

Securing a Place in History: The Promotion of Fibich's Melodramas

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One of the most frequently consulted American language dictionaries, in publication since 1828, defines melodrama as “a work characterized by extravagant theatricality and by the predominance of plot and physical action over characterization.”¹ Closer inspection of the entry reveals the etymology of the term to be the “modification of French *mélodrama*”, with an origination date of 1802. The definition is therefore more appropriate to the French style of the genre popular in the nineteenth century than to the Czech version. When music was used in French melodrama, it was mainly to underscore a dramatic moment in the play, rather than to serve as an integral and indispensable part of the complete work. A multivolume dictionary of the Czech language, published by Academia in 1989, adds a further layer of meaning to the term: “a musical composition accompanying a declaimed (or recited) poetic work, often dramatic.”² These definitions are neither in full agreement nor mutually exclusive.

The Czech melodrama is, in fact, a declaimed text with a musical accompaniment, where the music is either alternating or occurring simultaneously with the spoken word. This category of melodrama may privilege plot over character, particularly in smaller-scale works, where the length itself prevents character development to any degree, and it may contain dramatic moments that are, in fact, exaggerated for effect, as in the conclusion of Fibich's *Vodník* [The Watergoblin] and the last scene of Benda's *Medea*. In the final analysis, it is, to a large degree, this exaggeration factor that has helped insure the survival of the more generalized form of the genre to the point where it reinvented itself as film music.

¹ “melodrama”, in: *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2010. Merriam-Webster Online. 14 August 2010 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/melodrama>. This dictionary was originally by Noah Webster and titled *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. In 1843, following Webster's death, George and Charles Merriam procured the publishing and revision rights to the 1840 edition of the dictionary.

² “melodram”, in: Bohuslav Havránek (ed.), *Slovník spisovného jazyka českého* [Dictionary of the Czech Literary Language], Vol. 3 (Prague, 1989), p. 55.

Melodrama has always drawn particular attention to moments of high theatricality. Jiří Benda, the all-but-creator of the staged version of the genre,³ confirms this by limiting the occasions when text and music occur simultaneously to the moments of the highest dramatic intensity, as when Ariadne becomes a victim of the sea in the midst of a raging storm, or when Medea, at the height of her fury against Jason, calls on the powers of the underworld to come to her aid. Opera composers have also used melodrama to emphasize certain intensely dramatic moments within the larger sung work, as with Weber in the “Wolf’s Glen Scene” of *Der Freischütz* or Beethoven with the grave-digging scene from *Fidelio*.

Yet the drama that determined the course of the melodramatic impulse in Benda’s works was not limited to the stage. Medea was jealous not only of Creusa, Jason’s new wife, as called for in the myth, but also of Ariadne, or rather the actress who portrayed her. When Charlotte Brandes created the role of Ariadne so successfully in the premiere of Benda’s melodrama, her rival in the theatre troupe, Sophie Seyler, insisted that a similar work be written for her.⁴ Benda’s setting of the even more highly dramatic story of Medea was the result. Such were the origins of the first successful staged melodramas, born of the declamatory talents of two eighteenth-century actresses and fueled by the power of professional jealousy.

Given the theatrical demands of the genre, it should come as no surprise that a strong interest in performing melodrama was generated among actors and actresses of Prague’s Provisional Theatre in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when Zdeněk Fibich presented a new staging of Benda’s *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Medea* on the hundredth anniversary of their creation. For the 22 December 1875 performances, Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá and Jakub Seifert assumed the roles of Ariadne and Theseus respectively, with Julie Šamberková as Medea and Josef Bittner as Jason.

Less predictable perhaps were the venues in which the concert version of melodrama was introduced to the public, and consequently where the revived genre gained its initial popularity. A perusal of periodicals from the 1870s that include among their pages reports on what was being performed on various programs in Bohemia and Moravia, reveals that the recitation of poetry by professional actors and actresses was a popular alternative to a concert consisting only of vocal and instrumental selections. A more careful examination of these sources yields the names of several performers from Prague’s Provisional Theatre, and the subsequent National Theatre, including those who were also featured in

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau premiered his *Pygmalion*, the first example of the true melodrama, in Lyons in 1770, with the majority of the music written by Horace Coignet. Although Rousseau’s experiment with combining spoken text and music was not in itself especially popular, the idea was imitated numerous times by German composers of the 1770s. The earliest truly successful attempts are found in Benda’s *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Medea*.

