

Progressive Stylistic Features in Fibich's Late Opera *Šárka* (1896–1897)

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Fibich's opera *Šárka* (1896–1897) is one of his most mature works and as such stands on the threshold of many important twentieth-century developments. It is characterized by intense dramatic and emotional expressivity. Musically speaking, the work is dominated by Šárka's central fate theme that is immediately announced at the outset of the overture to Act 1, bars 3–12 (here stated in majestic, tragic d-minor) and that reappears in countless variations—including a climactic recapitulation on p. 148–149 of the Orbis piano-vocal score¹—until its final restatement at Šárka's heroic death-suicide at the close of Act 3 (there reiterated in d-minor's minor subdominant, g-minor). This noble gesture is marked by rising fourths and minor thirds followed by two crucial expressive semitones on c-sharp – d and g-sharp – a. These intervallic features become highly charged during the stormy introduction to the highly dramatic Act 2. Here the former thirds are transmuted into agitated augmented seconds (f – g-sharp), which in turn produce diminished seventh chords such as f – g-sharp – b – d. Moreover, the complementary minor seconds are transformed into fluctuating dissonant aggregates, such as d-sharp – e – c-double sharp (see piano-vocal score,¹ p. 68 / staff 3) and A – B-flat – G-sharp – A (p. 69 / staff 3). Similar dramatic metamorphoses of Šárka's central theme occur in Act 3 during the final scene, when Vlasta rejects Šárka and even curses her (p. 163 / staves 2–3). Here Vlasta's agitation is portrayed by a highly modernistic permutation around the pitches f – d-flat – g-flat – c etc. A similar moment occurs later at the apparition (through intense darkness) of Šárka's allied maiden-warriors (p. 175 / staves 1–2), when Šárka's triadic theme (with the outline a – c-sharp – f) acquires augmented triadic colors, such as f-sharp – a-sharp – d (see musical examples 1a–d).

These augmented triads also affect the vertical harmonies of Fibich's opera, as during Šárka's ominous "*Mně dovol*" at the end of Act 1 (p. 64 / staff 4). One might also quote from the dramatic introduction to Act 3, whose modernistic clusters around a – b-flat –

¹ Musical references are to the piano-vocal score published by Orbis, Praha (American copyright secured in 1950). My cordial thanks are extended to Jiří Kopecký for kindly sending me a copy of this edition.

d - e - g - g-sharp may be viewed as natural outgrowths of Šárka's opening fate theme, in particular her minor second and third intervals (see Example 1e).

Example 1: Metamorphoses of Šárka's central fate theme

a) Principal fate theme from overture to Act I

(Note rising fourth and minor third, plus minor second)



In this connection one should also single out the prominent minor second key relationships in the final scene of Fibich's masterpiece, notably Ctirad's lyrical echoes of the exquisite Act 2 love duet on p. 152–157. Here the nostalgic flat keys of D-flat and A-flat sharply collide with the surrounding (and more neutrally hued) tonalities of C-major and a-/e-minor. Much the same holds true of Ctirad's closing "*O pojd'!*" (p. 179), which is cast in solemn D-flat and A-major, contrasting vividly with the adjacent tonal spheres of c-minor and a-flat-/g-minor (Šárka's climactic suicide, as noted above). In this fashion Fibich extends the expressive intervals of the augmented triad and minor second (both derived from Šárka's initial fate theme) to broader key relationships that reflect the dramatic conflicts of the opera's close.

