

Zdeněk Fibich's Work and Life Changed by a Literature
Zdeněk Fibichs Schaffen und Leben durch Literatur verändert,
Literaturou změněný život a dílo Zdeňka Fibicha

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I. Today's situation

There are still many good reasons to think about Czech composer Zdeněk Fibich (1850–1900) within the framework of Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884) and Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904), although today's music world has almost forgotten his name. Why? First Fibich began as a bold, courageous artist, he composed in the name of a modern Czech music and then he became more cautious. Some of his compositions can even sound surprisingly old-fashionedly in comparison with those by Smetana and Dvořák (and vice versa). It may seem confusing that Fibich did not write any chef d'oeuvre like a cycle of symphonic poems *My country* or a symphony *From the New World* at the end of his life. Fibich was creating during his whole life compositions of different quality, the often assumed idea of permanent progress can be hardly applied. Second some of Fibich's best works are difficult to introduce because of their high performing demands, for instance cantate *Springtime Tale* requested symphonic orchestra, mixed choir and soloists as many other compositions of this genre, but its length is quite unusual – only about 15 minutes. Who can afford to rehearse such a work? As more evident example serves, of course, stage melodrama trilogy *Hippodamia*. Another problem represents a lack of recordings and published music. Third Fibich's music is unknown and from this point of view still impresses as something new, hence the big success of opera *Šárka* in Wexford, but also apprehensions from staging melodrama *Hippodamia's Death* in the Prague's National theater in the Fibich's jubilee year 2000. Fourth Czech musicology is also partly responsible for his contemporary state. It tried to interpret Fibich as a progressive, modern composer, on the other hand – as another extreme – musicologists were not interested in Fibich's music at all. Fibich's work is a combination of novelty and tradition rather than one of creating of persistent newness, but authors, who wrote about Fibich, had obvious problem with an interpretation of the 19th century idea of a progress and novelty. Let me overview 100 years of Fibich's research.

II. Research

Authors of first books, studies and reminiscences are counted among Fibich's close friends. 1/ Otakar Hostinský as an author of *Reminiscences on Fibich* (in the journal *Dalibor* from 1902) translated and adjusted Friedrich Schiller play for a libretto to the opera *The Bride of Messina* (1884), 2/ Anežka Schulzová, who in the 1890s took position of Fibich's wife, an alto-singer of the National theatre Betty Hanušová-Fibichová, published under the pen-name Carl Ludwig Richter a book *Zdenko Fibich. Eine musikalische Silhouette* (1900), 3/ Zdeněk Nejedlý presented himself as Fibich's pupil. Three key persons stood at the beginning of Fibich's research, not as disinterested propagators of his work. This claim proves a book by Vladimír Knittl *Zdeněk Fibich, Popular Biographical and Critical Outline* [Zdeněk Fibich, populární životopisný a kritický nástin] (probably 1911). Knittl criticised Fibich's literature for being too subjective or too skilled, but it uses so many Hostinský's and Richter's quotations that we can regard it for a plagiarism. The reason why Knittl wrote his falsification justifies a chapter, dealing with the opera *The Bride of Messina*. The author defended his father, a critic Karel Knittl and an idea about gloomy and inanimate atmosphere of the work, which is totally different attitude than upheld Hostinský and after him Nejedlý. Besides this, Hostinský's and Schulzová's interpretations of Fibich's last working period stand to each other as a contradictory (Hostinský devoted his attention to the work of 1880s, Schulzová emphasized the era of 1890s).

