



Smetana's *Libuše* in Vienna: The History That Never Came About

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Abstract

The choice of the theme of Princess *Libuše* for the opera shows how problematic mythology is in relation to operatic conventions. The decision of Josef Wenzig (or also Ervín Špindler) and Bedřich Smetana represents, in a sense, a risky artistic experiment as well as a quite exceptional solution. Smetana's *Libuše* was to retain its position as a representative work within Czech social life, and it still fulfils this purpose today. The history of the reception of Smetana's *Libuše* is closely linked to the history of the independent Czechoslovak (Czech) state; on the other hand, it is impossible not to see how poor the statistics on the performance of *Libuše* outside the Czech cultural circle are. Our study attempts to show how Smetana's *Libuše* helped to build the National Theatre's permanent Czech repertoire, often in spite of the theatre's operational vicissitudes and not infrequently in spite of Smetana's intentions (*Libuše* was more or less always ready for performance and filled the dramaturgical gaps of the institution's management). A counterpart to the Czech reception history (in the sense of provincial patriotism) is provided by information about performances of *Libuše* on non-Czech stages. And in this field we find ourselves rather in the realm of – to use Vladimír Macura's words – dreams about *Libuše*. Of course, dreams and visions also constitute national consciousness. We concentrate on the oft-repeated information that Gustav Mahler intended to perform *Libuše* in Vienna in the 1890s.

Keywords

Czech National Opera; *Libuše*; Vienna Court Opera; Bedřich Smetana; Ludwig Hartmann; Gustav Mahler

A Work Confined to Czech Culture

The history of musical events that were planned but ultimately did not take place can reveal more about a particular phenomenon than a laboriously constructed history of reception. Operas with a *Libuše* theme may have international potential – let us recall the opera *Primislaov, primo re di Boemia*, which was welcomed as an exotic treat at the San Cassiano theatre in Venice in 1697,¹ or the opera *Libussa*, which Conradin Kreutzer apparently attempted to stage in Naples in 1825 under a changed title, *Primislas*.²

The Czech revivalists dreamed up a unique *Libuše* who would be a model of femininity and a just ruler. In the words of the literary historian Vladimír Macura, the “dream of *Libuše*” continues to permeate Czech cultural life, and it is primarily dreams and visions that constitute national consciousness. The successful staging of Smetana's *Libuše* on foreign stages, which would follow the production at the Vienna Court Opera, became an attractive idea for Czechs before World War I. However, this idea never came to fruition. *The Bartered Bride* became the model for Slavic opera gaining world fame, while the topic of performances of *Libuše* abroad remained a brief historical chapter. Smetana's *Libuše* was performed in Vienna in 1924 thanks to a guest performance by the Olomouc Theatre.³ In 1986, Gabriela Beňačková sang *Libuše* at the Carnegie Hall in New York under the baton of the admirer of Czech music Eve Queler in a concert performance of the opera.⁴ *Libuše* was performed in Edinburgh in 1998 with Eva Urbanová in

¹ The libretto was written by Giulio Cesare Corradi, with music by Tomaso Albinoni. For more see Michal Fránek, Ladislav Futtera, Jiří Kopecký, and Jana Spáčilová, *The Singing Libuše. An Ancient Bohemian Myth on the Opera Stage* (ConBrio, 2025), 49–60.

² The libretto was written by Carl Joseph Bernard, and the successful premiere took place in Vienna in 1822. On the strength of this performance, Kreutzer was appointed bandmaster at the Kärntnertheater, the impresario of which was Domenico Barbaja. Barbaja, a talented opera entrepreneur, managed to connect the Viennese opera scene with theatres in Milan and Naples. In addition, the soprano Caroline Unger, who played *Libuše*, was engaged in Naples in 1825. For more see Fránek, Futtera, Kopecký, and Spáčilová, *The Singing Libuše*, 126, 143.

³ Miriam Hasíková, “Meziválečné hudební divadlo v Olomouci” (PhD diss., Univerzita Palackého, Olomouc, 2018), 44.

⁴ Donal Henahan, “The Opera: Benackova in Smetana's ‘Libuse,’” *The New York Times* 136 (March 14, 1986), Section C: 7, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/14/arts/the-opera-benackova-in-smetana-s-libuse.html>.

the lead role.⁵ Reflections on the performance of Smetana's *Libuše* accompanied Leon Botstein, the music director of the Bard Music Festival, in 2023–2024, but an email message from Michael Beckerman in early September 2024 read: “Sorry... it's Dalibor in the end...”⁶ The 2025 festival was dedicated to the work of Bohuslav Martinů.⁷ The dream of international renown for Smetana's *Libuše* can still be dreamed, but it is happening despite Smetana's intention.

A Festive Opera “for the Nation”

Smetana was aware that his fourth opera deviated from the usual opera dramaturgy, and he urged that this “festive tableau” be performed only on exceptional occasions. However, a nation that constantly needed to prove its worth did not miss a single opportunity to celebrate. *Libuše* became established as an opera performed on the anniversary of the opening of the National Theatre on November 18th, 1883, and as a title commemorating the anniversary of Smetana's death (as the basis for the May celebrations of the National Theatre). *Libuše* was therefore more or less always ready to be performed and filled the dramaturgical gaps of the institution's management. Despite Smetana's intentions, *Libuše* was constantly in the repertoire and could be performed more or less at any time. In 1886, a critic of *Dalibor* complained:

This year's annual celebration of Smetana's memory at the National Theatre will turn out very poorly. Much was promised, but nothing was prepared, and now it is said to be too late, so that *Libuše* will be repeated again. Well, of course, while the local German theatre spent *months* preparing to honour the anniversary of Wagner's death, while they rehearsed and staged three great, completely new works by him over the last five months and are preparing an entire Wagner cycle for the autumn, no one at the National Theatre *honestly* remembered our great master.⁸

⁵ See the database *Operabase*, <https://www.operabase.com/productions/libuse-5614/sk> (accessed September 9, 2024).