But Fibich's *Šárka* is a proto-modernistic work in many other respects as well, notably in its quasi-Janáčekian dichotomies between lyrical, epic female idioms (cf. Vlasta's "*Slyšte, věční, prosby hlas*" in Act 1, p. 38 / staff 1²) and mechanistic, march-like styles for Přemysl, Ctirad and the other knights (see p. 40–43). Fibich eventually succeeds in blending these two seemingly irreconcilable sexual realms through various ingenious compositional techniques. Since Vlasta and her female co-warriors tend to prefer the modal realms of d-minor and its lower seventh degree, C-major (which is often linked to its upper major mediant, E-major), Fibich first introduces the approaching knights (p. 39–40) in C-major as well, but soon switches to the more tragic key of a-minor (p. 40 / staff 3) at Šárka's dramatic outburst, "*Ctirad! Opět vidím*". The knights thus assume the dominant minor key (a-minor) of Šárka's central tonality of d-minor, just as their march themes (see p. 40 / staves 2–3 and p. 42 / staves 4–5) increasingly assimilate salient melodic aspects of Šárka's main theme itself, notably the elegiac a-minor utterance in the overture to Act 1, bar 13. The same intervallic configuration of opening fourth-minor third³ is later encountered in Act 1 at Přemysl's "[...] *jemuž koří*" (p. 51 / staff 1) and the ensuing men's chorus, "*Slova chvály*" (p. 53 / staff 2), whose sequential modulations on D – E once again recall the women's lyrical music at the outset of Act 1. Similar instances of female-male musical interaction also occur during the impassioned love duet in Act 2, especially Ctirad's rapturous "*Nuž nazývej*" (p. 114 / staff 1, featuring an expressive minor second /f-sharp – e-sharp/ à la Šárka over a D-major foundation) and "*Moje, moje jsi*" (p. 118 / staff 1, with a – g-sharp semitone over d-minor base). In fact, it should be noted that the entire Act 2 love duet again employs the female tonal axes of C – d – E⁴ familiar from Act 1.

Another instance of female-male motivic interpenetration concerns the knights' *upwardly* surging sixteenth rhythms familiar from p. 40 / staves 2–3. These somewhat mechanistic masculine march idioms from Act 1 are soon transformed in Act 2, scene 1 (p. 78 / staff 1) into highly charged *downward* sixteenth patterns (cf. "*Nuž s námi reku na Děvín!*",

² This vocal melody is forecast by Šárka's "[...] *vám, bozi věční!*" in Act 1, p. 22 / staff 1.

³ Cf. also Šárka's climactic outburst, *V svaté háje* on p. 25 / staff 3.

⁴ Cf. the initial C-major areas on pp. 87 / staff 2, 88 / staff 3, 93 / staff 2, 95 / staff 3–96 / staff 3, 122–123 / staff 1, 123 / staves 3–4, followed by d-minor spheres on pp. 92, 93 / staff 3, 99 / staff 3, 100 / staves 3–5, 107 / staff 5, 114 / staves 4–5, 118 / staves 1–3, 120 / staff 2, 126 / staves 3–4 and climactic E-major arrival points on p. 91–92 / staff 1, 105 / staves 3–5, 131 / staff 3 (very end of Act 2).

orchestra: *a - e* /fourth!/ - *e - d* - *c-sharp*) with the familiar second cadential interval, *a - g-sharp* - *a* from the men's march in Act 1. These female martial figures are in turn transmuted into the striking Act 3 masculine triplet patterns *d - g* (note again opening fourth!) - *f - f* - *e-flat* - *d* on p. 132 / staff 5. The latter acquire especially heroic dimensions during the final defeat of the warrior-maidens on p. 170–171 (see examples 2a-c). Here one may justly speak of proto-Janáčekian⁵ or Bartókian rhythmic metamorphoses, just as Fibich's intervallic permutations (discussed earlier) already point to Schoenberg and Webern.

