

= The Bartered Bride =

The Bartered Bride ( Czech : Prodaná nevěsta , The Sold Bride ) is a comic opera in three acts by the Czech composer Bedřich Smetana , to a libretto by Karel Sabina . The work is generally regarded as a major contribution towards the development of Czech music . It was composed during the period 1863 ? 66 , and first performed at the Provisional Theatre , Prague , on 30 May 1866 in a two @-@ act format with spoken dialogue .

Set in a country village and with realistic characters , it tells the story of how , after a late surprise revelation , true love prevails over the combined efforts of ambitious parents and a scheming marriage broker .

The opera was not immediately successful , and was revised and extended in the following four years . In its final version , premiered in 1870 , it rapidly gained popularity and eventually became a worldwide success .

Czech national opera until this time had been represented only by minor , rarely performed works . This opera , Smetana 's second , was part of his quest to create a truly Czech operatic genre . Smetana 's musical treatment made considerable use of traditional Bohemian dance forms such as the polka and furiant , and although he largely avoided the direct quotation of folksong he nevertheless created music considered by Czechs to be quintessentially Czech in spirit .

The overture , often played as a concert piece independently from the opera , was , unusually , composed before almost any of the other music had been written .

After a performance at the Vienna Music and Theatre Exhibition of 1892 , the opera achieved international recognition . It was performed in Chicago in 1893 , London in 1895 and reached New York in 1909 , subsequently becoming the first , and for many years the only , Czech opera in the general repertory .

Many of these early international performances were in German , under the title Die verkaufte Braut , and the German @-@ language version continues to be played and recorded . A German film of the opera was made in 1932 by Max Ophüls .

= = Context = =

Until the middle 1850s Bedřich Smetana was known in Prague principally as a teacher , pianist and composer of salon pieces . His failure to achieve wider recognition in the Bohemian capital led him to depart in 1856 for Sweden , where he spent the next five years . During this period he extended his compositional range to large @-@ scale orchestral works in the descriptive style championed by Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner . Liszt was Smetana 's long @-@ time mentor ; he had accepted a dedication of the latter 's Opus 1 : Six Characteristic Pieces for Piano in 1848 , and had encouraged the younger composer 's career since then . In September 1857 Smetana visited Liszt in Weimar , where he met Peter Cornelius , a follower of Liszt 's who was working on a comic opera , Der Barbier von Bagdad . Their discussions centred on the need to create a modern style of comic opera , as a counterbalance to Wagner 's new form of music drama . A comment was made by the Viennese conductor Johann von Herbeck to the effect that Czechs were incapable of making music of their own , a remark which Smetana took to heart : " I swore there and then that no other than I should beget a native Czech music . "

Smetana did not act immediately on this aspiration . The announcement that a Provisional Theatre was to be opened in Prague , as a home for Czech opera and drama pending the building of a permanent National Theatre , influenced his decision to return permanently to his homeland in 1861 . He was then spurred to creative action by the announcement of a prize competition , sponsored by the Czech patriot Jan von Harrach , to provide suitable operas for the Provisional Theatre . By 1863 he had written The Brandenburgers in Bohemia to a libretto by the Czech nationalist poet Karel Sabina , whom Smetana had met briefly in 1848 . The Brandenburgers , which was awarded the opera prize , was a serious historical drama , but even before its completion Smetana was noting down themes for use in a future comic opera . By this time he had heard the music of Cornelius 's Der Barbier , and was ready to try his own hand at the comic genre .

= = Composition history = =

= = = Libretto = = =

For his libretto , Smetana again approached Sabina , who by 5 July 1863 had produced an untitled one @-@ act sketch in German . Over the following months Sabina was encouraged to develop this into a full @-@ length text , and to provide a Czech translation . According to Smetana 's biographer Brian Large , this process was prolonged and untidy ; the manuscript shows amendments and additions in Smetana 's own hand , and some pages apparently written by Smetana 's wife Bettina ( who may have been receiving dictation ) . By the end of 1863 a two @-@ act version , with around 20 musical numbers separated by spoken dialogue , had been assembled . Smetana 's diary indicates that he , rather than Sabina , chose the work 's title because " the poet did not know what to call it . " The translation " Sold Bride " is strictly accurate , but the more euphonious " Bartered Bride " has been adopted throughout the English @-@ speaking world . Sabina evidently did not fully appreciate Smetana 's intention to write a full @-@ length opera , later commenting : " If I had suspected what Smetana would make of my operetta , I should have taken more pains and written him a better and more solid libretto . "

The Czech music specialist John Tyrrell has observed that , despite the casual way in which The Bartered Bride 's libretto was put together , it has an intrinsic " Czechness " , being one of the few in the Czech language written in trochees ( a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one ) , matching the natural first @-@ syllable emphasis in the Czech language .