⁶ Email from Michael Beckermann to Jiří Kopecký dated September 3rd, 2024.

⁷ See the report: “The Bard Music Festival returns for its 35th season with an exploration of the life and work of composer Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959);” *Bard Music Festival*, <https://fishercenter.bard.edu/whats-on/programs/bard-music-festival> (accessed September 8, 2024). Six performances of Smetana's *Dalibor* (directed by Jean-Romain Vesperini) took place between July 25th, and August 3rd, 2025; *Fisher Center Tickets*, https://tickets.fishercenter.bard.edu/events/?_gl=1*1yu5uad*_gcl_au*MTc4MDkyNjY1Mi4xNzUxNTUzNTEz*_ga*MTI4MjQxMzg4My4xNzUxNTUzNTE0*_ga_MDV28M4C4N*_czE3NTE2NDQzMTMkbzIkZzEkdDE3NTE2NDQ1ODIkajEzJGwwwJGgw (accessed July 4, 2025).

⁸ “Letošní výroční oslava památky Smetanovy v Národním divadle dopadne velmi chudě. Slibovalo se mnoho, nic se ale nepřipravilo a nyní prý jest již pozdě, tak že zase jen opakovati se bude *Libuše*. Inu ovšem, mezitím co v zdejším německém divadle *celé měsíce* se chystali k důstojnému uctění úmrtního dne Wagnerova, mezitím co tam v posledních 5 měsících nastudovali a vypravili tři

Libuše helped build the permanent repertoire of the National Theatre and at the same time retained its exceptional position as a representative work within Czech social life. It still fits into this context today. The history of the reception of Smetana's *Libuše* is closely linked to the history of the independent Czechoslovak (Czech) state.

Speculation that Smetana's *Libuše* could step out of its Czech context gained momentum after the International Theatre and Music Exhibition in Vienna in 1892. *The Bartered Bride* became an international opera hit, the Theater an der Wien staged Smetana's comic opera in 1893, and the Court Opera gradually added *The Bartered Bride*, *The Kiss*, *The Secret*, and *Dalibor* to its repertoire. After the premiere of *Dalibor*, extraordinary credit for Smetana's success was attributed to Gustav Mahler, who had already verified the lasting popularity of Smetana's operas in Hamburg. In 1897, Mahler preferred Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* to Leoncavallo's *La Bohème*, and the Czechs praised Mahler for not being intimidated by "attacks from German nationalist newspapers for allegedly Slavifying opera."⁹ Mahler was not alone in being responsible for the "Slavicising of the Vienna Court Opera and the Vienna Concert Hall" – in addition to *Onegin* and *Dalibor*, Dvořák's *Saint Ludmila* was also performed in Vienna – but it was certainly his enthusiastic efforts to transform the Court Opera that were behind the leak of a discreet but important piece of news for Czech readers: "Smetana's opera *Libuše* has been accepted for performance at the local court opera."¹⁰ When *Národní listy* quoted extensively from German periodicals after the Vienna premiere of *Dalibor*, they dismissed the commentary from *Deutsches Volksblatt* as banal and could not resist quoting extensively from German nationalist sarcasm:

So yesterday, the two-tailed Czech lion happily celebrated its entry into our opera in its highest form. It shone on the throne on which Vladislav sits in Act I as judge over the insolent Dalibor. We see the image of the Czech lion six times larger than life on the ceiling of the hall where the irritated king sits in the third

veliká, zcela nová jeho díla a na podzim celý Wagnerův cyklus chystají, nevzpomněl si v Národním divadle na našeho velikého mistra *pochťivě* nikdo." Anonymous, "Z Národního divadla," *Dalibor* 8, no. 17 (May 7, 1886): 8.

- ⁹ "útoků německo-nacionálních listů pro domnělé poslovanění opery." Anonymous, "Premiéra Evgenije Oněgina ve vídeňské opeře," *Národní listy* 37, no. 321 (November 20, 1897): 3–4, see 4. Antonín Dvořák experienced nationally motivated resistance to Czech music in Vienna as early as in the 1880s; see David Brodbeck, "Dvořák's Reception in Liberal Vienna: Language Ordinances, National Property, and the Rhetoric of Deutschtum," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 1 (2007): 72, 130 and Veronika Vejvodová and Barbora Števíková, "Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* in Vienna in 1888: Presentation of an Unknown Letter from Antonín Dvořák to Alfred Littleton and Period Critical Reaction," *Musicalia* 16, nos. 1–2 (2024): 110–41.
- ¹⁰ "Smetanova opera 'Libuše' přijata jest na zdejší dvorní opeře ku provozování." Anonymous, "Různé zprávy. Vídeň," *Dalibor* 20, no. 3–5 (November 27, 1897): 34.

act. One can imagine the rapture of Libuše's daughters and sons, who yesterday took every seat they could in our Opera House and celebrated their new success in their immodest manner. After all, the performance of the Czech national opera on the emperor's name day in German Vienna, as well as the announcement that we will soon be blessed by Libuše, should be considered. The Czech gentlemen have every reason to thank the Vienna Opera for the care and understanding it has shown for this premiere, not only by sending its best forces, but also by providing decorations and costumes at a cost that we miss when attending performances of precious German works. The external success of the novelty was enormous. Never before has our Opera seen such a storm of praise as yesterday.¹¹

Soon, the connection between Mahler and Smetana's *Libuše* became a media reality:

