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

Nors S. Josephson

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 / staffs 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 / staffs 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
(Notice rising fourth and minor third, plus minor second)

b) Stormy introduction to Act II, p. 68, staves 1+3

(Notice Webern-like minor seconds!)

c) From agitated dramatic close of Act III:
Vlasta renounces Šárka on p. 163 / staff 2

(d) Appearance of killed maiden-warriors at end of Act III, p. 175 / staff 1
(Compare augmented Šárka trill from f – e – d – a tritonic in Ex. 1a)

(g) Harmonic cluster beginning Act III
(Notice intervals of minor second, major third and tritone from Ex. 1a)
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 pojď!” (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 1) 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 / staffs 2–3 and p. 42 / staffs 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 intervalllic configuration of opening fourth-minor third 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/ a 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 – E major familiar from Act 1.

Another instance of female-male motivic interpenetration concerns the knights’ upwardly surging sixteenth rhythms familiar from p. 40 / staffs 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 / staffs 3–4, followed by d-minor spheres on pp. 92, 93 / staff 3, 99 / staff 3, 100 / staffs 3–5, 107 / staff 5, 114 / staffs 4–5, 118 / staffs 1–3, 120 / staff 2, 126 / staffs 3–4 and climactic E-major arrival points on p. 91–92 / staff 1, 105 / staffs 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-Janáčekian\(^5\) or Bartókian rhythmic metamorphoses, just as Fibich’s intervallic permutations (discussed earlier) already point to Schoenberg and Webern.

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

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

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, an 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, odpust!*” (p. 116 / staffs 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.

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In closing, one should stress the Czech national styles that Fibich so convincingly employs in Šárka, notably Ctirad’s folklike A-flat entrance\(^7\) at the close of Act 2 (cf. p. 101 / staff 4–105 / staff 3) or the lovers’ lyrically toned “Víz 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, Větve 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

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

\(^7\) 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, Nálad, dojmy a upomínky (completed 1899). See Ibid., p. 237–238 and also Nálad, No. 348 for a compositional study that includes Šárka’s main themes.
Šárka’s intervening stanza one: lays down falcon on sacrificial stone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Šárka’s ritornello in orchestra</th>
<th>E-major, e-minor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Šárka’s stanza two: addresses Vlasta</td>
<td>A – C – f-minor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Abenharmonic 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.

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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 Nálady, No. 267. Here, too, our Czech composer blends modal and coloristic harmonies that even feature implied whole-tone progressions.
Progressive stylistic Züge in Fibichs Spätoper Šárlka (1896–1897)

Zusammenfassung


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

Shrnutí

Fibichova opera Šárlka vznikla na konci devadesátých let 19. století a stojí tak na prahu 20. století. Jeji 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 Šárlce objevují subtilní reminiscence na Smetanovu Libuší a Wagnerrova Tristana a Parsifala (zejména v milostném duetu v závěru 2. jednání), Fibich se vyvaroval jakémukoliv povrchním napodobování a dosáhl vrcholu v české dramatické tvorbě.

Keywords

Fibich’s opera Šárlka; analysis of 19th century opera.