From Melodrama to Opera via Music Drama and Historical Reprises

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Progressiveness and historical awareness

Despite Otakar Hostinský's strong positivistic stance, his influential aesthetic thought yielded to the Romantic cult of genius. Hostinský was interested in pivotal figures in music history "who were pioneers rather than achievers [...] Gluck, late Beethoven, Hector Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner. The aesthetic gravitas of the entire current of previous musical evolution was directed toward the musical drama." Hostinský singled out Zdeněk Fibich as a worthy representative of this line: "And it is certain that, in the future, whenever composers are named in a list of great masters of the last three centuries who belong to the principal stage of development, among them will be the name of the Czech creator of modern scenic melodrama, Zdeněk Fibich."

The nineteenth-century well-educated man would have been acquainted with the historian's ideal of inevitable progress; nevertheless, evolution continued with reprises, by re-discovering what had already been discovered. Fibich collaborated with Hostinský in organizing historical concerts (1880, 1882) and planned to compile a historical anthology of music (1891). Prague's National Theatre (hereafter Národní divadlo) "discovered" antiquity in 1889; Fibich was discussing themes of antiquity with his older colleague Antonín Dvořák in the late 1880s when operas by Christoph Willibald Gluck were being performed. The end of the nineteenth century was literally crammed with anniversary

Jaroslav Střítecký, "Otakar Hostinský a formální estetika" [Otakar Hostinský and Formal Aesthetics], in: Rudolf Pečman (ed.), *Pocta Otakaru Hostinskému* [In Honor of Otakar Hostinský] (Brno 1982), p. 83-88.

Karel Hoffmeister, "Vzpomínky" [Memories], *Hudební výchova* [Music Education] (February 1936), No. 2-3, p. 19-23; here p. 20.

Otakar Hostinský, "Slovo o významu mistra Zdeňka Fibicha" [A Word about the Craftsman Zdeněk Fibich's Significance], *Dalibor*, 23 (1901), No. 1, p. 1-2; No. 2, p. 9-10; here p. 10.

See Jiří Kopecký (ed.), Zdeněk Fibich. Stopy života a díla [Zdeněk Fibich: Footprints of His Life and Work] (Olomouc, 2009), p. 86.

celebrations. Dvořák's opera *Jakobín* cannot be separated from references to the great French Revolution (1789) whose centenary was observed in 1889. Composers returning to the operatic repertory in strength in the centenaries of their birth included Gioacchino Rossini (1892), Gaetano Donizetti (1897), and Vincenzo Bellini (1901). Operatic connoisseurship in the 1890s was not complete without mentioning the appeal of verismo—as well as the ever-topical Giocomo Meyerbeer, whose hundredth birthday celebration in Prague in 1891 began with gala performances in the Neues Deutsches Theater.⁵ A Mozart cycle reigned in the Národní divadlo during the Mozart jubilee year in 1891; the centenary of the premiere of his *Don Giovanni* had already been observed in 1887. Zdeněk Fibich was definitely interested in the repertory and scores available in his own time, and it is not very surprising that strikingly extensive, valuable stylistic traits from a variety of sources emerged in his compositions.

The failure of opera and success of melodrama

While Fibich and his librettist Hostinský had not expected that Nevěsta messinská [The Bride of Messina would be enthusiastically received (1884), it was met with a unanimous public ridicule that devastated Fibich. The cause for failure must not have been faulty operatic dramaturgy,6 for the work was modelled on Czech declamation. Hostinský and Fibich had underestimated the consequences of that decision. According to many scholars, the performance would have offered no more than, and probably less than, opera usually offered spectators in the nineteenth century. There was no opportunity for grand opera staging effects; the audience could not carry away expressive vocal melodies—only the majestic effect of the purely instrumental funeral march in Act 3. The desolation of antique tragedy was portrayed in dark colors. The title role is written for alto, and Fibich wrote the music of Don Manuel's retinue for low basses, complementing them with the tenors and altos of the retinue of Don Manuel's brother, Don Cesar. The critics were frightened by Wagnerian and non-Czech aspects of the music; the opera public ridiculed it by changing the title from *Die Braut von Messina* to *Messinge Braut* (a brass bride, therefore cold—and the opera as well). Fibich was caricatured as a naïve artist who had been duped by a devious aesthetician. Dvořák did not stay in the background: "Dvořák asked various people to name random notes, and wrote them down so that he could make a witticism about Nevěsta messinská: 'From these notes, one could create Tristan!'"7

Marta Ottlová, "Giacomo Meyerbeer v Praze v 19. stoleti" [Giacomo Meyerbeer in Prague in the 19th Century], in: Helena Spurná (ed.), *Hudební divadlo jako výzva* [Music Theatre as a Challenge] (Prague, 2004), p. 133–160.