¹¹ "So hat der zweischwänzige böhmische Löwe gestern Abend denn glücklich in höchst eigener Person seinen Einzug in unsere Oper gehalten. Er prangt an der Rücklehre des Thronsessels, in dem König Wladislaw im ersten Acte über den kecken Dalibor zu Gericht sitzt und man sieht sein Bild sechsmal in Ueberlebensgröße an de Decke des Saales, in dem der gereizte König im dritten Acte Sitzung hält. Man kann sich das Entzücken der Söhne und Töchter Libussas vorstellen, die gestern die ihnen erreichbaren Plätze in unserer Oper fast vollständig occupirt hatten, um in ihrer nicht eben bescheidenen Weise den neuen Erfolg zu feiern, als der ja die Aufführung einer tschechischen Nationaloper am Namenstage des Kaiser sim deutschen Wien und die Unkündigung, daß wir auch mit der Libussa in Bälde beglückt werden sollen, sicher anzusehen sind. Wir behalten uns vor, auf die Novität, die den Wienern ja übrigens bereits aus dem Ausstellungstheater bekannt ist, und die Leistungen der Mitglieder unserer Oper noch zurückzukommen, und bemerken für heute nur, daß die Herren Tschechen alle Ursache haben, der Wiener Oper für die Sorgfalt und das Verständnis zu danken, die auf diese Premiere verwendet wurden. Nicht nur, daß man eine Reihe erster Kräfte, voran die Herren Winkelmann und Dippel, sowie Frau Sedlmaier in's Treffen schickte – nein, man stelte auch für Decorationen und Costüme Mittel zur Verfügung, die wir beim Besuch werthvollerer deutscher Werke oft schmerzlich vermiften. Der äußere Erfolg der Novität war ein kolossaler. Wohl noch niemals haben in unserer Oper so gewaltige Beifallsstürme getobt wie gestern." Anonymous, "Hofoperntheater," *Deutsches Volksblatt* 9, no. 3147 (October 5, 1897): 7. Original Czech, slightly shortened translation: "Tak tedy dvojocasý český lev včera šťastně v nejvyšší své osobě slavil svůj vjezd do naší opery. Skvěl se na lenochu trůnního křesla, ve kterém zasedá Vladislav v I. jednání nad drzým Daliborem jako soudce. Vidíme obraz českého lva šestkrát v nadživotní velikosti na stropě sálu, ve kterém podrážděný král zasedá v jednáním třetím. Možno si představit vytržení dcer a synů Libušiných, kteří včera zabrali kdekteré místo mohli v naší Opeře, kteří svým neskromným způsobem oslavili nový úspěch. Za takový přece provozování české národní opery v den jmenin císařových v německé Vidni, jakož i ohlášku, že budeme záhy obleženi [oprava: oblaženi] zároveň také *Libuší*, dlužno považovati. Páni Čechové mají všechnu příčinu, aby děkovali vídeňské Opeře za pečlivost a porozumění, které věnovala této premiéře. Nejen že vyslány první síly, ale opatřeny také dekorace a kostumy nákladem, kterého pohřešujeme při návštěvě drahocenných německých děl. Vnější úspěch novinky byl obrovský. Ještě nikdy v naší Opeře nezuřila tak mocná bouře pochvaly jako včera." Anonymous, "Smetanův 'Dalibor' ve dvorní opeře vídeňské," *Národní listy* 37, no. 276 (October 5, 1897, afternoon edition): 3.

We can rejoice twice over the success of *Dalibor* in Vienna. Smetana did not get there through any patronage, but [...] through the great intrinsic value of his work, which instantly overshadowed everything that contemporary opera production had to offer. We can rightly rejoice that Mahler [...] will perform the pinnacle of Smetana's art, his most Czech opera *Libuše*, with the same success.¹²

Czech Hopes Versus Mahler's Disagreement

From today's perspective, it seems that it was only a matter of time before the idea of staging *Libuše* abroad emerged. The overture to *Libuše* was popular with military bands and was included in the repertoire of foreign concerts.¹³ From correspondence between the conductor of the Provisional and National Theatres and Bedřich Smetana, we know that Adolf Čech intended to introduce Hans von Bülow to *Libuše* in 1881, which is why he sought out Wenzig's original libretto.¹⁴ However, only Mahler remained associated with the possible promotion of *Libuše* on German opera stages, and this legend became established. Jan Löwenbach also supported it in 1924, the year of the hundredth anniversary of Smetana's birth, when, after listing the Viennese premieres of Smetana's operas, he wrote: "No other Smetana operas were performed in Vienna; in particular, Mahler's intention to stage *Libuše* did not come to fruition."¹⁵ In the euphoria of 1924, Löwenbach somewhat forgot, as we shall see, the information about Mahler's opinion of *Libuše*, which he himself had requested from Karel Kovařovic in 1910.

If we are forced to look for the truth about the "German *Libuše*" outside Mahler's circle, then the closest we come to concrete steps is in the case of Hans Gregor, the director of the Wiener Hofoper, in 1911. Gregor entered into negotiations with Smetana's heirs in order to make textual changes, and he himself attended a performance of *Libuše* in Prague on Saturday, September 2nd, 1911.¹⁶

¹² "Nás může těšiti dvojnásob úspěch Dalibora ve Vídni. Nedostal se tam Smetana nijakou protekcí, nýbrž [...] velikou vnitřní cenou díla svého, jež rázem zastínila vše, co poskytovala veškerá současná operní produkce. Můžeme se právem těšiti, že Mahler [...] se stejným zdarem provede vrchol Smetanova umění, nejčestější jeho operu Libuši." F. P., "O dvorní opeře vídeňské," *Dalibor* 20, nos. 6–7 (December 11, 1897): 42–43, see 43 (Dalibor, December 11, 1897 | Národní knihovna České republiky | Digitální knihovna Kramerius (nkp.cz).

¹³ See, for example, the report on the premiere of the overture in Chemnitz: Anonymous, "Smetanovy dopisy," *Dalibor* 9, no. 32 (September 3, 1887): 251.

