



# Vrchlický's Smetana

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## Abstract

This paper deals with poetic texts in which Jaroslav Vrchlický reflected on the work of Bedřich Smetana between 1876 and 1903. It traces the content and form of his celebratory texts and the circumstances surrounding their dissemination in order to show to what extent Vrchlický's treatment of the Smetana theme highlighted the issue of the nationality of art, and to what extent it raised general questions surrounding the essence of artistic creation. The paper shows how an evaluation of Smetana's work is inseparable from Vrchlický's reflection on his own position in Czech culture and society. In the conclusion, attention is also paid to Vrchlický's possible creative inspiration thanks to Smetana's music.

## Keywords

Bedřich Smetana; Jaroslav Vrchlický; occasional lyric poetry; relationship between literature and music

Bedřich Smetana's work emerged as a subject for lyric poetry not only during his lifetime but long after his death as well.<sup>1</sup> Even as the value of his work was still being debated, poems reflecting Smetana's music were actually contributing to that debate. The present study will focus on texts by Jaroslav Vrchlický, who expressed his opinion of Smetana<sup>2</sup> in a total of six occasional poems. Between 1876

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of poets' interest in this musician and composer were summarized in the anthology *Ladění slov* (1966). See Vladimír Justl, ed., *Ladění slov* (Prague: SHV, 1966). Other examples of the numerous texts involving Smetana-related poetic lyricism were presented by Jaroslav Jiránek, "Bedřich Smetana a česká literatura," *Česká literatura* 22, no. 5 (1974): 426–438, here 430.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Pražák wrote about Vrchlický's opinion of Smetana's music: "He was enormously excited by Beethoven, Berlioz and especially Smetana. When he heard *Libuše*, it was as if someone had pinned wings to his soul. Of Smetana's music in general he thought that Time itself paused over it and turned everything under its influence into light and flowers. He saw in it the most perfect incarnation of the national spirit, a beacon of light for the nation on its darkened path." Albert Pražák, *Vrchlickému nablízku* (Prague: Družstevní práce, 1945), 157. These statements, however,

and 1903, when these poems were written, the value of Vrchlický's work was also being debated within the same social framework. I would thus like to show how Vrchlický's contributions to the cult of Smetana reflected the author's position in the literary and social field and the related attitudes towards the relationship between the artist and the nation. These attitudes are mostly evident in the texts themselves and in publishing strategies, while in some cases they are clarified by ego-documents.

Smetana himself was only able to read the first of the poems that Vrchlický dedicated to him. He received it personally on November 14th, 1876 at the Provisional Theatre during a gala performance of *The Kiss* (*Hubička*). The enthusiastic audience summoned the deaf composer from the box to the stage, where he received tributes from numerous deputations and acknowledged their unvoiced congratulations. Even the last one to congratulate him, Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá, shook his hand and conveyed – as *Národní listy* reported – “the Czech audience's feelings of grateful appreciation and warm affection.” At the same time, the actress handed Smetana a parchment bearing the celebratory lines.<sup>3</sup> The poem composed in Smetana's honor was not only presented to the man himself, however; the students in attendance also distributed some one thousand copies printed on paper to the audience (Ill. 1).<sup>4</sup>

Smetana found this event to be rather gratifying following all the struggles he had endured in previous years, so after he came back home from the theatre he wrote in his diary: “I was called innumerable times. Many deputations with wreaths on the stage, an address, a poem presented by Mrs. Malá. A fine reward indeed for my efforts.”<sup>5</sup> His notes do not indicate if he also met the author of those celebratory lines that evening.<sup>6</sup> Indeed he may not have known who it was until the following day, when *Národní listy* reported on the performance, printed

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are more a paraphrase of some of Vrchlický's verses than an authentic record based on interviews with him.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, “Slavnost Smetanova,” *Národní listy* 16, no. 316 (November 15, 1876): 3. The report includes a description of the artefact: “The poem is printed on parchment and the typographical treatment is truly extraordinary. On the first leaf, in gold, blue and red, is the dedication: ‘To the Genius of the Czech Master Smetana, Friends of Czech Art 1876.’ Around the dedication are entwined on the pages the names of Smetana's operas: *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, *The Bartered Bride*, *Dalibor*, *The Two Widows*, *The Kiss*, and *Libuše*.” The latter great opera had not yet been performed and was planned for the great National Theatre, see *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, “Slavnost Smetanova,” 3; Reproduction (Illustration 1) of a National Museum – Bedřich Smetana Museum copy, inventory number S 217/81.

