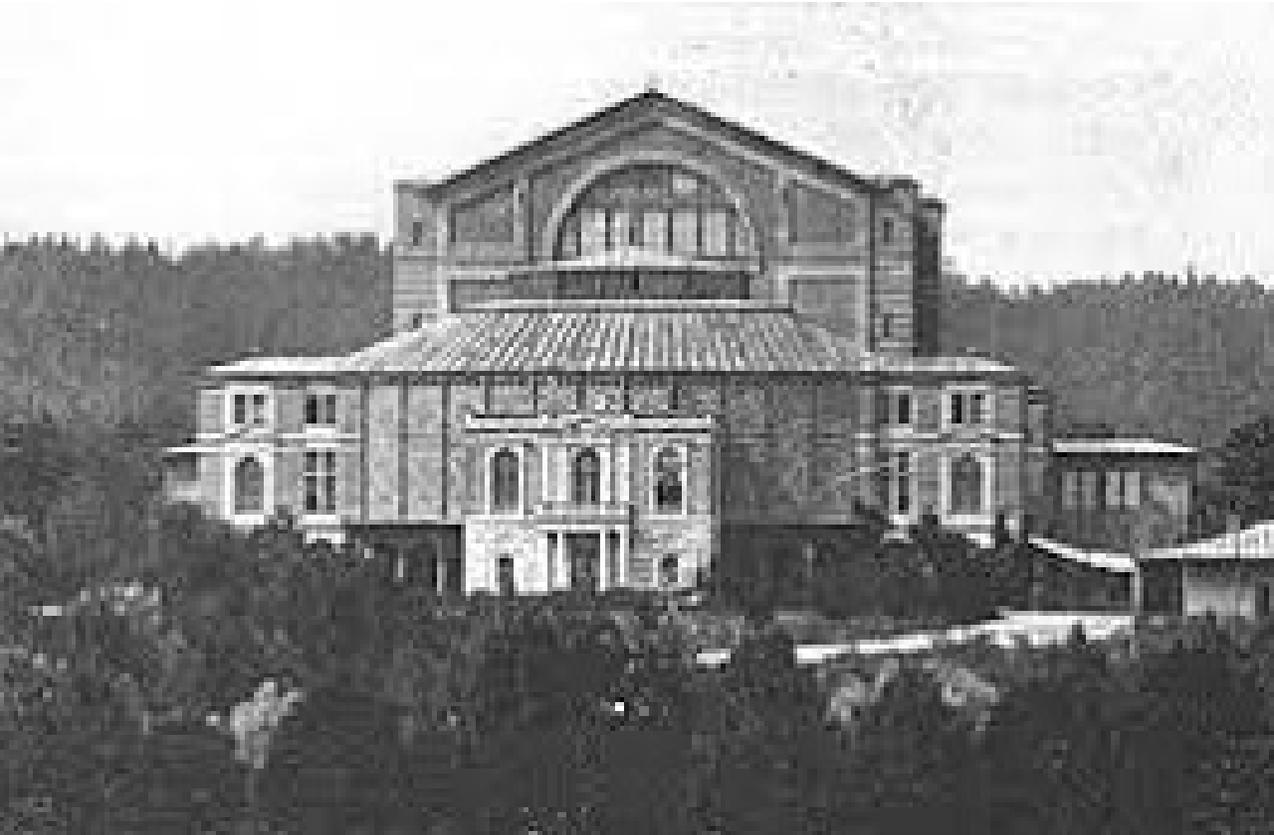
- 1842-1849 - Dresden
- 1848 - participation in revolutionary activities
- Exile:
  - 1849-1858 - Switzerland
  - 1858-1862 - Paris, Venice
- 1862 - return to the homeland (Biebrich, Munich...)
- 1864 - eighteen-year-old Ludwig II of Bavaria ascends the throne
  - Wagner's benefactor

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# MUSIC DRAMA – ART AND REVOLUTION

Die Kunst und die Revolution (1849), Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (1849-1852), Oper und Drama (1851)





# "PILGRIMAGE" TO BAYREUTH

# Music drama

- Wagner's ideal: opera as symphonic poem (J. Kerman)
- concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSuRJueqsQg>