¹⁴ A. Čech to B. Smetana, Praha March 9th, 1881, in Jan Löwenbach, "U neznámé korespondence Smetanovy," *Hudební revue* 10, issue 7–8 (April–May 1917): 286–293.

¹⁵ Jan Löwenbach, "Smetana a Vídeň," *Lidové noviny* 32, no. 115 (March 4, 1924): 7.

¹⁶ See Anonymous, "Neueste Theaternachrichten," *Der Morgen. Wiener Montagblatt* 2, no. 36 (September 4, 1911): 6. The information was repeated by the newspaper (*Linzer*) *Tages-Post*: Anonymous, "Theater- und Kunstnotizen. Director Gregor," (*Linzer*) *Tages-Post* 47, no. 207 (September 10, 1911): 11. For comparison see *Archiv Národního divadla*, <https://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/predstaveni/26730> (accessed September 11, 2024).

The most forthcoming was *Národní listy*, which revealed why Gregor's plans had failed:

However, Smetana's heirs are opposed to reworking the end of the opera. It concerns Libuše's prophecy. According to Morgen, the reworking from Czech to German, or rather from the Czech spirit to the Viennese spirit, was taken over by a Viennese music writer, who is apparently meant to be the music correspondent of Extrablatt, [Hans] Liebstockel.¹⁷

In this light, and despite the strong Mahler cult in Prague, a comment made in the pages of *Hudební revue* in 1910 seems justified:

Mahler himself, a native of Bohemia, worked in Prague for many years, was a frequent visitor to the National Theatre, and knew Smetana, Dvořák, and Fibich, not to mention the others, but apart from *Dalibor*, which was still new when he arrived at the court opera, and *The Bartered Bride*, which remained a favourite opera in the repertoire until Heš's death, he did not even touch upon Smetana.¹⁸

We cannot rule out the intention of the Volksoper director Rainer Simons, although we are unable to substantiate the source of such information: "Mahler probably planned *Libussa*, which he placed ahead of all Smetana's other operas because of its monumentality, but this plan failed – similarly to the later plan of the director Simons – because of the mythical-patriotic text, especially the finale with the living pictures."¹⁹

Let us try to stick strictly to verifiable facts. The Weinberger publishing house had been offering Smetana's operas (except for *The Devil's Wall*) to Wilhelm

¹⁷ "Dědicové Smetanovi však vzpírají se proti předělání konce opery té. Jedná se o věštbu Libušinu. Prepracování z českého textu na německý, resp. z českého ducha na vídeňský, převzal podle Morgen vídeňský hudební spisovatel, kterým je patrně míněn hudební zpravodaj Extrablattu [Hans] Liebstockel." Anonymous, "Smetanova Libuše ve Vídni," *Národní listy* 51, no. 244 (September 4, 1911): 3. We would like to thank Vlasta Reittererová for introducing us to Hans Gregor's initiative. She has been assisting our research on *Libuše* with extraordinary kindness for several years now.

¹⁸ "Mahler sám rodem z Čech, dlouhá léta stejně působil v Praze, byl pilným návštěvovatelem Národního divadla, znal tedy jak Smetanu i Dvořáka i Fibicha, o ostatních ani nemluvě, ale mimo *Dalibora*, který byl při jeho příchodu do dvorní opery ještě nový, a *Prodanou nevěstu*, která do smrti Hešovy oblíbenou operou repertoáru zůstala, o Smetanu ani nezavádlil." Bedřich Hlaváč, "Z Vídneň," *Hudební revue*, Volume 3 (March 1910): 159–164, see 161.

¹⁹ "Wohl plante Mahler noch *Libussa*, die er ihrer Monumentalität wegen allen anderen Opernwerken Smetanas voransetzte, doch scheiterte dieses Vorhaben – ähnlich wie der spätere Plan des Direktors Simons – am mythisch-patriotischen Text, insbesondere am Schluß mit den lebenden Bildern." J. B. Löwenbach, "Smetana und Wien," *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt* 53, no. 64 (March 5, 1924): 6.

Jahn, the director of the court opera in Vienna, since 1892.²⁰ Jahn staged the comic operas – *The Bartered Bride*, *The Kiss*, and *The Secret* – but hesitated over *Dalibor*. Mahler, who had already conducted *Dalibor* in Hamburg, inherited this commitment from Jahn and staged Smetana's opera even before his appointment as director. Neither Jahn nor Mahler seems to have considered *Libuše*. However, Mahler was evidently reminded of *Libuše* repeatedly, and so in the spring of 1899 he visited the National Theatre in Prague, “[...] since *Libuše* is to be staged at the Vienna Court Opera in the coming winter season.”²¹ All that remains of Mahler's reaction is a laconic report of Mahler's enthusiasm and polite congratulations on the performance of *Libuše*.²² Only with the passage of time did Jan Löwenbach ask Karel Kovařovic to recall Mahler's visit, and the report recorded in 1910 sounds credible:

The result was eagerly awaited: what impression would Smetana's work make on Mahler? Even after the performance, Smetana's admirers were unexpectedly disappointed. “The national opera belongs only in the National Theatre,” was Mahler's brief judgment, and *Libuše* was not performed at the Vienna Court Opera [...] *Libuše*'s prophecy was deemed objectionable [...]. And so – unfortunately – for petty nationalistic reasons – there is indeed little hope that Smetana's greatest work will ever cross the narrow threshold of his homeland, which is not only to the detriment of Czech musical art, but also to the detriment of dramatic opera composition in general.²³

²⁰ Vlasta Reittererová and Hubert Reitterer, *Vier Dutzend rote Strümpfe... Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der Verkauften Braut von Bedřich Smetana in Wien am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004), 161.