Hostinský conducted towards Fibich as his older and more experienced friend. They both admired Bedřich Smetana and they considered Richard Wagner to be one of the greatest opera reformers. Their relationship led into origin of *The Bride of Messina*. Hostinský became a co-creator of the work which, according to him, was missing in the new Czech national music. The work, which was logical consequent of Czech operatic production: "Who once said A – a music drama, he must also say B – a music tragedy, otherwise he does not have any other choice than go back to the Italian opera before Gluck and acknowledge total sway of music."¹⁶⁹ *The Bride of Messina* was, as Hostinský thought, a crucial and indispensable work in a development of Czech national opera, which followed logically after Smetana's operas. Hostinský defended the "Czechness" of the opera arguing by the use of national language and so-called "declamatory style". A selection of a theme was subject to an artist and his artistic freedom: "Not a theme, but a way of its conception determines a national impression of a piece of art, even by a foreign theme."¹⁷⁰ A failure of *The Bride of Messina* Hostinský explained as a prejudice against so-called "Wagnerianism" etc. Regardless of the fact that *The Bride of Messina* is today considered without any objections to be a work which is based rather on Gluck's reform, it is not true that the public did not accept this opera only because of a danger of

¹⁶⁹ Hostinský, O.: *Reminiscences on Fibich* [Vzpomínky na Fibicha], F. A. Urbánek, Prague 1909, p. 112.

¹⁷⁰ Hostinský, O.: *About Nowadays State and of the Czech Music Direction* [O nynějším stavu a směru české hudby], F. A. Urbánek, Prague 1885, p. 147.

Wagner's or foreign influence. Hostinský did not admit in his argumentation a possibility of staging futility, but the same opinion, which Karel Knittl adopted in 1884 was in substance repeated in 1903 by Fibich's admirer Josef Boleška: "Progressiveness itself would not be an obstacle for the audience, which rejoiced at Wagner's Lohengrin a year later. But the theme itself, although it was skilfully adjusted for music drama by O. Hostinský, it veiled both the stage and the auditorium with a stifling, black haze caused by a rule of inexorable fate."¹⁷¹

No doubt Hostinský respected artistic freedom, the claim of an artist to compose modern and new work, but it went to use principles developed by F. Liszt and R. Wagner. Hostinský considered Fibich to be a Smetana's successor, but he pointed his attitude against Dvořák. No wonder this happened within his reflections about Dvořák's operas¹⁷² and symphonic poems. On the other hand Fibich also had a right to work freely and as artistic individuality could not compose without a proper critical response and a contact with the public. If there were a group of people who were afraid of foreign – modern – influences, Fibich could also be afraid of Hostinský's ideas, which gave to his composition clear direction but at the same time they were not able to keep him in touch with audible music. In spite of being librettist of *The Bride of Messina*, Hostinský still behaved as an aesthete and a critic. And here lies the point of these thoughts. While Fibich was experiencing a reception of *The Bride of Messina* as its author, Hostinský did not leave his role as a scholar. While Fibich decided to write another opera almost ten years after *The Bride of Messina*, Hostinský's attitude remained clear and stout for the rest of his life: "Only when we were modern, we were true to type, only when we did not close ourselves to new, temporal ideas and currents, which could fertilize our national fund, our work was blessed."¹⁷³ It is more than probable that Fibich was not as sure as Hostinský and even if he knew he was regarded as a modern composer, certain doubts appeared after the origin of such exceptional work. Perhaps Fibich himself got frightened of his own composition and may be a development of Fibich's compositional style was too accelerated by Hostinský with his belief in progress and his frankness to new streams, which he took for being modern.

Let's now direct an attention to the relationship between Z. Fibich and A. Schulzová. After the opera *Hedy* (Schulzová wrote libretto based on the story by Lord Byron) arose Fibich's most popular opera *Šárka*. Although Schulzová as C. L. Richter permanently emphasized modernity and peculiarity of this work, in comparison with *The Bride of Messina* is *Šárka* yet an opera, which was adjusted to the concrete public and not a work that should solve certain artistic problem or think to the end any artistic principles. The

¹⁷¹ Boleška, J.: About Zdeněk Fibich [O Zdeňku Fibichovi], in: Dalibor, 1903, Vol. 25, N. 38, p. 282.

¹⁷² Hostinský, O.: Antonín Dvořák in the Development of Our Dramatical Music [Antonín Dvořák ve vývoji naší hudby dramatické], in: Antonín Dvořák. Collection of Studies about his Work and Life [Antonín Dvořák. Soubor statí o jeho díle a životě], M. Urbánek, Prague 1912, p. 208–226.