= = = Composition = = =

By October 1862 , well before the arrival of any libretto or plot sketch , Smetana had noted down 16 bars which later became the theme of The Bartered Bride 's opening chorus . In May 1863 he sketched eight bars which he eventually used in the love duet " Faithful love can 't be marred " , and later that summer , while still awaiting Sabina 's revised libretto , he wrote the theme of the comic number " We 'll make a pretty little thing " . He also produced a piano version of the entire overture , which was performed in a public concert on 18 November . In this , he departed from his normal practice of leaving the overture until last .

The opera continued to be composed in a piecemeal fashion , as Sabina 's libretto gradually took shape . Progress was slow , and was interrupted by other work . Smetana had become Chorus Master of the Hlahol Choral Society in 1862 , and spent much time rehearsing and performing with the Society . He was deeply involved in the 1864 Shakespeare Festival in Prague , conducting Berlioz 's Romeo et Juliette and composing a festival march . That same year he became music correspondent of the Czech language newspaper Národní listy . Smetana 's diary for December 1864 records that he was continuing to work on The Bartered Bride ; the piano score was completed by October 1865 . It was then put aside so that the composer could concentrate on his third opera Dalibor . Smetana evidently did not begin the orchestral scoring of The Bartered Bride until , following the successful performance of The Brandenburgers in January 1866 , the management of the Provisional Theatre decided to stage the new opera during the following summer . The scoring was completed rapidly , between 20 February and 16 March .

= = Roles = =

= = Synopsis = =

= = = Act 1 = = =

A crowd of villagers is celebrating at the church fair ( " Let 's rejoice and be merry " ) . Among them are Ma?enka and Jeník . Ma?enka is unhappy because her parents want her to marry someone she has never met . They will try to force her into this , she says . Her desires are for Jeník even though , as she explains in her aria " If I should ever learn " , she knows nothing of his background . The couple then declare their feelings for each other in a passionate love duet ( " Faithful love can 't be marred " ) .

As the pair leave separately , Ma?enka 's parents , Ludmila and Kru?ina , enter with the marriage broker Kecal . After some discussion , Kecal announces that he has found a groom for Ma?enka ? Va?ek , younger son of Tobiáš? Mícha , a wealthy landowner ; the older son , he explains , is a worthless good @-@ for @-@ nothing . Kecal extols the virtues of Va?ek ( " He 's a nice boy , well brought up " ) , as Ma?enka re @-@ enters . In the subsequent quartet she responds by saying that she already has a chosen lover . Send him packing , orders Kecal . The four argue , but little is resolved . Kecal decides he must convince Jeník to give up Ma?enka , as the villagers return , singing and dancing a festive polka .

= = = Act 2 = = =

The men of the village join in a rousing drinking song ( " To beer ! " ) , while Jeník and Kecal argue the merits , respectively , of love and money over beer . The women enter , and the whole group joins in dancing a furiant . Away from the jollity the nervous Va?ek muses over his forthcoming marriage in a stuttering song ( " My @-@ my @-@ my mother said to me " ) . Ma?enka appears , and guesses immediately who he is , but does not reveal her own identity . Pretending to be someone else , she paints a picture of " Ma?enka " as a treacherous deceiver . Va?ek is easily fooled , and when Ma?enka , in her false guise , pretends to woo him ( " I know of a maiden fair " ) , he falls for her charms and swears to give Ma?enka up .