²¹ “[...] ježto *Libuše* v nejbližším zimním období má být uvedena na jeviště dvorní opery vídeňské.” Anonymous, “Dramatické umění,” *Národní listy* 39, no. 132 (May 13, 1899): 4. Mahler was in close contact with the director of the National Theatre, F. A. Šubert, as evidenced by Mahler's letters stored in the LA PNP (fund F. A. Šubert) and the National Theatre Archive fund in the National Archives. We would like to thank Kateřina Viktorová for drawing our attention to Mahler's telegram to F. A. Šubert from Vienna to Prague (May 7, [1899]), in which he inquires about the performance of *Libuše* at the National Theatre (NA, fund National Theatre Archive, sign. D 211/156).

²² Anonymous, “Dramatické umění,” *Národní listy* 39, no. 136 (May 17, 1899): 4. Mahler listened to *Libuše* on May 15th, 1899, and Fibich's *Šárka* on May 16th.

²³ “S napětím očekáván výsledek, jaký dojem Smetanovo dílo na Mahlera udělá! – Ještě po představení dostalo se titelům Smetanovým neočekávaného zklamání. ‘Národní opera patří zase jen do Národního divadla’ zněl krátký úsudek Mahlerův a k provedení *Libuše* ve vídeňské dvorní opeře nedošlo [...] Závadným shledáno *Libušino* prořectví [...]. A tak – bohužel – z malicherných příčin národnostních – jest vskutku málo naděje, že nejskvělejší dílo Smetanovo kdy překročí úzký práh domoviny a to nejen ku škodě českého hudebního umění, ale též ku škodě dramatické operní tvorby vůbec.” Manuscript of Kovařovic's article on *Libuše*, pp. 3–4. See the letter from Karel Kovařovic to Jan Löwenbach from October 9th, 1910 and Kovařovic's article *Smetanova “Libuše”* [4 pages]. Stored at Literární archiv Památníku národního písemnictví v Praze, fund Jan

To this recollection, we should add that Kovařovic unequivocally rejected proposals to delete the prophecy from the opera, as such an intervention would destroy the very structure and meaning of the work.

Two names stand out in the preserved printed materials of Josef Weinberger's publishing house: Oscar Straus and Ludwig Hartmann. The well-known operetta composer Oscar Straus created a two-handed piano reduction with only textual references to key situations in the opera – such material could be useful during theatre rehearsals and be handy for the assistant conductor, the maestro suggeritore. Ludwig Hartmann was well known and appreciated in the Czech environment from the 1880s onwards as a nationally unbiased admirer of Czech music, especially that of Smetana.²⁴ However, his well-intentioned proposals to merge the Czech and German theatres in Prague were met with polite

Löwenbach, box. 1, received correspondence, file Karel Kovařovic (More detailed information about Jan Löwenbach's extensive heritage is provided by Marek Pechač, "Jan Löwenbach and the Beginnings of his Collaboration with the Artists' Society," *Hudební věda* 62, no. 2 (2025): 170–205, see 172). If we are to believe J. B. Foerster, Mahler would have approached the problem from a purely artistic point of view: "He was enthusiastic about *Libuše*, and we discussed at length how to adapt the final act for foreign audiences. Mahler did not mind the patriotic fervour, but he regretted that the final act, after a purely theatrical reconciliation, was lost in one endless, motionless tableau vivant. As is well known, Mahler, the director of the court opera, also attempted to stage *Libuše*, but unfortunately, here too, his efforts were in vain." ("Nadšen byl pro *Libuši* a radili jsme se dlouho o úpravě posledního aktu pro cizinu. Mahlerovi nevadilo vlastenecké nadšení, ale litoval, že poslední akt po čistě divadelním smíru, ztrácí se v jeden nekonečný, nehybný živý obraz. Jak známo, pokoušel se i ve dvorní opěře ředitel Mahler o provedení *Libuše*, bohužel, i zde marně.") Josef Bohuslav Foerster, "Z mých vzpomínek na Gustava Mahlera," *Smetana* 1, nos. 17–18 (June 2, 1911): 264–266; see 266.

²⁴ A critic in *Národní listy* wittily characterised him thus: "He belongs to the variety of 'righteous Germans,' namely those who are not bothered when they hear a Czech word spoken. They are Germans whom we show off like white crows, four-legged chickens, and other curiosities, sending them from house to house, from uncle to uncle, so that everyone can see them, enjoy them, and be pleased by them. That is why we so gladly quote their statements." ("Patří k odrůdě 'spravedlivých Němců,' totiž těch, kterým se nedělá nanic, slyší-li vysloviti české slovo. Jsou to Němci, které si jako bílé vrány, jako kuřata o čtyrech nohách a jiné kuriozity ukazujeme a posíláme od domu k domu, od strýčka ke strýčkovi, aby je každý viděl, každý se jimi pokochal a potěšil. Proto tak rádi citujeme jejich výroky.") Anonymous, "Theatralia," *Národní listy* 28, no. 359 (December 28, 1888): 2–3; see 2.

disagreement on the Czech side.²⁵ The work of the esteemed critic and translator²⁶ also corresponded to the opera practice of the time and at the same time reflected the politics of the era, as he gave careful consideration to nationally sensitive passages (Example 1).²⁷ In accordance with the idea of modern Wagnerian drama, Hartmann tried not to repeat words, and in ensembles each character was given their own text (Example 2). He was praised by the Czech side for his respect for Smetana and for making the work accessible to German audiences, even though the Czech press doubted the possibility of *Libuše* being staged in Vienna.²⁸ As expected, Libuše's prophecy became the proverbial stumbling block.