# Musicalization and staging the nation: the case of Wagner

- the plots "supported by" music of Wagner's music dramas to evoke German pride
- *Der Ring des Nibelungen* [The Ring of the Nibelung]
  - mythology - medieval Germanic and Scandinavian myths
- *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*
- Bayreuth Festival
- misused by the Nazis during the WWII



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## **TRANSGRESSING BORDERS WITH NATIONAL RIVERS**

# Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

- composer, pioneered the development of Czech music
- **Prague Provisional Theatre** – first Kapellmeister (1866-1874)
- *The Bartered Bride* (1866)
- *Má vlast* [My homeland] (1872-1879)
  - cycle of 6 symphonic poems
  - Vyšehrad, Vltava (Moldau, 1874), Šárka, From Bohemian Woods and Fields, Tábor, Blaník
- *Libuše* (1881)
  - **NT Prague** opening(s) – 1881, 1883



# Smetana's cycle *My homeland*

- 1874-1879
- 6 symphonic poems
- "Moldau" - 2nd poem (1874) - imitating (tone painting) the flow of the Moldau river: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3G4NKzmfC-Q>
- see also Wagner's the flow of the Rhine waters (1852): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfAKZj2pYrs>

# Smetana's *Bartered Bride*

- premiered on May 30, 1866 (Provisional Theatre in Prague)
- spontaneously taken as the first truly national opera
- comic opera with plot taken from the village life – also the reason of the doubts about its "appropriatenes" to the task of national opera
- later, opera *Libuše* met the demands

# Dream about Libuše

- “The dying Magdalena Dobromila Rettigová reportedly let herself be carried from her bed to the floor. She did so (...) like Libuše, of whom legend has it that, seeing death approaching, she laid down on the floor and died.” (VI. Macura)
- to seal importance of one's own life in "tableau vivant"



Magdalena Dobromila Rettigová.

# Libuše

- Czech mythical duchess / duchess of tribe of Czechs
- oracle
- mythical foundress of Prague
- progenitor of Premyslid dynasty
- known from chronicles (Kosmas – early 12th century, Hájek z Libočan - 16th century...)



J. Mathauser: Princess Libuše foretells the glory of Prague

## Shared mythology as transcultural phenomenon

- Libuše - also a favorite story of German literature
- Franz Grillparzer: *Libussa* (1872)
  - Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen
  - Austrian play(wright)
- German poets
  - a "proper" matter belonging to the German cultural sphere, a "German fairy tale"
  - also regarded as a "monumental drama from the Slavic antiquity of Bohemia" (Herder 1828), the attribute "böhmisch"
  - an exotic matter (at the same time)

Franz Grillparzer

# Libussa

Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen



# "Our" and "Their" Libuše:

- "German" Libussa as exotic matter
  - story pointing towards the past
  - mythical bedrock pointing towards "other", "exciting"
  - reference to "Germany's excitingly unknown ethnic prehistory" (V. Macura)
  - dream visions of heroic past and deeds
  - dream of past "Golden Age"...

# Becoming a symbol of Czech nation

- image of ancient times -  
less emphasis on realm of myths
- more: recounting about:
  - beginnings of Czech national independence
  - Czech origin
  - foundations of the Czech state