Example 2: Janáčekian dramatic polarities

a) Knights' march in Act I, p. 40, staff 2

Marciale, non troppo mosso



(Knights' key of *a*-minor is minor dominant of feminine *d*-minor tonality)

b) Female warriors at outset of Act II, p. 78 / staff 1

Molto vivo



(Note similar rhythms and identical minor second cadence compared to men in Ex. 2a)

c) Knights' martial idioms at outset of Act III, p. 132 / staff 5

Allegro con fuoco



(Like female warriors, men begin with perfect fourth and continue with major-minor seconds on *f - e♭ - d* that run parallel to female warriors' downward patterns on *e - d - c♯* / also featuring intervals of major second-minor second /)

Given this plethora of modernistic concepts in Fibich's *Šárka*, it is somewhat surprising to encounter traditional viewpoints of Fibich as an exclusively late Romantic artist imbued with the spirit of Smetana and Wagner. Admittedly Smetana's ceremonial festival

⁵ Janáček knew and admired Fibich's *Šárka*, as appears from his essay "České proudy hudební", which appeared in *Hlídky*, 16 (1899), p. 36–41. In particular, Janáček esteemed Fibich's modern approach to musical drama, his modulatory freedom and especially *Šárka*'s rich melodic idioms. See the summary by Jiří Vysloužil in his article "Zdeněk Fibich und Leoš Janáček", in: Jana Fojtíková, Věra Šustíková (eds.), *Fibich - Melodram - Secese* (Praha, 2000), p. 42–45.

opera *Libuše* (1872) did influence the general dramaturgy and musical idiom of much of Act 1 in Fibich's *Šárka*, including its principal tonalities of C- and D-major. In addition, isolated melodic motives, such as the women's "Héja!" at the outset of Fibich's Act 2 (p. 70 / staves 1–2)⁶ directly recall Smetana's chorus, "Héja! Héja!" in Act 2, scene 3 of *Libuše*. As for Wagner, most of the incidental resemblances to his later music dramas occur in Act 2 of *Šárka*, in particular the closing love duet, as follows:

Table I: Incidental resemblances to Wagner's music dramas in Fibich's *Šárka*

Šárka: page/staff nos.	Wagner work	Act	Bars
1. 70/2, bars 5–6	<i>Parsifal</i>	2	1479–1480 (after Kundry's "Irre!")
2. 87/2–3 + 108/2–3	<i>Meistersinger</i>	2	848–850 (Eva and Walther)
3. 90/2 ("Krásná!")	<i>Tannhäuser</i> (Paris version)	1	Venusberg scene, 525–526
4. 97/3, 99/3 + 100/3	<i>Siegfried</i>	2	714–725 (Forest murmurs)
5. 121/1 + 122/3–123/1 (in D- and C-major, respectively)	<i>Tristan</i>	2	1162–1164 + 1196–1197 (Isolde: "Barg im Busen")
6. 124/2–125/1	<i>Tristan</i>	2	1544–1563 + 1575–1594

It will be noted that all of these instances are based on lyrical (and usually erotic) episodes in the corresponding Wagner works; the latter are typically taken from love or forest scenes in the more intimately scored second acts. Of this listing, nos. 2 and 3 are essentially major ninth chords used (like no. 1) at Wagner's original pitch levels. The first and fourth, on the contrary, are modal d-minor episodes with a light Lydian (or g-sharp) touch in the *Parsifal* scene. Here it should be noted that in no. 4 both Wagner and Fibich eventually resolve d-minor to the brighter feminine realm (Šárka in Fibich, forest bird in Wagner) of E-major. Of special note are the two *Tristan* leanings in nos. 5 and 6, although it is possible that this climactic refrain in Fibich's opera actually derives from Šárka's earlier lyrical effusions at "Ach, odpusť!" (p. 116 / staves 1–3), where it represents a vocal variation of her principal motive (a – d – f) on the pitches f-sharp – a – d. In any case all of these subliminal Wagner echoes are—with the possible exception of the triumphant no. 5—temporary coloristic excursions and do not affect the essential melodic substance of Fibich's opera, which remains thoroughly Czech in spirit.

⁶ For more parallels between Smetana's *Libuše* and Fibich's *Šárka*, see Jiří Kopecký, *Opery Zdeňka Fibicha z devadesátých let 19. století* (Olomouc, 2008), p. 213–214.