²⁵ An anonymous critic in *Národní listy* rejected this view on nationalist grounds: "For now, we stand opposite each other in the field, and it is not reason that reigns here, but passion. For now, we are eager to see who is stronger. When one kneels on the other's chest, then perhaps it will be time for a third to step in and wisely help to settle our mutual affairs." ("Prozatím stojíme tu proti sobě v poli a tu nepanuje rozvaha, nýbrž vášně. Prozatím jsme žádostivi, kdo je silnější. Až bude jeden druhému klečeti na prsou, pak snad bude čas, aby přistoupil třetí a moudře nějak společnou naši záležitost pomáhal vyrovnati.") Anonymous, "Theatralia," *Národní listy* 28, no. 359 (December 28, 1888): 2–3; see 3. Václav Vladimír Zelený, writing in *Hlas národa*, also considered Hartmann's proposal unfeasible, even in the distant future, assuming national reconciliation: "If the reconciled population of Bohemia – say, in the 22nd century – flourished in the purest tribal love, theatre (like all verbal artistic institutions) could not be connected; indeed, it would be even less conceivable than ever before. Nationalities at the height of their idealistic flight would need perfect, unrestricted institutions for the cultivation of their poetry and song – only in the practice of pure instrumental music and the visual arts could they then unite. Such would be the utopian ideal." ("Když by smířené obyvatelstvo v Čechách – třeba ve XXII. století – rozkvétalo v nejčistší lásce kmenové, divadla [jako všechny slovesné ústavy umělecké] nemohla by býti spojena, ano právě po tom zase dalo by se to myslit ještě méně než kdy jindy. Národnosti na vrcholu ideálního rozletu potřebovaly by přec dokonalých, nestíněných ústavů na pěstování své poezie a svého zpěvu – jen při provozování pouhé hudby nástrojové a výtvarných umění mohly by se pak spojovat. Takový by byl stav utopicky ideální.") X. Y. [Václav Vladimír Zelený], "Možnosti a nemožnosti. – Liškův obraz," *Hlas národa* 3, no. 2 (January 2, 1889): 1.

²⁶ Emanuel Chvála, *Z mých paměti hudebních*, eds. Filip Karlík and Jiří Kopecký (Olomouc: Vydavatelství Univerzity Palackého, 2020), 127.

²⁷ It remains unclear whether Hartmann consulted Mahler about his translation, as it is possible that Mahler built on their successful collaboration in Hamburg, where he had prepared a German translation of Smetana's *The Kiss*, which was translated by Hartmann. For more see Kateřina Viktorová, "The Promoting of Smetana's Operas in Hamburg from 1881 to 1897," *Musicalia* 16, nos. 1–2 (2024): 35–58; see 54. Regarding Mahler's enthusiasm for Smetana's operas during his time in Hamburg see Josef Bohuslav Foerster, *Poutník v Hamburku* (Sínx, 1939), 49.

²⁸ h., "Německá Libuše," *Národní listy* 38, no. 4 (January 4, 1898, afternoon edition): 1–2.

Example 1 In Přemysl’s song about linden trees, Hartmann skilfully removed passages that could provoke strong reactions from German opera audiences toward this emblematic work of Czech culture. Hartmann replaced the word “nation” with “people:”

<p>Přemysl (II/scene 4) Právem zasvěceny národu jste mému! You [linden trees] are rightfully sacred to my nation.²⁹</p>	<p>Přemysl (II/Vierte Szene) Heilig hält Euch mit Recht Seit der Vorzeit der Menschen Geschlecht!³⁰ You are rightly considered sacred [linden trees], since the dawn of humanity! Heilig halten Euch seit der Vorzeit die Menschen!³¹ People have held you sacred since ancient times!</p>
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Example 2 Hartmann replaced every repetition in Smetana’s musical setting with new phrases, which also applies to the brief anticipation of Přemysl’s arrival in Act 3. The literal translation is: “Not long now and he’s here, he draws near!”

<p>Libuše (III/scene 2) Avšak on jde, on jde, on jde! But, he is coming! He is coming! He is coming!³²</p>	<p>Libuše (III/Zweite Szene) Nicht lang, und er ist da, er naht!³³ Not long now and he’ll be here, he draws near! Nicht lang, und er ist da, nah’ schon...³⁴ Not long now, and he’ll be here, almost here...</p>
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The Prophecy as an Insurmountable Problem

Even before the premiere of *Libuše*, Otakar Hostinský and Emanuel Chvála, the opera critics commissioned to open the National Theatre, had doubts about the

²⁹ Pavel Petránek, ed., *Bedřich Smetana & opera. Libreta všech dokončených oper / Librettos of All Completed Operas*, trans. Hana Pavelková (Národní divadlo moravskoslezské, 2024), 164.

³⁰ Friedrich Smetana, *Libussa, Festoper in drei Akten und lebenden Bildern, Dichtung von J. Wenzig, deutsch bearbeitet von Ludwig Hartmann (Textbuch)* (Leipzig: Josef Weinberger, [after 1897]), 29.

³¹ Friedrich Smetana, *Libussa, Fest-Oper in 3 Akten und lebenden Bildern, Dichtung von J. Wenzig, deutsch bearbeitet von Ludwig Hartmann (Klavierauszug mit Text)* (Leipzig: Josef Weinberger, J. W. 1968, [after 1897]), 138. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Musiksammlung, F18. Schalk. 444/210.

³² Literal translation from Petránek, *Bedřich Smetana & opera*, 169.

³³ Friedrich Smetana, *Libussa, Festoper in drei Akten und lebenden Bildern, Dichtung von J. Wenzig, deutsch bearbeitet von Ludwig Hartmann (Textbuch)* (Leipzig: Josef Weinberger [after 1897]), 37.