Marta Ottlová and Milan Pospíšil, "Hostinskýs und Fibichs Braut von Messina: Tschechischer Wagnerianismus" [Hostinský's and Fibich's The Bride of Messina: a Czech Wagnerianism], in: Helen Geyer, Wolfgang Osthoff, Astrid Stäber (eds.), Schiller und die Musik [Schiller and Music] (Cologne 2007), p. 113-122.

Jiří Kopecký (ed.), Zdeněk Fibich. Stopy života a díla (Olomouc, 2009), p. 84.

Although Fibich did not understand how to manage Czech opera in the 1880s, he did find assurance as a composer in melodrama. In Hakon, the last of his six concert melodramas, he was able to create independent abstractions of musical forms-for example, sonata form—that were closely related to the poetic text. Interpreters, listeners, and critics became fond of these unusual music genres. The 1892 production of Námluvy Pelopovy [The Courtship of Pelops] in the international musical and theatrical exhibition in Vienna established Fibich as one of the foremost modern composers. For once, the critics in Prague were in agreement. One of the reviews of the first performance of Smrt Hippodamie [Hippodamia's Death] (8 November 1891) praised the magnificient adaptation of the text for the stage, the love scene with Airopa and Atreus, the beginning of the Olympic games, and commented: "events follow one another in a colorful, beautiful mixture. Each part of this melodic progression has its own quality within the festive parade [...] It all creates a picture of sovereign musical splendors; as regards the orchestration, Fibich here rises to the sublime, stately level of his previous work, the corresponding scenes of glory in Námluvy Pelopovy."8 The tendency to esteem Hippodamia highly apparently persists to this day-along with the highly praised art of musical cuts, of course. However, an appreciation of Fibich's excellent ability to judiciously implement the spoken word and monumental concepts in an experimental genre waned when it was realized that he had actually reverted to the traditional operatic form of recitative and aria. For example, Fibich resolved scene 5 in act 3 of Smír Tantalův [The Atonement of Tantalus] as a sort of recitative between Pelops and Hippodama (the recitativ accompagnato from Hippodamia's allusion "Nu, stěžoval si trpce Tantalus?" [Well, does Tantalus complain bitterly?] which is followed by Hippodamia's passionate, aria-like exclamation "O víckrát neodhalím svoje nitro" [Oh, how many times have I not laid my heart bare]). In that respect, Hippodamia resembles a number opera more than Nevěsta messinská does.

At the outset of the 1890s, Fibich not only brought these proven approaches to the new operatic projects for which he felt sufficiently mature, but also continued to deepen them with reminiscences and allusions to earlier developmental phases of opera. The reviews for *Bouře* [The Tempest] did not mention Fibich's exquisite stylistic games, but did proclaim the opera to be an unqualified success. Václav Juda Novotný commended Fibich's magical orchestration: "These are sounds which so far have not been heard in the orchestra." And perhaps he also complimented Fibich: "When we search in the German literature, what remains so massive along with Goldmark after Wagner's monumental era, such long creative gaps?" Ten years after demolishing *Nevěsta messinská*, Karel Knittl acknowledged that in *Bouře* "The vocal lines of Fernando and Miranda are satisfying from every point of view, even to a pandering to the taste of Italian cuisine." "

⁸ [František Karel Hejda] (cipher Hda), "Smrt Hippodamie", Dalibor, 13 (1891), Nos. 43-44, p. 338-343; here p. 339.

⁹ [Václav Juda Novotný] (cipher N.), "Bouře", *Hlas národa* [The Voice of the Nation] (1895), No. 62.

¹⁰ Karel Knittl, "Bouře", *Dalibor*, 17 (1895), No. 13, p. 95.