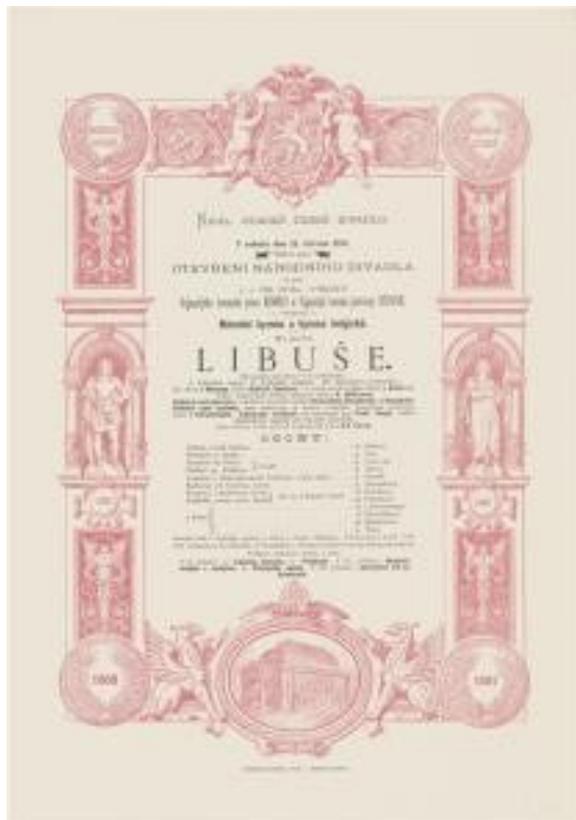


Přemysl the Ploughman

# Libuše as symbol of Czech nation

- Libuše's oracles
  - a call to presence
  - to call for/"attract" / focus attention to the bright future
- personification and embodiment of relations to the homeland
- symbol of Czech nation
- in *Manuscript of Zelená Hora* (faked, discovered 1817):
  - the establishment of a new, invented tradition of understanding Libuše
  - transformation of Libuše into a Czech national symbol
  - L. presented in her key role: ruler of a distinct nation "with a different language, different laws from those of the Germans, a nation that is essentially and directly genetically democratic and cultural" (V. Macura)
- Libuše as sacred value (recall M. D. Retigová's pre-death gesture)

# Bedřich Smetana's *Libuše*



- composed 1872
- premiere: National Theatre, Prague - June 11, 1881
- opening performance of National Theatre (1881, 1883)

(Marie Sittová as Libuše)

# Smetana's *Libuše*

- idea of national opera - programmatically nationalistic opera
- closest to the concept of Wagner's music drama
- influences: *Tristan und Isolde*, *Rheingold*, *Valküre* ...
- original German libretto Josef Wenzig – transl. by Ervín Špindler



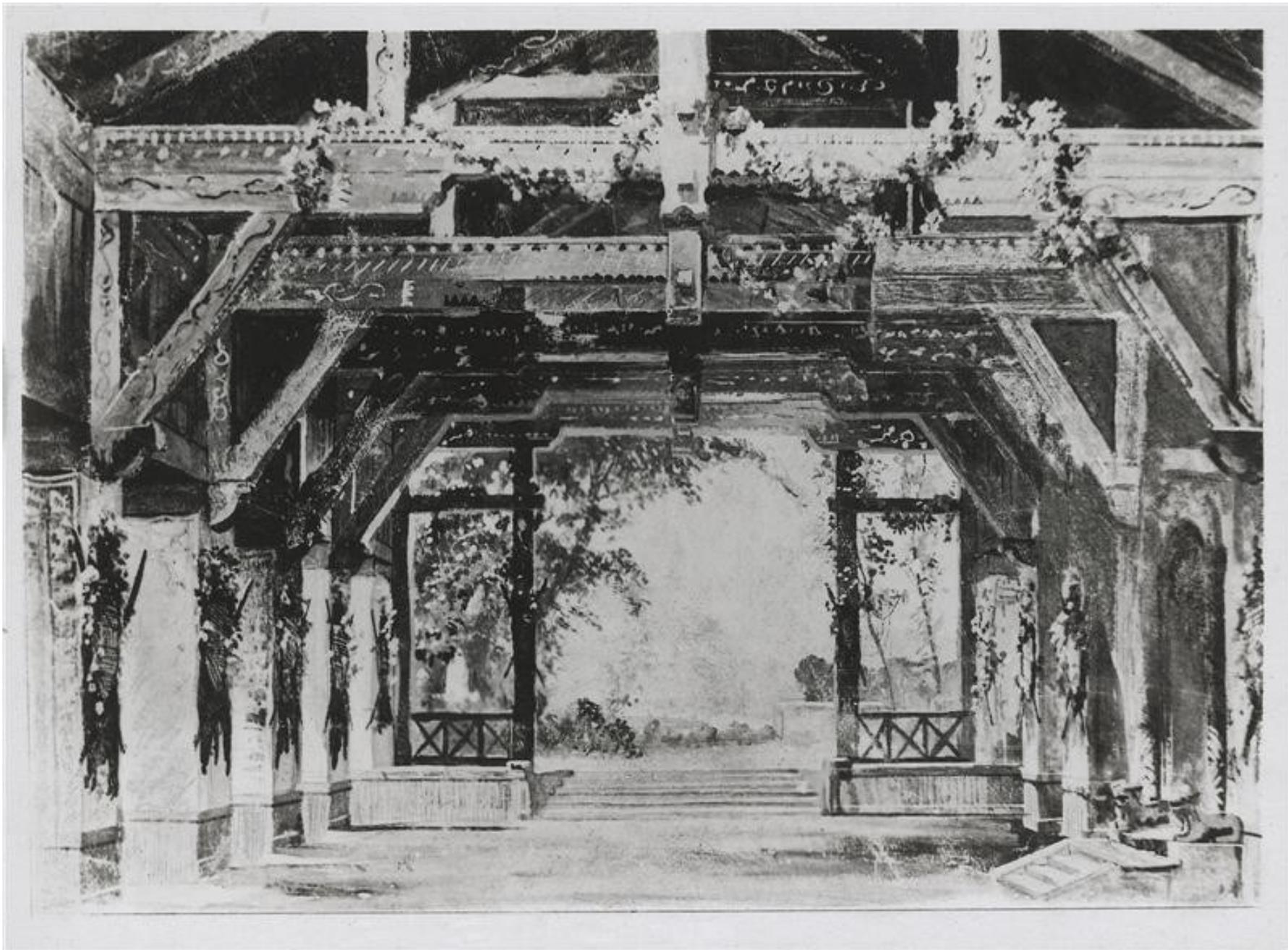
Mikoláš Aleš - draft of tableau vivant (1897)