³⁴ Friedrich Smetana, *Libussa, Fest-Oper in 3 Akten und lebenden Bildern, Dichtung von J. Wenzig, deutsch bearbeitet von Ludwig Hartmann (Klavierauszug mit Text)* (Leipzig: Josef Weinberger, J. W. 1968, [after 1897]), 179–180.

effectiveness of the *tableau vivant*.³⁵ It was Chvála who preserved the memory of 1892, when *Libuše* was proposed for the programme of the aforementioned International Theatre and Music Exhibition:

Smetana was the only one to be promised two of the six evenings agreed upon in advance at the exhibition theatre (originally, *Libuše* and *Dalibor* were to be performed, but then, for external reasons, out of fear that the apotheosis of *Libuše* in Vienna might be considered provocative, *The Bartered Bride* was put in its place).³⁶

After fifteen years of operation of the “golden chapel,”³⁷ another opportunity to stage *Libuše* in Vienna raised similar considerations. In 1898, Josef Boleška pointed out that *Libuše* should not be performed so often as a regular repertoire title and, for the adaptation of the opera into German, he proposed ending the third act with Chruďoš's reconciliation with *Libuše*.³⁸

Mahler might have been able to afford to cut Smetana's work in such a drastic manner, as Prague intellectuals were considering, but not Smetana's admirer Ludwig Hartmann, who based his adaptation on Václav Juda Novotný's version and emphasised regional patriotism instead of Czech nationalism (see the table below).

The change from “Böhmen's Volk” to “Böhmerland” may have been prompted by an article in *Národní listy*, which presented Hartmann with an exaggerated vision of political conflict:

We do not know how the German audience will react to a possible performance. Today, at least, *Libuše*'s prophecy would arouse “the deepest indignation of the German people” and ministers would certainly be impeached if Mrs. Sedlmaierová (the magnificent Milada from *Dalibor*) prophesied:

“Böhmen's Volk wird nie vergeh'n,
wird nach Kampf im Licht ersteh'n!

³⁵ In a series of letters to Adolf Čech, Smetana pointed out the exceptional dramaturgical solution of his *Libuše* and was aware of the operational obstacles. For more see Milan Pospíšil, “Smetana's Operas in His Correspondence,” in *Bedřich Smetana and European Opera*, eds. Aleš Březina and Ivana Rentsch (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2024), 173–201; see 197.

³⁶ “Smetanovi jedinému vyhrazeny hned předem dva ze šesti sjednaných večerů ve výstavním divadle (původně zamýšlelo se provedení *Libuše* a *Dalibora*, pak z příčin vnějších, z obavy, že by apoteóza *Libuše* ve Vídni mohla býti považována za provokativní, položena na její místo *Prodaná nevěsta*.)” Chvála, *Z mých paměti hudebních*, 144.

³⁷ A familiar nickname for the National Theatre owing to its gilded rooftop.

³⁸ Josef Boleška, “Smetaniana,” *Národní listy* 38, no. 131 (May 12, 1898): 1–2.

(The Czech nation will not perish,
it will gloriously overcome all horrors!)”³⁹

J. Wenzig (1866)	Mein theures Böhmenvolk wird nicht vergeh'n, Aus Grabesnächten herrlich neuersteh'n!
J. Wenzig / E. Špindler / B. Smetana (1872)	Můj drahý národ český neskoná, on pekla hrůzy slavně překoná! (všichni na jevišti s jásotem) Národ český neskoná, on pekla hrůzy slavně překoná! Sláva! Sláva! Sláva! My dear Czech nation shall never perish, it will overcome all horrors of hell! Czech nation shall never perish, it will overcome all horrors of hell! Hail! Hail! Hail! ⁴⁰
V. J. Novotný (1884) ⁴¹	Můj drahý národ český neskoná, on hrůzy všechny slavně překoná! My dear Czech nation shall never perish. it will gloriously overcome all horrors . ⁴²
L. Hartmann (1897) ⁴³	Böhmens Volk wird nie vergeh'n, wird nach Kampf im Licht ersteh'n!

³⁹ “Jak se německé obecnstvo zachová při eventuálním představení, ovšem nevíme. Dnes alespoň by prorocství Libuše vzbudilo ‘nejhlubší rozhořčení německého lidu’ a ministři by byli zajisté dáni v obžalobu, kdyby tak paní Sedlmaierová (skvozná Milada z Dalibora) věstila: ‘Böhmens Volk wird nie vergeh'n, / wird nach Kampf im Licht ersteh'n!’ (‘Národ český neskoná, / on hrůzy všechny slavně překoná!’).” h., “Německá Libuše,” 2. Regarding the cast of Smetana’s *Dalibor* at the Vienna Court Opera on October 4th, 1897 see *Wiener Staatsoper Archive*, <https://archiv.wiener-staatsoper.at/performances/22816> (accessed September 13, 2024).

⁴⁰ Translated from Petráněk, *Bedřich Smetana & opera*, 176.

⁴¹ Josef Wenzig, *Libuše. Slavnostní zpěvovbra o 3 jednáních* (F. A. Urbánek, 1884), 46.

⁴² Translation by Šimon Pužej.

⁴³ Friedrich Smetana, *Libussa. Oper in drei Akten von Josef Wenzig, für die deutsche Bühne bearbeitet von Ludwig Hartmann, Clavier-Auszug zu zwei Händen (arr. von Oscar Straus)* (Leipzig: Josef Weinberger, J. W., 1885 [1897]), 164. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Musiksammlung, MS1569-4 (cf. MS324-4, Universal Edition, No. 413 / J. W. 885).