The motives that led Vrchlický and Fibich to set William Shakespeare's *Tempest* remain unclear. Otakar Hostinský called it "a daring leap from a shapely myth to a fantastic cock-and-bull story". Considering that the celebrations of Friedrich Schiller's centenary that were held in Bohemia as well as Germany in 1859, and that the Shakespeare festivities in 1864 demonstrated the viability of Czech art, *Bouře* may well have enabled its authors to succeed in reaching the Czech public. The choice of theme may be indirectly deduced from the memoirs of J. B. Foerster. The intimate ties of the principal characters with certain persons—Fibich / Fernando and Schulzová / Miranda—derive from one of Vrchlický's favorite pastimes: "He carried on various pranks accompanied by witticisms and, at times, audacious observations. The pliant instrument of his poet's magic wand displayed all sorts of metamorphoses and surprising turns. The long-haired master, wrapped in a broad, colorful robe, wearing a tall magician's hat decorated with sacred runes, would appear from a covered table as Prospero."

Fibich had already been asking Vrchlický for alterations to the text when working on *Hippodamia*. But for *Bouře*, Vrchlický had to directly "hit the target" of precomposed music with his verses. And when a Central European composer dictates scenes with verses and music according to his talent to produce *tableaux vivants*, he reveals that he has had experience with operas from the south. Although Prague was built as a city with both Romanesque and German traits,¹⁴ its somewhat Czech identity enabled it to claim to be the western operatic metropolis of the Slavonic world.¹⁵

A neglected aspect of *Bouře* in the Fibich literature is its acknowledgement of the eighteenth century. Fibich did not seek to restore a classic or early Romantic style, but to reconstruct "another nature" in the sense of "another diatonicism" in *Die Meistersinger*, the Wagner opera that most nearly approaches high art.¹⁶ Mozart also considered setting

Otakar Hostinský, *Vzpomínky na Fibicha* [Reminiscences about Fibich] (Prague, 1909), p. 169.

Fibich may have been viewed as Smetana's successor at the time. Fibich's *Bouře* begins with a ship-wreck that may have been thought to refer to Smetana's unfinished comic opera *Viola*. Attention has been called to the so-called "Czechness" of Shakespeare's *Tempest* by articles that designated Emperor Rudolf II as Shakespeare's model for Prospero (see Jaroslav Pihert, "Nové nastudování Fibichovy *Bouře* (19. December 1912)" [A New Production of Fibich's The Tempest, 19 December 1912], *Hudební revue* [Music Review] (6 January 1913), No. 4, p. 205–208).

Josef Bohuslav Foerster, *Poutník* [A Pilgrim] (Prague, 1942), p. 382.

Edgar Istel deduced "das Kriterium einer wahrhaft universalen Opernkunst" from the contemporary realities of these two currents (Edgar Istel, *Die moderne Oper vom Tode Wagners bis zum Gegenwart | 1883–1923*/ [Modern Opera from Wagner's Death to the Present | 1883–1923/] | Leipzig, 1923/, p. 73).

The success of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and the subsequent guest appearances of the chorus of the Národní divadlo in Vienna in 1892 ("der Sieg von Wien") had "eine Schlüsselbedeutung für die Rezeption russischer Opern in Westeuropa" (Phillip Ther, *In der Mitte der Gesellschaft. Operntheater in Zentraleuropa 1815–1914* [In the Middle of Society. Opera Theatre in Central Europe 1815–1914] (Vienna, 2006/, p. 392).

For Wagner, it was not a matter of renovating the modal system or strict rules of counterpoint, but of reconstructing an artistic characterization corresponding freely to his subject. See Carl Dahlhaus,

Shakespeare's *Tempest*. ¹⁷ Fibich's setting may have been deliberately intended to pay homage to *Die Zauberflöte* in support of the Mozart cult in Prague: Caliban / Monostatos threatens Miranda / Pamina; Caliban / Papageno longs for children; Prospero / Sarastro subjects Fernando / Tamino to trials; spirit / genius crowns victorious virtue. While Anežka Schulzová was nurturing Fibich's depictions in *Bouře*, she documented two influences: Gluck's opera *Ifigenie na Tauridě* [Iphigénie en Tauride] and Beethoven's *Symphony no.* 6. ¹⁸ The imitation of bells in Ariel's ballad may have been aided by madrigal-style traces; Fernando's solo entrance ("dieses dreitheilige, abgeschlossene Arioso") has a form resembling that of the da capo aria, and Prospero's farewell to the island alludes to the early roots of operatic history: "Dieser ergreifende Abschiedsgesang ist durch ein schönes Ritornell der Hörner, Trompeten und Posaunen feierlich eingeleitet." The sequential pattern that consolidates Caliban's attempt to murder Prospero (example 1) may evoke an almost forgotten tradition of Mozart's contemporaries: "Diese Scene ist archaistisch, mit einem pikanten Stich in den Stil der alten italienischen Opera-Buffa des vorigen Jahrhunderts, etva in der Weise eines Paësiello oder Cimarosa." ¹⁹