<sup>5</sup> Cited from Alois Hnilička, *Smetanovské kapitoly* (Chrudim: Ant. Kiesl, 1935), 133. The next day, Smetana sent a letter of thanks to *Národní listy* in which he called “yesterday the most beautiful day of my entire life.” Bedřich Smetana, “Ctěná redakce!...,” *Národní listy* 16, no. 317 (November 16, 1876): 2.

<sup>6</sup> With thanks to Dr. Olga Mojžíšová for the consultation.

the poem dedicated to Smetana and identified its author as Vrchlický, whom they called “a very gifted young Czech poet.”<sup>7</sup> This twenty-three-year-old author, hitherto known only within the small circle of poetry connoisseurs, thus achieved broader renown for the first time.

Vrchlický’s *Logbook of Works* (*Deník tvorby*) reveals that the lines addressed to Smetana were written just a few days before the performance.<sup>8</sup> The author was thus obviously aware of the dramaturgical intention to present the poem to Smetana “on behalf of the entire Czech audience,”<sup>9</sup> and so he adapted the rhetoric of the text to this task, highlighting the theme of the creator’s bond with the nation. Smetana is metonymically called the “soul” of the nation and presented as its healer; the text attributes healing powers to Smetana’s music, which gathers up to itself the suffering and longings of the nation. The lyrical subject is truly impersonal, acting as a member of the nation and commanding Smetana to continue creating in its interests. Vrchlický did not stray from the role of spokesman for the audience, even when reprimanding those members of the nation who had not yet accepted Smetana:

But the time shall come when all will know you, / when they will say with a shudder: “He lived among us, / He was the sun, and we were but mists, / that wanted to cover his triumphant course, / we have disappeared – but he shines glorious!” (Však přijde čas, kdy všickni poznají tě, / kdy s chvěním řeknou: “On žil mezi námi, / On slunce byl a my jen byli mhami, / jež triumfální běh mu zakrýt chtěli, / my zmizeli jsme – On však září skvělý!”)<sup>10</sup>

Although it might seem there was no room for Vrchlický’s own creative situation to be projected within this formal poem, unbeknownst to the audience a reflection of this type occurred not only in the quoted anticipation of Smetana’s opponents’ future epiphany, but also in the section thematizing the exclusivity of artistic creation. Vrchlický conceived this motif as a contrast between the creator and the public: “The world only cheers! / But you yourself are walking down a steep path / towards the ideal of the sun [...]; You continue to walk big in a crowd of the small. / We weep in the night, You are already at the dawn.” (“Svět jása jen! Ty sám však strmou drahou / jdeš k ideálu slunci [...]; Ty dále kráčíš velký v davu malých. / My lkáme v noci, Ty již na úsvitě.”)<sup>11</sup> This is not the

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, “Slavnost Smetanova,” 3.

<sup>8</sup> The text is dated November 1876. Museum of Czech Literature, Literary Archive (LA PNP), Jaroslav Vrchlický fonds, own manuscripts, *Deník tvorby 1876–1908*. Whence the poem’s title, not mentioned by the period press.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, “Slavnost Smetanova,” 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

first time that Vrchlický used this figurative solution to the motif, such phrasing and an anticipation of future recognition of the artist's contribution. In private letters and manuscripts from earlier times we find similar statements, in which he was, however, referring to himself. Hence at the beginning of August 1875, he wrote to his brother Bedřich Frída: "A number of my recent verses simply involve a struggle to be or not to be, and I am as yet undecided. *Every individual ascends to those heights alone [...]*"<sup>12</sup> Shortly before that, Vrchlický wrote the poem *Spleen and Ideal* (*Spleen a ideál*), in which he took stock of his short creative career in a lyrical self-address and anticipated:

But the time shall come when the voice of wrath will fall silent, / when those who have poured gall / into thy wine will say in mute awe: / "He stood among us, we knew him not, / behold the thorns of his crown, / how suddenly they burn with the fire of rubies!" / But thou shalt walk tall in their midst, / with the light of thought on thy pale cheek! (Však přijde čas, kdy ztichne zloby hlas, / kdy oni, kteří nasypali žluč / v tvé víno, řeknou v němém strnutí: / "Stál mezi námi, neznali jsme jej, / hle vizte trny jeho koruny, / jak náhle planou ohněm rubínů!" / Ty ale půjdeš velký středem jich, / na bledé skrání světlo myšlénky!)<sup>13</sup>