⁴ Charlotte Brandes, highly regarded as a dramatic actress, was the wife of actor/playwright Johann Christian Brandes. Both were members of Abel Seyler’s theatre troupe. Sophie Seyler had enjoyed a very successful acting career in Germany and Austria before joining Seyler’s troupe in 1769 and was particularly well known for her tragic roles. She and Abel became lovers and were married in 1772.

Fibich's revival of Benda's works in 1875, specifically Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá and Jakub Seifert. The supporters of these performances also reveal a popular trend, one whose goal was no doubt tied to the increased interest in the revitalization of the Czech language in a society where German had long been dominant. All of these manifestations warrant further scrutiny in the search to explain the popularity of melodrama in the Czech lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As early as the 1860s, various Czech organizations and literary movements were attempting to expand their cultural offerings by presenting works of both foreign and native authors. Czech artists were encouraged by these efforts to create works that utilized national folklore, dances, and history as subject matter and that were, by design rather than coincidence, delivered in the Czech language. As part of the larger-scale movement to lend authenticity to a region seeking autonomy from the Austro-Hungarian Empire at mid-century, writers and composers in particular drew heavily upon history and folk tradition for their subjects. Where native sources did not exist, they were created, as was the case with *Kytice z pověstí národních* [A Bouquet of National Tales], the selection of fables and legends created by Karel Jaromír Erben, published in 1853. Grounded in folk material with which Erben was familiar through his avid pursuits as a collector and researcher, this volume became a popular resource for composers of vocal music, as well as for performers who were in search of literary works to declaim on the afore-mentioned types of programs, which also included instrumental and sung vocal works. A particularly noteworthy example is found in the activities of actress Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá, who recited Erben's *Štědrý den* [Christmas Day] in 1873 for the women's music society *Cecilie* in Berouň, two years before she premiered Fibich's concert melodrama setting of this text in the Vinohrady area of Prague for the Society Eliščín.

The most popular occasion for the recitation of concert melodrama, whether the works were by Fibich or his contemporaries, was on programs supported by the numerous amateur musical societies springing up in the nineteenth century. Sokol units also appear frequently in periodicals of the time as sponsors of melodrama performance. In addition, benefit concerts for various charitable causes, celebratory occasions, or landmark events provided outlets for the declamation of these works. An examination of where the premieres of Fibich's concert melodramas took place and who performed them provides evidence for these venues. In addition to her premiere of the piano version of *Štědrý den* in Vinohrady, Sklenářová-Malá also debuted Fibich's *Pomsta květin* and *Věčnost* in 1881 at a concert held on Žofín Island in Prague to honor renowned university professor and logician Bernard Bolzano (1781–1848), the leader of the Catholic Enlightenment, which had been an important force in the era of the National Revival.⁵ The same location witnessed the February 1883 premiere of the orchestral version of *Vodník*, when Sklenářová-Malá joined conductor Adolf Čech and the Provisional Theatre orchestra. Exactly one month later on 11 March 1883, for a program hosted by Prague's Měšťanská beseda, Fibich

⁵ Bolzano was a man of liberal beliefs, urging educational and economic reforms that, instead of conflict, would result in peaceful relations with other nations. He regarded military action as social wastefulness.

provided the accompaniment from the piano for Sklenářová-Malá's recitation of the same work. In 1899, the actress introduced the orchestral version of *Štědrý den* as part of the fourth concert of the Czech Philharmonic season, with Fibich himself conducting. In 1926, conductor Václav Talich took up the banner of popularizing the concert melodrama when the Czech Philharmonic included Fibich's *Štědrý den* in its program at the Smetana Hall in Prague with National Theatre actor Bedřich Karen delivering Erben's poetry.

All that remains unaccounted for in the list of Fibich's concert melodramas are *Královna Ema* (1883) and *Hakon* (1888). The first performance of *Královna Ema* seems to have taken place in Plzeň in December 1883, shortly after the work was published in a musical supplement to the periodical *Humoristické listy*.⁶ Unfortunately, information is lacking regarding the names of those performing. Several years later, however, in 1889, none other than National Theatre actor Jakub Seifert performed the work in Jičín at a concert sponsored by the local literary society. One year previously, on 4 March 1888, Seifert had premiered Fibich's *Hakon* in Prague's Rudolfinum with Fibich again at the piano. A week later on 11 March, Josef Šmaha, also a well-known actor from the National Theatre, introduced Fibich's orchestral version of this work with Adolf Čech conducting the theatre's orchestra. It is interesting to note that Sklenářová-Malá had performed, or more specifically, had recited, Vrchlický's poem that would supply the text for Fibich's *Hakon*, in September 1886 for a program sponsored by the Society Jubilejní in Žebrak. This program also included Sklenářová-Malá performing Fibich's *Štědrý den*.