¹⁷³ Hostinský, O.: A Word about an Importance of Zdeněk Fibich [Slovo o významu Zdeňka Fibicha], in: Dalibor, 1901, Vol. 23, N. 1, p. 2.

change of a traditional myth and Šárka's suicide could be admired as a daring step of librettist, but at once is this "novelty" conspicuously near to the world of Italian opera. Conspicuous also is the fact that it is an opera written on the Czech theme again. The way from *The Bride of Messina* to *Šárka* only manifests that opera is – as we can read in Grove Dictionary: "[...] that genre to which composers have for three and a half centuries been drawn irresistibly, but which has so often proved recalcitrant, operable only through compromise."¹⁷⁴ In this case it was a compromise between modernity and tradition. Paradoxically it is neither Hostinský's *The Bride of Messina* nor Schulzová's *Šárka* but *Hippodamia* by Jaroslav Vrchlický, which gave birth Fibich's most courageous work. It is noticeable that we still know very little about relationship Fibich – Vrchlický. (Unfortunately Vrchlický did not write anything like *Reminiscences on Fibich*.) Hostinský did not reject melodrama as a genre, but he was skeptical towards melodramatical adaptation of whole drama. Fibich came to his "big experiment" naturally, as though incidentally: through his six concert melodramas and thanks to his profession as deputy conductor and choirmaster at the Provisional Theatre (1875–78), where he met – besides many operettas – melodramatic works by Jiří Benda. *Hippodamia* was Fibich's first and the only "international" success (in Vienna 1892). It is perhaps today's most valuable work by Fibich and also the work which among Fibich's heritage could be indicated as "totally new". *Hippodamia* is a peak of Fibich's interest in melodrama, which up to the present day has been inspiring Czech composers, which allows an organization of festival and competition of concert melodrama, which leaves an open way for paying homage to Fibich internationally. In this sense Jaroslav Jiránek appositely specified Fibich as a lumírovec (i.e. a member of an artistic group Lumírovci, the most significant representative was J. Vrchlický).

Let's continue in going through the Fibich's research. Schulzová and Hostinský were followed by young and zealous Nejedlý. He uncritically exaggerated positive evaluations of both authors, hence Fibich became one of the greatest komponist of the 19th century, a real successor of Smetana and Wagner. Dvořák was replaced from a view of music development before Smetana. Books written by Nejedlý in the beginning of 20th century can be read as rarities of Czech music historiography, but it does not change the fact that Fibich's research is connected mainly with Zdeněk Nejedlý's name. Nejedlý fought obviously with a problem of evaluation. According to him, if you will, was good only the art, which brought something new.¹⁷⁵ And in Fibich's oeuvre he found big amount of "firsts": a genre of polka used within a string quartet, nationalist tone the symphonic poem *Záboj*, *Slavoj* and *Luděk* etc. Nejedlý interpreted each new Fibich's work as a progress, as art that could be calculated like a mathematical problem. Nejedlý did not see or he did not want to see traditional features in Fibich's music. He used Fibich as an important link in the development of Czech music; Dvořák was excluded from the history by constructing

¹⁷⁴ Griffiths, P.: Opera, §VI. 20th century developments, in: The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Vol. 13, Macmillan Publishers, (Stanley Sadie – editor), London 1991, p. 610.

¹⁷⁵ Nejedlý, Z.: Otakar Ostrčil, Prague 1935, p. 37.

a “healthy” line Smetana – Fibich – Foerster – Ostrčil. No wonder that long time after Nejedlý nobody wrote a comprehensive work about Fibich. Friends of Nejedlý agreed with his ideas.¹⁷⁶ Those, who wanted to express (and expressed like V. Knittl or V. Helfert) their own opinions, would baited (and they did so) against themselves Nejedlý and his group. Around Fibich was built certain barrier, which slowed down understanding of his life and work. Besides this, it was believed that actors and singers acting and singing in Fibich's opera or melodramas would be unlucky, would be injured or even die.¹⁷⁷