The use of some verses relating originally to Vrchlický himself in this paean to Smetana can be attributed to the well-known reasons why *Spleen and Ideal* remained in the manuscript.<sup>14</sup>

An examination of Vrchlický's creative workshop shows that he perceived Smetana's story – as yet unfinished – to be a prefiguration of his own creative career. From the responses to his first book of verse, *From the Depths* (*Z hlubin*, 1875), Vrchlický knew his future opponents as early as 1876 and, by analogy with the tussles over Smetana, he anticipated the clashes over the "cosmopolitan" works he had ready for print or was still planning to write. Under these circumstances, then, in a poem dedicated to Smetana, he postulated a symbiosis between the creator and the nation, disrupted only by uncomprehending listeners. What still remained hidden from readers, however, was that despite his position as the spokesman for the nation, Vrchlický relates to Smetana primarily as one creator to another. Worthy of note is also *Lumír's* treatment of the *Národní listy* report on the performance of *The Kiss*, which, together with the text of

<sup>12</sup> Cited from Bedřich Frída, *Mladá léta Jaroslava Vrchlického v zrcadle dopisů, jež psal svému strýci a bratrovi* (Prague: Společnost Jaroslava Vrchlického, 1931), 100, highlighted by M. H.

<sup>13</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Intimní lyrika* (Prague: Lidové noviny, 2000), 376.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Hrdina, "Básníkovo okno do času. Nuda jako zamlčený činitel uměleckého zrání Jaroslava Vrchlického," in *Oč práce k zábavě: Volný čas v české kultuře 19. století*, ed. Eva Bendová and Zdeněk Hojda (Prague: Academia, 2021), 31–41.

Vrchlický's poem, was taken up by various domestic and foreign periodicals.<sup>15</sup> This journal, in which Vrchlický presented his cosmopolitan work, printed the report without Vrchlický's verses.<sup>16</sup> It seems that the journal also did not give space to the verse text circulating in the political press, because it gave priority to content over the aesthetic aspect.<sup>17</sup>

Vrchlický's second Smetana-related text was his verse obituary *To Bedřich Smetana (Bedřichu Smetanovi)*, dated May 12th, 1884. It was published on the front page of *Lumír*,<sup>18</sup> from which the text was taken for the front page of *Dalibor* by the latter's editors. These external circumstances surrounding the dissemination of the text suggest that the primary addressee this time was not the audience or the nation as a whole, but rather the community of artists. This is also reflected in the form. Whereas the public was normally addressed in 1876 with a speech in rhyming couplets and unstratified verse, Vrchlický responds to the death of the musician with a sonnet – an artifice in a fixed form that was his typical means of relating to other artists, living or dead.

Bedřich Smetana establishes a hierarchy of values that is headed by the work which the strong-spirited artist subordinates his life to. Below that there are expressions of recognition, “the bustle of the crowds and applause, the thunder of fame” (“ruch zástupů a potlesk, slávy hřmění”) and, at the lowest level, reactions of disapproval, “the spike of resentment, ridicule and affronts” (“hrot zášti, úsměchu a pohanění”). Smetana is treated as a prolific artist-idealist, endowed with the power to “create worlds.” In the space of the obligatory fourteen lines, Vrchlický delivered a eulogy, into which he also projected his own situation. This time the communication situation allowed him to directly express his understanding of Smetana's position as a proud creator whose work is not accepted by some members of society. Whereas in the 1876 lines, Vrchlický deployed a first-person plural lyrical subject, in the poetic obituary his artistic habitus is pushed to the fore. The grammatical forms of the second-person singular (familiar-form

<sup>15</sup> See e.g., Anonymous, “Českého veleducha pocta,” *Pokrok. Orgán Americké Národní Jednoty (Cleveland)* 10, no. 26 (December 21, 1876): 5.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, “Bedřich Smetana,” *Lumír* 4, no. 32 (November 20, 1876): 551–52.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the five-foot iambic rhyming couplets of verses dedicated to Smetana with the similarly focused occasional poem *To Josef Jungmann (Josefu Jungmannovi)* written in 1873, which Vrchlický divided into stanzas with a complex rhyme scheme and unequal verse length, see Jaroslav Vrchlický, “Josefu Jungmannovi,” *Paleček* 1, no. 41 (1873): 321–22. Vrchlický was also the author of *Address for the Vocal celebration (Proslov k slavnosti Vocolově)* (written in July 1876, see Museum of Czech Literature, Literary Archive, Jaroslav Vrchlický fonds, own manuscripts, *Logbook of Works (Deník tvorby 1876–1908)*, which was presented by a certain K. Brousek in Kutná Hora; evidently this text was not preserved. See Anonymous, “Památka Vocolova oslavena,” *Světlozor* 10, no. 35 (September 1, 1876): 483.