Subsequent performances of Fibich's concert melodramas continued to feature Sklenářová-Malá and Seifert, along with other actors and actresses from the National Theatre. Sklenářová-Malá appeared most frequently on programs in Prague, but she also performed Fibich's melodramas in the towns of Pardubice, Sušice, and Karlín. Fibich's works were not the only ones that were graced with her delivery, however. She is also known to have performed Ludvík Čelanský's *Země* and J. B. Foerster's *Faustulus*, both with texts by Vrchlický.⁷

A similar record of concert melodrama performance accompanies Jakub Seifert, not only with additional recitations of *Hakon*, which he premiered and to whom the work was dedicated, but also with the orchestral version of *Vodník* for both the Umělecká beseda and the National Theatre in Prague. In addition, Seifert was the reciter for Angel Bukurešťliev's *Benkovski*, performed in 1890 at the Měšťanská beseda hall.⁸

Thus, the practice in which actors and actresses from the Provisional, and subsequently the National Theatre, appeared on programs in which first poetry, and then Fibich's settings of it, were featured is well represented by these two performers. Furthermore, it

⁶ Zdeněk Fibich, "Královna Ema", *Humoristické listy hudební přílohy* [musical supplement] 25 (1883), No. 8, p. 1-4.

⁷ Sklenářová-Malá performed Ludvík Čelanský's *Země* in September 1894 at Prague's National Theatre with the theatre orchestra and J. B. Foerster's *Faustulus* with piano in March 1897 at the hall on Žofín Island in Prague.

⁸ The concert was sponsored by the Bulharská Sedjanka in honor of the Bulgarian educator and collector of Bulgarian folk songs Vasilij Aprilov (1789-1847).

was only the beginning of a vibrant trend. Additional investigation of performance records reveals numerous names from the Theatre's roster. Fibich's *Štědrý den* was presented by actress Ludmila Vlčová, who, incidentally, was a student of Sklenářová-Malá, as well as by Růžena Nosková, Jarmila Kronbauerová, and actors Rudolf Deyl, Vojta Novák, and Bedřich Karen. Delivering Fibich's *Věčnost* were Eduard Vojan, Josef Chramosta, Vojta Novák, and in 1910, Hana Benoniová for a performance in Prague's Rudolfinum with conductor/composer Otakar Ostrčil at the piano.

The trend is similar for Fibich's other concert melodramas, furnishing further proof that several of the most important names in theatre performance were trying their voices at this newly rediscovered art form. That Fibich also had important ties to the Provisional Theatre as assistant conductor and was husband to Betty Fibichová, a well-known singer for the same institution, could only have helped his prospects of introducing these works. Yet, as we have seen, the trend is not limited to Fibich's works, but extends to melodramas by other composers as well. A brief list representative of the much larger whole includes Marie Laudová performing Čelanský's *Balada o duši Jana Nerudy*, Jilek's *Cigánovy housle* and Kovařovic's *Zlatý kolovrat* and *Všichni svatí tancovali*; both Hana Kubešová and Hana Kvapilová with Foerster's *Tři jezdci*; Vojta Novák for Foerster's *Amarus* and Jeremiáš's *Raport*; and Marie Bittnerová in three of Kovařovic's melodramas.⁹

The soil in which melodrama would be able to thrive had thus been fully prepared and carefully tended, resulting in the congenial conditions that greeted the introduction of Fibich's staged trilogy, *Hippodamie*. Audiences were fully aware, and many convinced, of the dramatic potential of both the staged and concert forms of the genre through the combined efforts of actors and actresses at the heights of their careers, conductors who were at the head of the most important ensembles in Bohemia, and the most prestigious cultural societies, including Prague's Umělecká beseda and Měšťanská beseda, not to mention many other artists and amateur organizations throughout the region. The same actors and actresses who had been so instrumental in the performance of concert melodrama were well positioned to assume leading roles in the largest-scale staged work ever attempted.

There are certain musical masterworks that occur periodically in cultural history, like Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and Fibich's *Hippodamie*, that are so unique that they seem to lie outside our ability to fully explain them. Yet, at least with Fibich, his *Hippodamie* may be viewed as the logical extension of his previous efforts in opera, namely in *Nevěsta messinská*, and his concert melodramas, some of which also existed in an orchestral version.