<p>L. Hartmann (after 1897)⁴⁴</p>	<p><i>Nie kann vergeh'n mein teures Böhmerland!</i> (begeistert) <i>Nie geht's zu Grund! Fest wird es alle Schrecken</i> Einst glorreich übersteh'n! ALLGEMEINER CHOR Götter! Fest laßt Böhmen steh'n, Seiner Feinde Ende seh'n. Schütz die Krone, schützt das Land, Wendet Unheil ab mit starker Hand. Heil Böhmen dir, Blüh' für und für!</p> <p><i>It shall never perish, my dearest Bohemian country!</i> It shall never perish! One day it will firmly overcome all horrors with glory! CHORUS TUTTI Gods! Let Bohemia stand firm, It will see the end of its enemies. Protect the crown, protect the land, ward off misfortune with your mighty hand. Glory to you, Bohemia, may you flourish forever!</p>
<p>L. Hartmann (after 1897)⁴⁵</p>	<p>Nie kann vergehn mein teures Böhmerland! (mit höchster Begeisterung) Nie wird's vergehn, stark wird's der Zeiten Schrecken glorreich überstehn! CHOR Götter! Fest laßt Böhmen steh'n, seiner Feinde Ende seh'n. Schütz die Krone, schützt das Land, Wendet Unheil ab mit starker Hand! Heil Böhmen dir, Blühe für und für!</p>

The question of what *Libuše's* prophecy would have sounded like if it had been performed in Vienna remains, given that the text of Dvořák's *Saint Ludmila* was extensively revised, a fact that did not escape the attention of the Czech press: "In Dvořák's oratorio *Saint Ludmila*, performed here for the first time on Sunday, the words (German translation): 'Glück und Heil dem Böhmen Land' are found. The last word had to be changed to 'Vaterland' for German ears."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Friedrich Smetana, *Libussa, Festoper in drei Akten und lebenden Bildern, Dichtung von J. Wenzig, deutsch bearbeitet von Ludwig Hartmann (Textbuch)* (Leipzig: Josef Weinberger [after 1897]), 48.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Smetana, *Libussa, Fest-Oper in 3 Akten und lebenden Bildern, Dichtung von J. Wenzig, deutsch bearbeitet von Ludwig Hartmann (Klavierauszug mit Text)* (Leipzig: Josef Weinberger, J. W. 1968, [after 1897]), 251–256. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Musiksammlung, F18. Schalk. 444/210 (cf. MS4856-4, same edition).

⁴⁶ "Ve Dvořákově oratoriu Svatá Ludmila, v neděli zde poprvé provozovaném, nalezejí se slova (německý překlad): 'Glück und Heil dem Böhmen Land.' Poslední slovo musilo se změnit pro uši

The Remarkable Position of *Libuše* in Czech Culture

The possibility of staging *Libuše* in Vienna took place in a hostile political atmosphere, which can be summed up by Mahler's description from 1908, when the world premiere of his *7th Symphony* took place in Prague: "My symphony will be performed on September 19th in Prague, unless the Czechs and Germans get into a fight before then."⁴⁷ *Libuše's* unrealised international career leaves a certain stigma – with humility, a willingness to make cuts, and a call to appreciate the artistic value of the work, the Czechs crossed their national borders and cared all the more about *Libuše's* place in their own social life. Smetana's music became part of the demarcation of the space that the Czechs claim as their own, but also the key to the Czechs' willingness to let the borders fall.

The fin-de-siècle Wagnerians could burn with love for Smetana regardless of nationality.⁴⁸ But these were exceptions; the average opera-goer lacked (and still lacks) an emotionally powerful relationship with the main characters in *Libuše*. On the other hand, where there is no lack of understanding for *Libuše's* love for her nation, the ideas about a work intended for a major political event (coronation – inauguration of the president) are fully realised. The pre-war opera director Karel Kovařovic based the structure of the Wagnerian opera cycle on *Libuše*; Kovařovic realised his dream of a Czech counterpart to Wagner's tetralogy and turned the National Theatre into a Czech Bayreuth.⁴⁹ Even Wenzig's much-criticised libretto, including the idea of ending the opera with the song *Kde domov můj* (*Where My Home Is*), did not fit in (see Ema Destinnová's portrayal of *Libuše* after World War I; see also the conclusion of the 1955 film *Z mého života* [*From My Life*] directed by Václav Krška).

It is tempting to try to answer the question of what would have happened if Gustav Mahler had performed *Libuše* in Vienna. Given his massive interventions in *Dalibor*, he might have been able to draw attention to the successful musical moments in *Libuše* as well; would the scene at the mound in Act 2 have stood up? In the case of the prophecy, either its removal or its performance would have caused a scandal on either the Czech or German side. With a great deal

německé ve 'Vaterland.'" Anonymous, "Z Vidně," *Národní listy* 37, no. 318 (November 17, 1897, afternoon edition): [1].

⁴⁷ "Meine Symphonie kommt nun am 19. September in Prag heraus – falls bis dahin nicht Tschechen und Deutsche in die Haare gefahren sind." Z Mahlerova dopisu Bruno Walterovi (Toblach, July 18, 1908), quoted from Jitka Ludvová, "Gustav Mahler in Prag im Mai 1908," *Hudební věda* 23, no. 3 (1986): 255–263; see 256.

⁴⁸ See Jaroslav Maria, *Já, vlastní životopis*, ed. F. Hynek (Academia, 2020), 58.

⁴⁹ See performances of the opera trilogy: Fibich's *Šárka* (October 14, 1904; Archiv ND (narodni-divadlo.cz), Smetana's *Libuše* (November 18, 1904; Archiv ND (narodni-divadlo.cz), Ostrčil's *Vlasty skon* (December 14, 1904; Archiv ND (narodni-divadlo.cz)).

of exaggeration, we could describe *Libuše* in Vienna around 1900 as an artistic assassination, and there would have been no need to wait for Sarajevo. Or could it? Could a miracle have happened, fulfilling the dreamlike vision jokingly and ironically described by *Národní listy* in 1899, which included Smetana's music? Let us also be carried away by this idea: if the Czechs and Germans were to become brothers, the Czechs would speak German and the Germans would speak Czech. The orchestras of both the Prague representative theatres (the Czech National Theatre and the New German Theatre) would join forces and play Smetana's *Výšebrad* and Beethoven's *Eroica*. The Germans would allow the emperor to be crowned King of Bohemia, and this state of affairs would be sealed by "children of peace" – Germans from the Czech lands would name their children Václav and Libuše, while Czechs would name theirs Siegfried and Kriemhilde.⁵⁰

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