<sup>18</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, “Bedřichu Smetanovi,” *Lumír* 12, no. 15 (May 20, 1884): 225.

“tykáni”) have a new meaning here – they do not express the sense of solidarity with artists felt by members of the nation, but a sense of creative kinship. This is also understandable given the fact that by 1884 Vrchlický had also experienced the fierce polemics of the patriots. Ultimately, the gesture of understanding prevailed over the option of considering artistic creation in general, which is also confirmed by the inclusion of the text in the collection *Sonnets of a Solitudinarian* (*Sonety samotáře*) – Vrchlický did not include it in the *Poet and Art* (*Básník a umění*) section, but at the end of the *Poet and the World* (*Básník a svět*) section, whose central themes include the relationship of the creator to the audience. Smetana was thus also placed within the context of literature.

Vrchlický's third text dedicated to Smetana is also a sonnet. It was again entitled *To Bedřich Smetana* (*Bedřichu Smetanovi*), but this time with the subtitle *On the anniversary of the master's death* (*Ve výroční den úmrtí mistrova*). According to the *Logbook of Works*, it was written in May 1886, two years after Smetana's death.<sup>19</sup> The motivation behind this text is not obvious – perhaps it was the experience of Smetana's music, which Vrchlický first thematized directly here. Whereas previously his attention had been focused on such circumstances as the arduousness of creative work or its social resonance, he now concentrated in this assessment of Smetana on the essence of art. Vrchlický credited Smetana's music with the capacity to temporarily relieve us of the awareness of the transience of life. “At that moment time ceased its flight / and, immersed in the sources of your harmonies, / melted into music, brightness and a rain of flowers.” (“V té chvíli čas v svém zastavil se letu / a pohrouživ se v souzvuků tvých zdroje, / sám roztál v hudbu, jas a deště květů.”)<sup>20</sup> With reference to Ludvík Kundera, according to whom the sound aspect of Vrchlický's diction is characterized by musicality and “his poetic thinking is akin to musical thinking,”<sup>21</sup> I venture to extend the power attributed to Smetana's music to the text itself: the power of the apostrophized Master's music was evidently also to be found in the music of the lines that deal with it. In other words, time, as Vrchlický conceived it, not only “melted” when immersed in the harmonies of Smetana's music, but it was also to be overpowered by the rhythm of the iambs that celebrate Smetana's art.

<sup>19</sup> Museum of Czech Literature, Literary Archive, Jaroslav Vrchlický fonds, own manuscripts, *Logbook of Works* (*Deník tvorby 1876–1908*).

<sup>20</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Nové sonety samotáře* (Prague: J. Otto, 1891), 112. No older print of the poem could be found.

<sup>21</sup> Ludvík Kundera, “Jaroslav Vrchlický a hudba,” *Tempo. Listy Hudební Matice* 12, no. 8 (April 1933): 286–95, here 291. This is also why Vrchlický compared speech to music and vice versa, and also, according to Kundera, “very often uses music and musical terms in his poems,” while “sometimes entire works are deliberately conceived musically,” see *ibid.*, 292.

Nationality as an element of art does not feature at all in the 1886 sonnet and the Czech nation is not even mentioned. Thus, when Vrchlický was composing the *New Sonnets of a Solitudinarian* (*Nové sonety samotáře*), he was able to include it in the *Art and Artists* (*Umění a umělci*) section, where it figures in the respectable company of texts dedicated to Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Poe, Whitman and the like. Smetana is not just the only Czech artist mentioned in this section, but also the only musician – Vrchlický’s tendency to include him in the context of literature is already noticeable here.