Fibich's research began with a trio of his friends. It was not the best way, but apparently the only one possible. Ludvík Lošťák commented on this situation distinctively, his sarcasm did not provoke Fibich's music, but Hostinský's, Schulzová's, Nejedlý's opinions: “And in the atmosphere of companionship lived, composed, died and was celebrated Zdeněk Fibich.”; “[...] ‘out-of-date’ and ‘unprogressive’ Antonín traveled all over Germany as a winner, while ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ Fibich stayed victoriously sitting within the close range of his friends!”¹⁷⁸

I have already mentioned the name of Vladimír Helfert. He surmounted a polarity Hostinský – Schulzová, but he had a sharp polemics with Nejedlý. Fibich in Helfert's interpretation was placed before Smetana as a “pure romanticist”, whose work was gained over a cult of inspiration. A fading of a dispute about the interpretation of piano work *Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences* we meet yet today.¹⁷⁹ More over: Helfert's idea about Fibich's “belated romanticism” is still influential,¹⁸⁰ but as Jaroslav Jiránek and Vladimír Hudec proved it is certainly not an unproblematic idea. They both described Fibich's position within the trio of Czech national composers (Smetana – Dvořák – Fibich), although in everyday concert life Fibich has ceded his place to Janáček.

From a brief outlook of Fibich's research it is not surprising that it is very difficult to get a relatively objective portrait of Fibich's personality and music. If we bear in mind an experimental detachment of Z. Fibich and Fibich's interpretations, we can try to get a candid view of Fibich. It is really startling, how easy we get two totally different persons who are all hidden under the name Zdeněk Fibich.

Of course there are authors who made a hero from Fibich, but on the other hand we can read that Fibich lived as a philistine.¹⁸¹ “His soul has never been creative but always

¹⁷⁶ See Bartoš, J.: Zdeněk Fibich, Prague 1913.

¹⁷⁷ See Hemelíková, B.: Death and Tragedy in the Context of Myth [Smrt a tragično v kontextu mýtu], in: A Phenomenon of the Death in the Czech Culture of the 19th Century [Fenoménu smrti v české kultuře 19. století], (Helena Lorenzová, Taťána Petrasová – editors), KLP – Koniasch Latin Press, Prague 2001, p. 176.

¹⁷⁸ Lošťák, L.: Chromatic Thunderclap [Chromatické hromobití], Vol. 2, Prague (probably 1903), p. 68, 74.

¹⁷⁹ See Jiránek, J.: On the Place and Import of Zdeněk Fibich in the Czech and European Music [Místo a význam Zdeňka Fibicha v dějinách české a evropské hudby], in: Opus musicum, 1999, Vol. 31, N. 6, p. 7–19.

¹⁸⁰ See Helfert, V.: Czech Modern Music [Česká moderní hudba], in: Tempo, Vol. 15–16, Index, Olomouc 1936.

¹⁸¹ Jiránek, K. B.: Zdeněk Fibich, Prague 1947, p. 35.

imitative.”¹⁸² “He could not compose purely originally and ingenuously.”¹⁸³ Fibich’s instrumentation is not perfect, but rather strange “[...] it has more thickness than strength.”¹⁸⁴ *Hippodamia* stays in the level of interesting attempt, but still only attempt,¹⁸⁵ it is an unknown form of Vrchlický’s work.¹⁸⁶ John Tyrrell wrote: “Fibich’s music is not very obviously Czech; [...] while Dvořák represented the archetypal Czech cantor, Fibich was typical of the educated, broadly cultured German musician.”¹⁸⁷ According to K. B. Jiráček is Fibich’s Third symphony “roaming in form”,¹⁸⁸ Fibich avoided here to solve problems.¹⁸⁹ Fibich’s last opera *The Fall of Arkona* is “[...] rather a triumph of composer’s conception of music drama than a real lively work.”¹⁹⁰ In this work Fibich went back to a type of French opera.¹⁹¹