Meanwhile , Kecal is attempting to buy Jeník off , and after some verbal fencing makes a straight cash offer : a hundred florins if Jeník will renounce Ma?enka . Not enough , is the reply . When Kecal increases the offer to 300 florins , Jeník pretends to accept , but imposes a condition ? no one but Mícha 's son will be allowed to wed Ma?enka . Kecal agrees , and rushes off to prepare the contract . Alone , Jeník ponders the deal he has apparently made to barter his beloved ( " When you discover whom you 've bought " ) , wondering how anyone could believe that he would really do this , and finally expressing his love for Ma?enka .

Kecal summons the villagers to witness the contract he has made ( " Come inside and listen to me " ) . He reads the terms : Ma?enka is to marry no one but Mícha 's son . Kru?ina and the crowd marvel at Jeník 's apparent self @-@ denial , but the mood changes when they learn that he has been paid off . The Act ends with Jeník being denounced by Kru?ina and the rest of the assembly as a rascal .

= = = Act 3 = = =

Va?ek expresses his confusions in a short , sad song ( " I can 't get it out of my head " ) , but is interrupted by the arrival of a travelling circus . The Ringmaster introduces the star attractions : Esmeralda , the Spanish dancer , a " real Indian " sword swallower , and a dancing bear . A rapid folk @-@ dance , the sko?ná , follows . Va?ek is entranced by Esmeralda , but his timid advances are interrupted when the " Indian " rushes in , announcing that the " bear " has collapsed in a drunken stupor . A replacement is required . Va?ek is soon persuaded to take the job , egged on by Esmeralda 's flattering words ( " We 'll make a pretty thing out of you " ) .

The circus folk leave . Vasek 's parents ? Mícha and Háta ? arrive , with Kecal . Va?ek tells them that he no longer wants to marry Ma?enka , having learned her true nature from a beautiful , strange girl . They are horrified ( " He does not want her ? what has happened ? " ) . Va?ek runs off , and moments later Ma?enka arrives with her parents . She has just learned of Jeník 's deal with Kecal , and a lively ensemble ( " No , no , I don 't believe it " ) ensues . Matters are further complicated

when Vašek returns , recognises Mařenka as his " strange girl " , and says that he will happily marry her . In the sextet which follows ( " Make your mind up , Mařenka " ) , Mařenka is urged to think things over . They all depart , leaving her alone .

In her aria ( " Oh what grief " ) , Mařenka sings of her betrayal . When Jeník appears , she rebuffs him angrily , and declares that she will marry Vašek . Kecal arrives , and is amused by Jeník 's attempts to pacify Mařenka , who orders her former lover to go . The villagers then enter , with both sets of parents , wanting to know Mařenka 's decision ( " What have you decided , Mařenka ? " ) . As she confirms that she will marry Vašek , Jeník returns , and to great consternation addresses Mícha as " father " . In a surprise identity revelation it emerges that Jeník is Mícha 's elder son , by a former marriage ? the " worthless good @-@ for @-@ nothing " earlier dismissed by Kecal ? who had in fact been driven away by his jealous stepmother , Háta . As Mícha 's son he is , by the terms of the contract , entitled to marry Mařenka ; when this becomes clear , Mařenka understands his actions and embraces him . Offstage shouting interrupts the proceedings ; it seems that a bear has escaped from the circus and is heading for the village . This creature appears , but is soon revealed to be Vašek in the bear 's costume ( " Don 't be afraid ! " ) . His antics convince his parents that he is unready for marriage , and he is marched away . Mícha then blesses the marriage between Mařenka and Jeník , and all ends in a celebratory chorus .

= = Reception and performance history = =

= = = Premiere = = =

The premiere of *The Bartered Bride* took place at the Provisional Theatre on 30 May 1866 . Smetana conducted ; the stage designs were by Josef Macourek and Josef Jiří Kolár produced the opera . The role of Mařenka was sung by the theatre 's principal soprano , Eleonora von Ehrenberg ? who had refused to appear in *The Brandenburgers* because she thought her proffered role was beneath her . The parts of Krušina , Jeník and Kecal were all taken by leading members of the *Brandenburgers* cast . A celebrated actor , Jindřich Mořna , was engaged to play the Ringmaster , a role which involves little singing skill .