In 1891, when the *New Sonnets of a Solitudinarian* were published, Vrchlický occupied a more prominent social position than he did at the time he was writing the Smetana sonnets, and his position in the literary field matched this. One critic, coincidentally, when comparing the *Sonnets of a Solitudinarian* with the *New Sonnets of a Solitudinarian*, remarked that “the poet’s age and personal circumstances have now made their mark,” and that “Vrchlický is closer [...] to all those around him,” and in short, he is “more Czech.”<sup>22</sup> This change was also reflected in the treatment of the Smetana theme – evidently for the first time in Vrchlický’s address for the opening of the Emperor Franz Joseph Czech Academy of Sciences, Literature and Arts, which was read out by Otýlie Sklenářová-Malá on May 18th, 1891 at the National Theatre.

Smetana is mentioned in this impassioned address – as a “poet of sweet tones” (“poeta sladkých tónů”) – in the concluding list of artists who were implementing Jungmann’s programme of national culture.<sup>23</sup> The book reprint of the speech confirmed the emphasis now placed on the importance of Smetana’s work for the nation – in the collection *Thistles from Parnassus* (*Bodláci z Parnasu*, 1893) Vrchlický included the text in the *From Czech Soil* (*Z české půdy*) section. In the

<sup>22</sup> J. Patočka, “Jaroslav Vrchlický: Nové sonety samotáře,” *Literární listy* 12, nos. 17–18 (September 1, 1891): 295–97, here 295.

<sup>23</sup> “And Kollár the eagle, the cheerful thrush of ‘Ohlasy’ / and the nightingale of ‘Máj’ with the wood-pigeon of ‘Kytice’ / and the dreamy Manes, the solemn Levý, / Smetana, the poet of sweet tones, // rose up at once in the direction where our great Paul was brooding / toiling, looking for the source and origin of the Slavonic. / He raised his Olympic head in a voice of thunder, saying: // ‘The Motherland has risen! The Homeland lives! We have not lived in vain! / Let the grandson with a diligent hand complete the work, / we have laid the foundation in the granite of hearts, / let him hoist the banners of victory to the stars!’” (“A Kollár orel, plesný drozd ‘Ohlasů’ / i slavík ‘Máje’ s doupnákem ‘Kytice’ / a snivý Manes, vážný Levý, / Smetana, poeta sladkých tónů, // se zvedli rázem směrem, kde zadumán / dlél, zdroj a původ Slovanstva hledaje, / náš velký Pavel. Olympickou / vztyčil hlavu řka hlasem hromu: // ‘Vlast vstala! Žije! Darma jsme nežili! / Vnuk dělnou rukou dílo ať dovrší, / my dali základ v granit srdcí, / vítězství praporec on vztyč k hvězdám!’”), Jaroslav Vrchlický, “K otevření České Akademie císaře Františka Josefa pro vědy, slovesnost a umění,” in *Bodláci s Parnassu* (Praha: J. Otto, 1893), 126. The chief role in this quoted address was of course played by scholars – Jan Amos Komenský, František Palacký, and Josef Jungmann (“our Paul”).

context of his book publications, this was the first text to appreciate Smetana exclusively in terms of his contribution to national art. Vrchlický codified this interpretation of Smetana in a way by including the address in an anthology of his poems published in 1894, specifically in the first cycle of the first book, entitled *Homeland (Vlast)*.<sup>24</sup>

That same year, a bust of Smetana was installed in the foyer of the National Theatre “in honour of the founder of Czech national opera” and also as a reminder of the success of Czech music in Vienna.<sup>25</sup> The unveiling of Josef Václav Myslbek's work took place on March 31st, 1894, on the 70th anniversary of Smetana's birth and the 10th anniversary of his death, and soon afterwards Vrchlický wrote an epigram: *When a bust of Smetana was erected in the National Theatre foyer (Když postavili poprsí Smetanovo ve foyeru Národního divadla)*. “When he was alive, they stomped and beat him, / now they've raised a statue to him, / and now that praise be, the whole world gushes, / they yell it too just to cover their blushes.” (“*Za živa jej dupali a bili, / nyní sochu jemu postavili, / a když sláva! teď svět křičí celý, / řvou též, by se rdíti nemuseli.*”)<sup>26</sup> In discussing the theme of Smetana, Vrchlický returned to the motif of the unrecognized creator, his motivation again being evidently rooted in his own situation. The accusation of insincerity by Smetana's former opponents appears at first sight to be an attack on the nationalists who railed against Smetana (and Vrchlický) in the 1870s. In the tense situation of 1894, when the confrontation between Vrchlický and the modernist critics was culminating in the well-known dispute over Hálek, Vrchlický's remark that there were people who once “stomped and beat” Smetana could have been addressed to the modernists, who, Vrchlický believed, underestimated his own poetic work as well. Vrchlický did not publish the indignant epigram in a book or, apparently, even in a journal.<sup>27</sup> But he did eventually decide to publish in book form the address where he had predicted that Smetana would achieve social recognition.