With an expert sense of dramatic writing acquired via his operatic works, complete with the use of leitmotif to guide the listener, and his success in merging orchestral accompaniment with the spoken word, Fibich was ready and able to undertake the problems inherent in creating not only a single opera-length staged melodrama but three of them as a logical sequence. Less than one month after finishing the orchestral version of *Hakon* in

⁹ Marie Bittnerová performed Kovařovic's *Loutkářův sirotek*, *Psyche a Satyr* and *Krasavice před branou nebeskou*, on a program at the Hotel U červené hvězdy in the Prague district of Karlín in 1892.

February 1888, Fibich began sketching the opening of his staged trilogy. *Námluvy Pelopovy* represented the first large-scale dramatic work he had completed since *Nevěsta messinská*, premiered on 28 March 1884. Although Fibich later complained that the declamatory style in the opera had forced him to inhibit his musical invention, his treatment of the vocal line in the trilogy is, in fact, according to musicologist John Tyrrell, a logical extension of his setting for the voice in *Nevěsta messinská*: “[...] it made little difference, [...] when in Fibich’s next stage work, *Hippodamie*, the declamatory vocal part became a spoken one.”¹⁰

And who better to deliver these lines than the professionals at vocal declamation, the actors and actresses of the National Theatre? And where better to test their effectiveness than on a program directed to the artists of Prague sponsored by their own Umělecká beseda? On 11 December 1889, the 39-year-old composer, then president of the music division of the Prague chapter, introduced Acts I and II of the piano version of *Námluvy Pelopovy* to the group. At the following week’s meeting, on 18 December, Fibich completed the preview of the first part of the trilogy with Acts III and IV. The complete version was premiered a mere two months later, on 21 February 1890, at the National Theatre with Adolf Čech conducting. The leading roles were assumed by Marie Bittnerová as Hippodamie and Jakub Seifert as Pelops, both of whom had already showcased their declamatory talents in the concert melodrama. Josef Šmaha, who had performed Fibich’s *Hakon* with Adolf Čech and the theatre orchestra in 1888, directed the production and performed the role of Oinomaos.

The performance roster for the next two parts of the trilogy reflects a similar pattern. Josef Šmaha was cast as Tantalos and Jakub Seifert again as Pelops in *Smír Tantalův*. Sklenářová-Malá’s talents were reserved for the final and most dramatically intense performance by the title character in the third segment of the trilogy, *Smrt Hippodamie*, with Jakub Seifert as Chrysippos and Josef Šmaha as Myrtillos. Ludmila Vlčová, who had performed Fibich’s *Štědrý den* the previous year, was Airopa and Karel Šimanovský, approaching the end of a lengthy career with the National Theatre dominated by leading roles in many of Shakespeare’s plays, was Pelops.

Whether apprehensive about the manner in which Fibich’s staged trilogy might be received by the public or as an example of taking advantage of the possibility of a groundbreaking moment in Czech theatre history, writer and composer V. J. Novotný penned a series of articles for the Prague periodical *Zlatá Praha* [Golden Prague] before the premieres of the three works. Their purpose was to introduce each melodrama, its plot, and principal musical motives. The first of these articles also provided the readership with a reminder of the accomplishments of Fibich’s predecessors in melodrama composition, including those of Rousseau, Benda, and Schumann. Despite the carefully planned introduction, however, Novotný chose to pre-empt any criticism by including an apologetic word in defense of the composer’s work. “Fibich is not a cruel person who would want opera to be weeded out. No, our composer does not have such an evil heart... His

¹⁰ John Tyrrell, *Czech Opera* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 85.

spirit is not inclined to submit to the usual path in the art of music; he is characterized by a burning thirst for new appearances in the realm of sound.”¹¹

Yet Fibich would need no such apology. While some critics accused *Námluvy Pelopovy* of being too Wagnerian, relating it not surprisingly to *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the clear majority lauded it as a success. Josef Bohuslav Foerster provided one of the most direct statements of affirmation: “Unless you have a heart of stone, you will be deeply moved.”¹² Criticism for the remaining two parts of the trilogy was also quite positive. Foerster once again praised Fibich’s efforts, this time in response to *Smrt Hippodamie*, which he felt had provided conclusive and triumphant proof that the theory that claimed the two disparate elements in melodrama were like oil and water and could not mix was, in practice, no longer valid.¹³

With *Hippodamie*, Fibich had indeed proven that melodrama could be as successful in the form of a fully staged work as it was in one designed for concert performance. But, as we have seen, he did not achieve this level of acceptance alone. The popularity that Fibich’s melodramas, both concert and staged, enjoyed was due in no small measure to the efforts of the actors and actresses of the National Theatre, the societies and venues that supported their performances, and the amateur groups and varied audiences, in Prague and in the smaller towns of Bohemia and Moravia, that helped to guarantee their success. It is to these various forces that we owe much of the credit for the unprecedented popularity of melodrama in the Czech lands and the special place afforded the works of Zdeněk Fibich in its revival.