In closing, one should stress the Czech national styles that Fibich so convincingly employs in *Šárka*, notably Ctirad's folklike A-flat entrance⁷ at the close of Act 2 (cf. p. 101 / staff 4–105 / staff 3) or the lovers' lyrically toned "*Viz tu krásnou noc*" on p. 125 / staff 2–126 / staff 3 that Ctirad so evocatively echoes at the close of Act 3, p. 179 / staff 4–180 / staff 3. Similar expressive idioms are utilized for Přemysl's three-part cavatina, *Věťve dvě* (p. 44 / staff 3–46 / staff 2) and the repetitive song forms for the opening ariosos of Vlasta and Šárka in Act 1. The latter sections are to be singled out for their malleable formal structures, fusing a beautifully articulated Czech declamatory style with flexible orchestral ritornelli and birdcall transitions. In his free blending of various musico-dramatic styles—such as folk-like ariosos, orchestral continuity and choral commentaries—Fibich points to similar stylistic fusions in the dramatic vocal music of Alban Berg (*Wozzeck*, 1925) and Igor Stravinsky (*Oedipus Rex*, 1927; *The Rake's Progress*, 1951).

Table II: Opening Scene-complex in Fibich's *Šárka*, Act 1

Dramatic content	Key(s)	Vocal score p. / staff	Style
Vlasta invokes shadows of departed souls near Vyšehrad castle	d minor with poetic touches on Eb/Db	14–16	Elegiac arioso
Sun's rays penetrate the grove	Ab	16/4–17/1	Dance-like, faster 6/8 rhythms with dotted eighth-note patterns Further development of 6/8 dance rhythms Free reprise of elegiac arioso
Birds return and sun rises	E G – C	17/2 18/1–19/3	
Vlasta: " <i>Hide enslaved head</i> " d : V (" <i>Skryj se, hlavo porobená</i> ")		19/3	
Šárka shoots the falcon, comes running in holding a bow	A ⁷ – e	20	Šárka again employs 6/8 rhythms
Šárka's ritornello in orchestra ⁸	e-minor	20/5–21/4	Features dotted quarter-eighth-four sixteenths

⁷ Here Ctirad's telling vocals are modelled on the Czech folk song, *Proč kalino*. See *Ibid.*, p. 206–207 (with musical examples).

⁸ Šárka's orchestral ritornello bears a slight rhythmic resemblance to No. 27 of Fibich's piano composition, *Nálady, dojmy a upomínky* (completed 1899). See *Ibid.*, p. 237–238 and also *Nálady*, No. 348 for a compositional study that includes *Šárka's* main themes.

Šárka's intervening stanza one: lays down falcon on sacrificial stone	C - G	21/4-22/3	Epic, heroic vocal style
Šárka's ritornello in orchestra	E-major, e-minor	23/1-3	
Šárka's stanza two: addresses Vlasta	A - C - f-minor	23-25 etc.	More agitated, declamatory

Note: Both Vlasta and Šárka prefer broader tonal movement from C/d or C up to E major. (E will be final tonic of Acts 1 and 2.) Unlike the Db and Ab areas in Act 3, those at the outset of Act 1 still tend to resolve to d-minor or (in the case of Ab:enharmonic G-sharp) E-major. One is impressed by how Fibich blends closed song forms with more developmental (and truly symphonic) dance rhythm episodes.