It is mentioned that during Fibich’s life there were many unfavorable opinions. From the small experiment, I have just made, it seems that Fibich’s research slips between “pros and cons”. Evaluations of Fibich often emerge rather like reactions on O. Hostinský, A. Schulzová, Z. Nejedlý, V. Helfert etc. than on Fibich’s music. Many authors often refer to the ideas of others and not to a concrete Fibich’s letter, for instance. To sum up Fibich’s research I can quote a note by Vladimír Hudec about the work *Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences*: “Under the shield of polemics has been lost their own substance.”¹⁹² How inspiratively impresses foreign reflections of Fibich’s music, reflections trying to take all the polemics off. For example, John Tyrrell – as Nejedlý – wrote up all Fibich’s “firsts”, but his attitude is contradictory to Nejedlý, he rather tried to convince a reader that Fibich’s music is really remarkable: “This is not to deny Fibich’s very real qualities as a composer.”¹⁹³ The case of Fibich shows clearly how clever a comment was by Josef Pekař about a ‘sense of the Czech history’: “[...] an intentional education by history plays remarkable role in our history, an usage of history for certain cultural-political or national

¹⁸² Lošťák, L.: Chromatic Thunderclap [Chromatické hromobití], Vol. 2, Prague (probably 1903), p. 76.

¹⁸³ Hoffmeister, K.: Zdeněk Fibich: Painter’s Studies [Zdeněk Fibich: Malířské studie], in: Dalibor, 1902, Vol. 24, N. 21, p. 171.

¹⁸⁴ Boleška, J.: About Zdeněk Fibich [O Zdeňku Fibichovi], in: Dalibor, Vol. 25, N. 40–41, p. 303.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 289.

¹⁸⁶ Zenklová, M.: An Unknown Shape of Hippodamia by Jaroslav Vrchlický [Neznámá podoba Hippodamie Jaroslava Vrchlického], in: Umění – Ars 1, Ostrava 1993, p. 70–80.

¹⁸⁷ The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Macmillian Publishers, London, Washington 1980.

¹⁸⁸ Jiráček, K. B.: Zdeněk Fibich, Prague 1947, p. 32.

¹⁸⁹ Burghauser, J.: Not Just Monuments [Nejen pomníky], Prague 1966, p. 82.

¹⁹⁰ Trojan, J.: A Brief History of Opera from a view of Dramaturgy I [Stručné dějiny opery z dramaturgického hlediska I], Prague 1985, p. 178.

¹⁹¹ Pazdírkův hudební slovník, 2nd part, Vol. 1, A–K, Brno 1937.

¹⁹² Hudec, V.: Zdeněk Fibich, Acta Universitatis Palackianae Olomucensis, Prague 1971, p. 143.

¹⁹³ The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (Stanley Sadie – editor), London, Washington 1980.

purpose. [...] But there was also intentional usage of history, where the purpose, always bearing by cultural-national aim, had the upper hand in care if its reasoning from a history can be compared with reality or nothing: it was, is and will be fake, a campaigning producing of historical 'sense'."¹⁹⁴

III. What should we be afraid of?

It is hard based on Fibich's literature to experience Fibich's music, but musicologists can change their point of view and stop asking for what to do for Fibich and try to answer the questions: Why is Fibich interesting for us, what is still noticeable from his life and work? Thanks to 100 years lasting Fibich's research it is not very difficult to distinguish between domains where Fibich left a marked "footstep" and where he "found" himself. Fibich revealed his individuality through natural inspirations (especially poetry of wood – see *Šárka*, or springtime – see *Springtime tale*) and balladic themes (see a symphonic poem *Toman and the Wood Nymph*, majority of his concert melodramas). It is clear that Fibich is, above all and from all authors points of view (not considering their particular evaluations of certain compositions), a composer of operas, melodramas and piano work *Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences*. We should not forget Fibich's musicological interests. Fibich can be regarded in addition to Hostinský and Nejedlý as a founder of Czech musicology, at least as Nejedlý's teacher. Successful pedagogical activity is not only proved by personality of Nejedlý, but also by composers and outstanding conductors of the National Theatre Karel Kovařovic and Otakar Ostrčil.