Ein fester Platz in der Geschichte: Die Propagierung von Fibichs Melodramen

Zusammenfassung

In unserer Zeit ist die Relevanz der Melodramen Zdeněk Fibichs für die Geschichte der tschechischen Musik unbestritten. Dieser Stellenwert ist zum Teil bereits durch Fibichs Zeitgenossen und die zahlreichen kulturellen Organisationen gesichert worden, die Deklamationen poetischer Werke in ihre sonst musikalischen Programme aufnehmen. Bekannte Schauspieler und Schauspielerinnen, hauptsächlich vom Prager Interims- und Nationaltheater, wie etwa Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá und Jakub Seifert, haben Fibichs Konzert-Melodramen durch Aufnahme in ihre öffentlichen Programme gefördert. Diese und andere hervorragende Interpreten haben sich in der Folge für das Melodrama auch dadurch

¹¹ Václav Juda Novotný, “*Námluvy Pelopovy*”, *Zlatá Praha*, 7 (1890), No. 13, p. 150.

¹² Josef Bohuslav Foerster, *Národní listy* (21 February 1890); reprinted in Artuš Rektorys (ed.), *Zdeněk Fibich: Sborník dokumentu a studií o jeho životě a díle* [Zdeněk Fibich: Collection of Documents and Studies about His Life and Work], Vol. 1 (Prague, 1951), p. 133–135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

eingesetzt, dass sie die Hauptrollen in Fibichs Melodram *Hippodamie* während der langen Dauer von dessen Popularität übernommen haben. Auch die Tschechische Philharmonie hat unter einigen der wichtigsten Dirigenten ihrer Geschichte – darunter Václav Talich – seine Kräfte mit professionellen Theaterleuten zur Aufführung von Fibichs Melodramen vereinigt. Der Umstand, dass diese Werke vor einem ganz verschiedenartigen, städtischen und ländlichen, Publikum, gespielt wurden, die Häufigkeit ihrer Aufführungen und die erfahrenen Interpreten haben ihre Anziehungskraft noch vermehrt. Diese Faktoren sind auch wesentlich für die Erklärung der beispiellosen Popularität des Melodramas überhaupt in den böhmischen Ländern im letzten Viertel des 19. Jahrhunderts. Fibichs künstlerisches Renommee in Prag und seine bevorzugte Stellung als Zweiter Kapellmeister des Interimstheaters haben ebenfalls dazu beigetragen, dass seine Werke besonders gefragt waren.

Übersetzt von Vlasta Reittererová

Zajištěné místo v dějinách: prosazování Fibichových melodramů

Shrnutí

Melodramům Zdeňka Fibicha je dnes vyhrazen nepopiratelný význam v historii české hudby. Tento stav byl zčásti pojištěn Fibichovými současníky a četnými kulturními organizacemi, které včlenily deklamace básnických děl do svých hudebních programů. Znamí herci a herečky, zejména z pražského Prozatímního a Národního divadla, jako například Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá a Jakub Seifert, podporovali jak prodej, tak časté uvádění Fibichových koncertních melodramů. Tito a další vynikající umělci pokračovali v kultivaci melodramu díky tomu, že získali hlavní role ve Fibichově *Hippodamii* a udrželi si je po celou dobu její popularity. Také Česká filharmonie pod vedením svých nejvýznamnějších šéfů, jakým byl např. Václav Talich, mnohokrát spojila své síly s herci, aby uvedla Fibichovy orchestrální melodramy. Prezentace těchto děl široké posluchačské veřejnosti – městské i venkovské, frekvence, se kterou byly nasazovány do programu specializovanými umělci, jen zvýšily jejich dosah. Tyto faktory jsou také životně důležité pro pochopení nebývalé popularity melodramu v českých zemích v poslední čtvrtině devatenáctého století. Fibichova umělecká pozice v Praze a jeho jedinečné postavení v roli asistenta dirigenta Prozatímního divadla také dopomohly k tomu, aby jeho díla získala své zvláštní místo mezi těmi nejoblíbenějšími od českých skladatelů.

Keywords

Concert melodrama; 19th century Czech music; Zdeněk Fibich.