In summary, Fibich's opera *Šárka* represents a milestone in the historical annals of Czech dramatic music. While certain stylistic aspects of the work still recall Smetana's festival opera *Libuše* (1872), Fibich's pervasive concern for intervallic and rhythmic permutations clearly point to early twentieth-century developments. Together with the late works of Johannes Brahms (also penned during the 1890s), they constitute significant precursors of modern Viennese composers as Schoenberg and Webern.⁹ In addition, Fibich's predilection for dramatic polarities and their resolution on the operatic stage emphatically heralds similar psychological tendencies in the operas of Leoš Janáček, a later Czech composer who admired Fibich's *Šárka* in his critical writings. Moreover, Fibich's pronounced compositional skill in amalgamating Czech folk styles and Wagnerian harmonic concepts look ahead to such twentieth-century composers as Ives, Bartók and Satie, for whom each new work of art was a unique artistic synthesis of disparate musical elements. Finally, Fibich's employment of both through-composed and closed song forms in close temporal proximity already suggests later twentieth-century opera composers as Alban Berg and Stravinsky, for whom neo-Classical references were part and parcel of their innovative stylistic idioms.

⁹ It should also be pointed out that Fibich's chromatic voice-leading in his late operas frequently leads to very expansive and proto-modernistic tonal relationships. A good example is found in his opera *Hedy* (1894-1895), Act 2, at the moment when Don Juan approaches and kneels before Hedy (marked *Lento* in bars 438-447). Essentially Fibich here moves from e-minor: V-i, but the Czech composer intensifies this progression through the insertion of dissonant appoggiaturas on c (resolving to b) and f (leading in modal / Phrygian fashion to the tonic e). Moreover, the upper pedal on g-sharp in bars 440-441 hints at a veiled, temporary modal shift to E *major* (with the upper g-sharp).

For a similar Fibich piano composition compare *Náladý*, No. 267. Here, too, our Czech composer blends modal and coloristic harmonies that even feature implied whole-tone progressions.

Progressive stylistische Züge in Fibichs Spätoper *Šárka* (1896–1897)

Zusammenfassung

Zdeněk Fibich's Oper *Šárka* entstand in den späteren 1890er Jahren und steht somit an der Schwelle zum angehenden 20. Jahrhundert. Ihre höchst konzentrierte motivische und intervallische Tonsprache wird vom tschechischen Komponisten systematisch entwickelt um ihre dramatische Ausdruckskraft zu verstärken. Außerdem werden ihre tonalen Stilmittel enorm erweitert. Letztere betonen oft Kleinsekundbeziehungen, so z.B. g-As oder C-Des in der letzten Szene des III. Aktes. Zudem verbindet Fibich seine schroffen dramatischen Gegensätze (die oft männlich-weibliche Konflikte betonen) auf meisterliche Art, eine Technik, die bereits auf ähnliche dramatische Polaritäten in den Opern Janáčeks hinweist. Obwohl sublimierte Erinnerungen an Smetanas *Libuše* und Wagners *Tristan* und *Parsifal* noch vorkommen (so besonders im herrlichen Liebesduett am Ende des II. Aktes), erreicht Fibich in *Šárka* einen künstlerischen Höhepunkt in der Geschichte der tschechischen Nationaloper.

Progresivní stylistické prvky ve Fibichově pozdní opeře *Šárka* (1896–1897)

Shrnutí

Fibichova opera *Šárka* vznikla na konci devadesátých let 19. století a stojí tak na prahu 20. století. Její vysoce propracovaná motivická a intervalová hudební řeč byla skladatelem záměrně rozvinuta, aby umocnila dramatickou expresivitu. Dokonce došlo k výraznému rozšíření tonálních prostředků ve směru sekundových vztahů jako např. postupy g – As nebo C – Des v závěrečné scéně opery. Fibich také spojoval mistrovským způsobem dramatické protiklady (časté střety mužského a ženského prvku), které upomínají na podobné polarity v operní tvorbě Leoše Janáčka. Ačkoliv se v *Šárce* objevují subtilní reminiscence na Smetanovu *Libuši* a Wagnerova *Tristana* a *Parsifala* (zejména v milostném duetu v závěru 2. jednání), Fibich se vyvaroval jakémukoliv povrchnímu napodobování a dosáhl vrcholu v české dramatické tvorbě.

Keywords

Fibich's opera *Šárka*; analysis of 19th century opera.