After twenty-one years, an extremely long time by Vrchlický's standards, the lines dedicated to Smetana in 1876 appeared with the title *To Bedřich Smetana (Bedřichu Smetanovi)* in the second edition of the *Voices in the Desert (Hlasy*

<sup>24</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, ed., *Anthologie z básní Jaroslava Vrchlického (1875–1892)* (Prague: J. Otto, 1894), 17–19. Vrchlický did not include any of his other Smetana-related poems in this or the second anthology of his work.

<sup>25</sup> František Adolf Šubert et al., *Zpráva o činnosti král. zemského a Národního divadla za dobu od 1. července 1892 až do 30. června 1893* (Prague: Družstvo Národního divadla, 1893), 20.

<sup>26</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Žeň času* (Prague: SNKLU, 1963), 286.

<sup>27</sup> Vrchlický included the text in a manuscript he arranged “Upstream.” Satires, epigrams and parodies etc. (“*Proti proudu.*” *Satiry, epigramy a parodie atd. 1875*). Bedřich Frída wrote about this in *Rukopisná pozůstalost Jaroslava Vrchlického*, *Sborník Společnosti Jaroslava Vrchlického* 1, 1915, 13–20, here 15. The text was taken from this manuscript for *Žeň času* (1963).

*v poušti*, 1897) collection.<sup>28</sup> This collection was originally a cycle of patriotic sonnets from 1890. In the second edition, it was expanded to include a second cycle of sonnets, the addition of *Pantheon (Pantheon)*, a section of *Toasts and Herms (Přípitky a hermy)*, and lastly, *Palinodies (Palinodie)*, written in 1897. Many of the newly included texts were written in the 1880s, which the author indicated with original dates, but surprisingly we do not find a date for the Smetana poem. This might have been due to the amount of editing involved. One of the lexical changes eloquently illustrates the shift in Vrchlický's creative career. Whereas in 1876 he wrote: "The world does nothing but cheer!" ("Svět jásá jen!"), twenty years later he crossed this out and corrected it to: "We cheer" ("My jásáme").<sup>29</sup> Vrchlický thus highlighted the national aspect of Smetana's work and showed his adaptation to the role of spokesman for the nation, which subsequently weakened any nationally indifferent reflection on Smetana's artistry.

Vrchlický included the poem *To Bedřich Smetana (Bedřichu Smetanovi)* at the front of the *Toasts and Herms* section, dedicated to Slavic artists, mostly Czech writers. This section, and thus the poem dedicated to Smetana in *Voices in the Desert*, is preceded by the famous composition *Pantheon (Pantheon, 1880–1883)*. At the level of composition, there is a subtle reminder of the previous "meeting" of Smetana's music and Vrchlický's poetry on the premises of the National Theatre – at the academy opening ceremony on November 18th, 1883, when Marie Bittnerová recited a part of *Pantheon* after Smetana's *Solemn Overture in C Major*.<sup>30</sup> Vrchlický then made a programmatic allusion to Smetana's work when he called his retrospective volume of patriotic poetry, arranged on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, *My Homeland (Má vlast, 1903)*; the dates of the poems range from 1885 to 1902).

With this book title, based on his earlier collection *On Home Soil (Na domácí půdě, 1888)*, Vrchlický symbolically claimed a position in the literary field similar to the one that Smetana had undoubtedly occupied in music. This can also be read from the recollections of Albert Pražák, written long after his conversations with Vrchlický:

<sup>28</sup> See also Justl, *Ladění slov*, 66–67. Even between 1876 and 1897, the text did not disappear from circulation; it was part of the Smetana cult. It was recited by Teréza Nováková on September 18th, 1880 at a music academy in the Litomyšl castle theatre. See Anonymous [D.], "Slavnost Smetanova v Litomyšli," *Dalibor 2*, no. 28 (October 1, 1880): 218–19. For Nováková's memoir with small excerpts from verses see Teréza Nováková, "Památce Bedřicha Smetany," in *Dívčí svět*, ed. Vilma Sokolová (Prague: F. Šimáček, 1893), 70–79, here 71–72, 74, 78.

<sup>29</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Hlasy v poušti, 1890–1897*, 2nd ed. (Prague: J. Otto, 1897), 87–88.