- legacy of coronation opera
  - only not to celebrate coronation of a ruler – but the nation
  - Czech waiting for a ruler (coronation that never took place)
- character of Libuše - off the main line of the story
- demonstrations of historical events
- musical-choreographic characters
- ceremoniality
- intentionally performed only on festive, nationally important occasions
- contribution to the process of symbolization of Libuše
- up to today staged rather occasionally – (e.g. 2018 - centenary of the founding of the Czech state)



Mikoláš Aleš - draft of tableau vivant (1897)

*Libuše*, 1897, Robert  
Holzer – 1st scene



# Libuše as a dramatic character

*First scene, Libuše's hall at Vyšehrad with a view of the Vltava valley.*

Libuše (*lifting Radmila to herself, calmly*): Rise up and put your mind at peace! / **Libuše's guiders are the gods.** / With their help we shall succeed in **solving / the strife** which now divides your **kin**.

**Eternal gods**, ye that dwell above the clouds, / look down with grace upon this **our land!** / To concord do ye lead it, / to love consecrate it, / **outside its borders keep the serpent of strife!** / May the **land's powers** bring about good / and produce plenty for all its men!

May concord and love lead the people **[nation]**forward / and proclaim the glory of its future days! / O, my gods, hear this my **prayer**, / take my people **[nation]** under your wing! / O, protect my **land [homeland]**! / Take my people **[nation]** under your wing!

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*Last scene, the Royal castle in Prague*

- Libuše/All: **Czech people [nation] shell never perish / they [it] all hell's horrors will ever resist!**

- [\(186\) Bedřich Smetana: Libuše 1983 \(Košler - Beňačková - Zítek\) - YouTube](#)
- (1983, cond. Zdeněk Košler, dir. Karel Jernek, scenography Josef Svoboda, costumes Olga Filipi, choreography Jiří němeček, Libuše - Gabriela Beňačková)

# Representing national values

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=787loxr6t\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=787loxr6t_U)



# Mythology today – in Brno

- *Libuše*, National Theatre, Brno, 2018 (trailer)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCHYKq8Z2H8>
- [https://www.google.com/search?q=ndb+libu%C5%A1e&oq=ndb+libu%C5%A1e&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i13i30i625.2440j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:15a29d78,vid:Ng0b\\_mn0Kec](https://www.google.com/search?q=ndb+libu%C5%A1e&oq=ndb+libu%C5%A1e&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i13i30i625.2440j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:15a29d78,vid:Ng0b_mn0Kec)
- "Libuše is the story of an amazing woman" (Patricie Částková, NT Brno dramaturge)



čtvrtek  
celý den

Inaugurace  
prezidenta republiky

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# Inauguration of Petr Pavel

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2I9qTDEIqc>

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