From the short overlook of Fibich's research ensues that Fibich was not such an innovator as Nejedlý wished to have. It is true that among Fibich's compositions we can find many which are easy to interpolate to certain context or compare to another works (for example: a symphonic poem *Záboj, Slavoj and Luděk* and Smetana's *Vyšehrad* or *Hippodamia* and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*), but Fibich does not appear as a prophet of future development of Czech or even European music. There are rather symptoms of "general" streams of development than its prophetic core. Fibich did not have the strength of world-famous personalities, who influenced fundamentally future development. We can not simply deny that it was Hostinský and not Fibich who supported the attitude of *The Bride of Messina* etc. Fibich's work tends to be overestimated but its reception or public acceptance does not accord with it. Rightfully Fibich's music is connected with impressionism, neo-classicism¹⁹⁵ and it is right to emphasize Fibich's art of abbreviation and miniature and to speak ways to the 20th century music.¹⁹⁶ But we can not from these features straight-linedly derive conclusions about artistic or historical value. Divergences between what we read about Fibich and what we hear when we listen to Fibich's music

¹⁹⁴ Pekař, J.: On a Sense of Czech History [O smyslu českých dějin], Rozmluvy, Prague 1990, p. 400.

¹⁹⁵ Hudec, V.: Zdeněk Fibich, Prague 1971, Acta Universitatis Palackianae Olomucensis, p. 39.

¹⁹⁶ Reittererová, V.: Zdeněk Fibich, in: Harmonie, 2000, N. 5, p. 22–23.

can cause feelings of disappointment, can evoke certain aloofness and caution. Indeed we should not be afraid of Fibich's music but should of the interpretations of this music, because interpretation of novelty leads often to an uncritical adoration, to searching for connections which were not (and are not) in fact so strong, it leads to a foresight of future. Doctrine of novelty changes discussion into quarrel, it creates a system of ideas which does not admit any invasion of another view. A fear of novelty is on the side of artist a natural phenomenon, but we realize insufficiently the possibility of misuse of this novelty in its verbal interpretation. Fear of these interpretations ensues at least from the fact that they can hide totally different (even malicious) intent (see Z. Nejedlý's ideas directed against Dvořák, see also Fibich's jubilee in 2000 and heightened amount of studies and articles by J. Jiránek to promote an interest with the public).

Zusammenfassung

Die Studie beschäftigt sich mit den Reflexionen des Lebens und Werkes von Zdeněk Fibich (1850–1900). Bewusste Interpretationen Z. Fibichs als Nachfolger Bedřich Smetanas wurde in den Intentionen der „rechten“ Entwicklungslinie der tschechischen Musik geführt, Fibich wurde absichtlich gegen Antonín Dvořák gestellt. Manche Fragen sind aus verschiedensten Gründen ohne Antwort geblieben (vor allem Beziehung Z. Fibich – Anežka Schulzová). Alle diese Standpunkte zeigte sich als unproduktiv und Literatur über Z. Fibich erfordert unbedingt sehr kritische Lesung. Es gilt vorwiegend über Autoren Otakar Hostinský, A. Schulzová und Zdeněk Nejedlý. Ihre Irrtümer als auch zu zeitgemässe Meinungen haben teilweise Jaroslav Jiránek und Vladimír Hudec überwunden. Die Schöpfung von Z. Fibich wartet stets auf objektiver und gesamter Verarbeitung.

Resumé

Studie se zabývá reflexemi života a díla Zdeňka Fibicha (1850–1900). Vědomá interpretace Fibicha jako nástupce Bedřicha Smetany byla vedena v intencích „správné“ vývojové linie české hudby, záměrně byl Fibich postaven proti Antonínu Dvořákovi. Některé otázky zůstávaly z nejrůznějších důvodů nezodpovězeny (především vztah Z. Fibich – Anežka Schulzová). Všechny tyto přístupy se ukázaly jako neproduktivní a literatura o Z. Fibichovi vyžaduje bezpodmínečně velmi kritické čtení. Platí to hlavně o autorech Otakaru Hostinském, A. Schulzové a Zdeňku Nejedlém. Jejich omyly i příliš dobové názory částečně překonali Jaroslav Jiránek a Vladimír Hudec. Tvorba Z. Fibicha stále čeká na relativně objektivní a celkové pochopení.