<sup>30</sup> František Adolf Šubert, *Národní divadlo v Praze. Dějiny jeho i stavba dokončená* (Prague: J. Otto, 1883), 354.

Smetana knew as well as he did that they had to keep in step with other nations, that they had to strengthen and exalt general ideals, that domestic traditions alone were not enough, that initiative and assertivity were also required, to fertilize the national spirit with everything new and to even augment the national treasury with foreign assets. And all these assumptions were misunderstood by us; both Smetana and Vrchlický were suspected of being indifferent in their Czechness, of insufficient work for the homeland and the nation. It was thus certainly no accident that Smetana wrote *My Homeland* (*Má vlast*), just as Vrchlický deliberately presented a book of the same name to the nation to mark his fiftieth birthday. However, in Smetana's case there was something more to it: it had a sense of heritage, like Neruda's *Friday Songs* (*Zpěvy páteční*). Vrchlický did not know, however, that by the will of fate his *My Homeland* collection also had this association.<sup>31</sup>

However, Vrchlický's relationship to Smetana did not end up getting bogged down in the hollow pathos of patriotic verse, as the development of his treatment of the Smetana theme might suggest. Shortly after the publication of *My Homeland*, he wrote his last Smetana-related text, an address to mark the unveiling of the first Smetana monument. It is clear from contemporary accounts of the ceremony in Hořice that the address was not recited there, but it is published at the front of the *Smetana Memorial* (*Smetanův památník*) album.<sup>32</sup> And indeed, in this case, these are not the kind of lines that an event like this calls for – the rhetoric is far from the requirements of a public speech, but is more appropriate for an intimately tuned speech from one creator to another. The lyrical subject of the speech is not a spokesman for the audience; when he speaks of “us,” he is not referring to the nation, but to artists active in various fields, who are trying by various means to capture the essence of the individual Czech. The text credits Smetana with the foremost role in this endeavour: “You put it best, O master of all masters, / You alone with your music / have cried out to the world: ‘The Czech has the strength for the contest, / unconquered by an evil fate!’” (“Tys nejlíp vyslovil, ó mistře mistrů všech, / Ty jediný svou hudbou / jsi křikl do světa: ‘Má v závod sílu Čech, / zlou nepokořen sudbou!’”)<sup>33</sup> The departure from the nationalist framing of Smetana's work is confirmed by the inclusion of the text in the *Silent Steps* (*Tiché kroky*, 1905) collection. Although this contains a section on *Homeland and Humanity* (*Vlast a lidstvo*), Vrchlický included the text dedicated to Smetana in the section on *Art* (*Umění*).

The theme of the Art section of the collection was again predominantly literary, but the position of music is not marginal. In the poem *Music* (*Hudba*) we

<sup>31</sup> Pražák, *Vrchlickému nablízku*, 157–158.

<sup>32</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, “K odhalení pomníku B. Smetany v Hořicích. Proslav,” *Smetanův památník* (Hořice: Slavnostní výbor pro odhalení Smetanova pomníku, 1903), 5–6.

<sup>33</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Tiché kroky* (Prague: J. Otto, 1905), 55–57.

even come across a sentence that may be one of the keys to Vrchlický's view of Smetana: "[Music] has today seized the sceptre from the word" ("I slovu urvala dnes vlády žezlo").<sup>34</sup> As the evidence collected by Ludvík Kundera has shown, the idea of the primacy of music over literature was not new to Vrchlický,<sup>35</sup> who was compensating – perhaps unconsciously – for a certain disadvantage felt by the word even at the time that literature dominated Czech art, by rhetorically blurring the differences between the two kinds of art.<sup>36</sup> Thus in his address for the opening of the Czech Academy he called Smetana "the poet of sweet tones," and in lines written in 1903 we again read:

In this century of prose, in the clatter of ancient fetters, / where the cry for bread resounds, / in weeping from a poor cradle, in rubble of ancient graveyards / You have interceded with your heavenly speech. (V tom prosy století v třesk starých okovů, / kde výkřik o chleb ječí, / v pláč chudé kolébky, v sсуť starých hřbitovů / Tys nebeskou vpadl řečí.)<sup>37</sup>