Nineteenth-Century Music (trans. J. Bradford Robinson, Los Angeles, 1989), p. 205. The Národní divadlo presented Wagner's only comedy for the stage in 1894. Fibich's Prospero and Caliban can be said to lie on a conceptual line that connects Wagner's Hans Sachs to Strauss's Baron Ochs.

Gary Schmidgall, *Shakespeare and Opera* (Oxford, 1990), p. 284–285.

¹⁸ Carl Ludwig Richter, Zdenko Fibich. Eine musikalische Silhouette [Zdenko Fibich. A Musical Silhouette] (Prague, 1900), p. 144-145.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156, 170, 169.



Fibich's glances at eighteenth-century music enabled him to incorporate song forms, periods, and two-bar symmetrical structures into throughcomposed scenes. Fibich could then remain Wagnerian in Schulzová's eyes while emancipating "das musikalische Element", and still comply with E. Hanslick's cogently designated premise "eine musikalische Musik".²⁰

Jaroslav Vrchlický considered further collaboration with Fibich, but his next Shakespearean libretto, Jessika, was taken up by J. B. Foerster. The pivotal interest of Fibich's life was now Anežka Schulzová. Hedy, the first opera that they created together, was based on their similar approaches to expressivity. The subjects of Fibich's operas resemble those of Wagner (Bouře | Die Meistersinger, Hedy | Tristan und Isolde, Šárka | Die Walküre, Pád Arkuna | Götterdämmerung). Nevertheless, when Fibich derived the plot of Hedy from Lord Byron's tale about the meeting of Don Juan with the pirate's daughter, he was also turning in the direction of Mozartian opera. The wedding of Hedy and Juan is accompanied by a simply constructed suite in Baroque style; the great operatic ballet is a pendant to a massive ensemble in Act 3. Schulzová tells us that this double choir with eight voices "ist hier auch dramatisch gerechtfertigt, die Situation ist dieselbe, wie bei dem H-dur Ensemble im Tannhäuser". 21 Lambro's four-bar phrase in this ensemble may be a recollection of the era in which classic Italian opera flourished. Fibich paid homage to Mozart with two reminiscences from the overture to Don Giovanni. But transient borrowings from Mozart's work and the overblown concertante finale did not provide a satisfying solution for the ear and eye of the opera spectator. Giocamo Puccini found a more suitable approach when composing La Bohème by devising a method of using wellknown quotations from Mozart. The reviewer Jaromír Borecký wrote without hesitation after *Hedy*'s premiere: "[...] an entire theatrical mass of unrestrained freedom, moving scenes, dazzling ballet, a magnificent ensemble. And the result: one of the most theatrical works that we are aware of in Czech opera. Its artistic value, of course, lies elsewhere."22 When the Národní divadlo produced this opera again in 1905, it was clearly asserted that "the organization of the large ballet and the impact of the ensemble will be an effective concession to the taste of the public at large".²³

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Ibid., p. 197. Like Richard Strauss when Hugo von Hofmannstal asked for an ensemble commenting on the plot for Rosenkavalier, Fibich was aware of the moment in which "eine dramatische Bombe" might be expected, and rightly here there is a place for an overwhelming "Ruhepunkt". Strauss provided examples from ensembles in Lohengrin and Die Meistersinger (letter, 16 May 1909); see Carl Dahlhaus, Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper [From Music Drama to Opera Based on Literature] (Munich-Salzburg, 1983), p. 33.

²² Jaromír Borecký, "Hedy", *Národní listy* [The National Gazette], 36 (1896), No. 44, p. 5.

²³ *Dalibor*, 27 (1905), Nos. 47-48, p. 374.

Czech opera after Bedřich Smetana

Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček and Zdeněk Fibich were only able to compose successful operas long after Bedřich Smetana. The leap from *Nevěsta messinská*, in which Fibich maintained the rules of declamation with painstaking precision at the expense of the musical effect, to Šárka (1897), in which he indulged in melodic lines while preserving correct accents and syllabic lengths, led through *Hippodamia* and *Bouře* (compare example 2 from *Nevěsta messinská* /a sketch and the final version/ with example 3 from Šárka /the first version below/). While Otakar Hostinský was upholding his beliefs and denigrating Schulzová for being too ambitious, and while Schulzová was vehemently promoting Fibich's work and ridiculing Hostinský's pretentiousness in her play *Nesmrtelnost* [*Immortality*] with the character of the egotist Trubka [Mr Tube], Zdeněk Fibich had to find his own path to opera. He apparently found it in his library among the scores of Mozart and his contemporaries. And after an intensive study of Wagner's works, Fibich returned to the bel canto style of the first half of the nineteenth century.







Example 3

Translated by Judith Fiehler

Vom Melodrama zur Oper, über das Musikdrama zur historischen Rückkehr

Zusammenfassung

Die traditionelle Periodisierung des Schaffens von Zdeněk Fibich ordnet seine Oper Die Braut von Messina (uraufgeführt 1884) und die Trilogie szenischer Melodramen Hippodamia (vollendet 1891) in einen gemeinsamen "künstlichen" Zeitraum ein, wobei der zeitliche Abstand von der Komposition der Braut von Messina und der Hippodamia und andererseits die unmittelbare Nähe der Trilogie zur Oper Der Sturm (Beginn der Komposition 1893) andeutet, dass eben die Wende der 80er und 90er Jahre für Fibich eine Rückkehr zum Theater bedeutete. Mit den beiden erfolgreichen Werken steht darüber hinaus im Privatleben Fibichs auf der einen Seite eine Abkühlung seiner Beziehung zu Otakar Hostinský, auf der anderen Seite seine neue, tiefe Freundschaft mit Jaroslav Vrchlický, dem Textautor der Hippodamia und Librettisten von Der Sturm in Verbindung. Dank *Hippodamia* hatte Fibich genug inspirierenden Impulse erhalten, die er in einer Opernkomposition verwerten konnte. Wenn auch einige Autoren Hippodamia als eine Zu-Ende-Führung, ja als konsequente Erweiterung von Wagners musikdramatischer Konzeption ansehen, so kann man das szenische Melodrama im Gegensatz dazu als eine Rückkehr zu den älteren Operntraditionen (dramma per musica) verstehen. Der Sturm und Hedy (uraufgeführt 1896) evozieren trotz unleugbarer Beziehungen zu den Meistersingern von Nürnberg und Tristan und Isolde die Situation in der Oper um das Jahr 1800.

Übersetzt von Vlasta Reittererová

Od melodramu k opeře, přes hudební drama k historickým návratům

Shrnutí

Tradiční periodizace tvorby Zdeňka Fibicha vřazují *Nevěstu messinskou* (premiéra 1884) a trilogii scénických melodramů *Hippodamii* (dokončena 1891) do jednoho "artistního" období, přitom značná časová vzdálenost *Nevěsty messinské* od *Hippodamie* a naopak bezprostřední blízkost opery *Bouře* (začátek komponování 1893) naznačují, že přelom osmdesátých a devadesátých let znamenal pro Fibicha návrat k divadlu. K oběma úspěšným dílům se navíc v osobním životě váže ochladnutí vztahu Z. Fibicha k Otakaru Hostinskému a na druhé straně navázání hlubokého přátelství s Jaroslavem Vrchlickým, autorem *Hippodamie* i libretistou *Bouře*. Fibich díky *Hippodamii* získal dostatek inspirujících podnětů, které dokázal zhodnotit v operní kompozici. A opět – pokud se *Hippodamie* některým autorům jeví jako dotažení Wagnerových teorií za samotného Wagnera, můžeme uplatnit opačný přístup a nahlížet scénický melodram jako návrat ke starším tradicím

opery (dramma per musica). *Bouře* i *Hedy* (premiéra 1896) přes neodbytná srovnávání s *Mistry pěvci norimberskými* a *Tristanem a Isoldou* evokují situaci opery kolem roku 1800.

Keywords

Zdeněk Fibich's operas; scenic melodrama; wagnerianism; Czech 19th century music.