One can assume that after Vrchlický's fiftieth birthday the comparison between literature and music might have sounded bitter. The foreign successes of Czech musicians and composers may have reinforced his dissatisfaction with the reception of his own work, which depended on mediation through translation. The author, who conveyed to the Czechs the richness of worldwide literature, was certainly aware, even in the context of unsuccessful nominations for the Nobel Prize (for the first time in 1904), how imperfectly his work was interpreted abroad. In the address for the unveiling of the Smetana monument, one can read frustration in the way the text discusses the present: not only conventionally as a century of prose, but also as a time of "struggles, deception, delusion and failure" ("zápasů, klamu, bludu a nezdaru") and "the ruins of premature graves" ("tríští předčasných hrobů").<sup>38</sup>

The adoption of the title *My Homeland* to name the 1903 retrospective volume ultimately invites reflection upon Vrchlický's inspiration from Smetana's symphonic music. Allusions to it are apparently encoded in the lines written for the

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>35</sup> Kundera, *Jaroslav Vrchlický a hudba*, 287.

<sup>36</sup> Vrchlický's texts of various genres were set to music by a number of Czech composers. His creative collaboration with Zdeněk Fibich, which began in the 1870s and culminated in the *Hippodamie trilogy* (1888–1891), and his collaboration on several works with Antonín Dvořák are particularly significant. Songs and choral compositions based on Vrchlický's lyrics were composed by Karel Bendl, Emanuel Chvála, Josef Bohuslav Foerster, and Karel Kovařovic, and among the younger composers we find Josef Suk and Otakar Ostrčil.

<sup>37</sup> Vrchlický, *Tiché kroky*, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 55.

unveiling of Smetana's monument. In the fifth stanza, Vrchlický portrays the impressiveness of Smetana's music abroad as follows: "And astounded at your magical sound, the world listened. / The breath of beauty blew far away, / And where its dearest flower fluttered, / You stood upon the peaks!" ("A zdiven čarovným tvým zvukem slouchal svět. / Dech krásy v dálku vanul, / a její nejdražší kde zaplápolal květ, / Tys na vrcholcích stanul!")<sup>39</sup> For ordinary readers, these verses were a conventional proclamation, but those who knew Vrchlický personally could recognize in them a transposition of memories of his stay in Italy. When Vrchlický arrived in Marano sul Panaro in 1875, he had few books to read and was dependent upon his memory more than ever. This made it all the more possible for him to process artistic impressions from more recent times. One of the most important of these was a visit to a concert in Prague on April 4th, 1875, at which Smetana's *Vyšehrad* (1874) was performed and at the end of which *Vltava* (1874) was given its premiere.<sup>40</sup> In Italy Vrchlický also wrote literary "symphonies," and one of the first, *Above the Panaro (Nad proudem Panaru)*,<sup>41</sup> was penned in May 1875, just a couple of weeks after he heard *Vltava*. He also wrote to his brother in this regard: "My friend the Panaro [...] has breathed a new symphony into me."<sup>42</sup> Yes, the river observed from the window and during walks in the mountains certainly inspired him to write, but his attention to this subject may well have been directed by the strains of Smetana's symphonic poem. Vrchlický might have had this in mind when he wrote in his last text dedicated to Bedřich Smetana: "So the Czech breathes through you, where a stray step is taken." ("Tak Tebou dýchá Čech, kde stane bludný krok.")<sup>43</sup>

It would be a task for another occasion to search for the musical background to Vrchlický's literary "symphonies," as well as other texts, or even for the musical context behind the composition of his *My Homeland* collection. But for now, this survey of the Smetana-related poems has shown the relativity of the attribute of nationality in art. Vrchlický made a subtle reference to Smetana through it in 1876, and highlighted it in the 1890s for representational reasons. The national character of art was, however, more like just a secondary bond between the two artists – the fellowship between them was primarily based on their understanding

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Bedřich Frída's estate includes a booklet with records of concerts attended between 1872 and 1876 with complete programmes. "Also recorded here is the Smetana concert of April 4th, 1875. [...] Above all, he valued programme music." Bedřich Frída, "Paměti," in *Vedle sebe šli jsme dálnou poutí... Vzpomínky ze života dvou bratří*, ed. Jaroslav Vrchlický (Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Arts, 2016), 43–113, here 58.

<sup>41</sup> Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Symfonie* (Prague: J. Otto, 1878), 73–80.

<sup>42</sup> Frída, *Mladá léta*, 90. The letter was written before June 13th, 1875.

<sup>43</sup> Vrchlický, *Tiché kroky*, 56.

of the essence of art. And it was primarily on this understanding that their creative inspirations could be based.

Translated by Melvyn Clarke

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