The choice of date proved unfortunate for several reasons . It clashed with a public holiday , and many people had left the city for the country . It was an intensely hot day , which further reduced the number of people prepared to suffer the discomfort of a stuffy theatre . Worse , the threat of an imminent war between Prussia and Austria caused unrest and anxiety in Prague , which dampened public enthusiasm for light romantic comedy . Thus on its opening night the opera , in its two @-@ act version with spoken dialogue , was poorly attended and indifferently received . Receipts failed to cover costs , and the theatre director was forced to pay Smetana 's fee from his own pocket .

Smetana 's friend Josef Srb @-@ Debrnov , who was unable to attend the performance himself , canvassed opinion from members of the audience as they emerged . " One praised it , another shook his head , and one well @-@ known musician ... said to me : ' That 's no comic opera ; it won 't do . The opening chorus is fine but I don 't care for the rest . ' " Josef Krejčí , a member of the panel that had judged Harrach 's opera competition , called the work a failure " that would never hold its own . " Press comment was less critical ; nevertheless , after one more performance the opera was withdrawn . Shortly afterwards the Provisional Theatre temporarily closed its doors , as the threat of war drew closer to Prague .

= = = Restructure = = =

Smetana began revising *The Bartered Bride* as soon as its first performances were complete . For its first revival , in October 1866 , the only significant musical alteration was the addition of a gypsy dance near the start of Act II . For this , Smetana used the music of a dance from *The Brandenburgers of Bohemia* . When *The Bartered Bride* returned to the Provisional Theatre in January 1869 , this dance was removed , and replaced with a polka . A new scene , with a drinking

song for the chorus , was added to Act I , and Mařenka 's Act II aria " Oh what grief ! " was extended .

So far , changes to the original had been of a minor nature , but when the opera reappeared in June 1869 it had been entirely restructured . Although the musical numbers were still linked by dialogue , the first act had been divided in two , to create a three @-@ act opera . Various numbers , including the drinking song and the new polka , were repositioned , and the polka was now followed by a furiant . A " March of the Comedians " was added , to introduce the strolling players in what was now Act III . A short duet for Esmeralda and the Principal Comedian was dropped . In September 1870 *The Bartered Bride* reached its final form , when all the dialogue was replaced by recitative . Smetana 's own opinion of the finished work , given much later , was largely dismissive : he described it as " a toy ... composing it was mere child 's play " . It was written , he said " to spite those who accused me of being Wagnerian and incapable of doing anything in a lighter vein . "

= = = Later performances = = =

In February 1869 Smetana had the text translated into French , and sent the libretto and score to the Paris Opera with a business proposal for dividing the profits . The management of the Paris Opera did not respond . The opera was first performed outside its native land on 11 January 1871 , when Eduard Nápravník , conductor of the Russian Imperial Opera , gave a performance at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg . The work attracted mediocre notices from the critics , one of whom compared the work unfavourably to the Offenbach genre . Smetana was hurt by this remark , which he felt downgraded his opera to operetta status , and was convinced that press hostility had been generated by a former adversary , the Russian composer Mily Balakirev . The pair had clashed some years earlier , over the Provisional Theatre 's stagings of Glinka 's *A Life for the Tsar* and *Ruslan and Lyudmila* . Smetana believed that Balakirev had used the Russian premiere of *The Bartered Bride* as a means of exacting revenge .

*The Bartered Bride* was not performed abroad again until after Smetana 's death in 1884 . It was staged by the Prague National Theatre company in Vienna , as part of the Vienna Music and Theatre Exhibition of 1892 , where its favourable reception was the beginning of its worldwide popularity among opera audiences . Since the Czech language was not widely spoken , international performances tended to be in German . The United States premiere took place at the Haymarket Theatre , Chicago , on 20 August 1893 . The opera was introduced to the Hamburg State Opera in 1894 by Gustav Mahler , then serving as its director ; a year later a German company brought a production to the Theatre Royal , Drury Lane in London . In 1897 , after his appointment as director of the Vienna State Opera , Mahler brought *The Bartered Bride* into the Vienna repertory , and conducted regular performances of the work between 1899 and 1907 . Mahler 's enthusiasm for the work was such that he had incorporated a quote from the overture into the final movement of his *First Symphony* ( 1888 ) . When he became Director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1907 he added the opera to its repertory . The New York premiere , again in German , took place on 19 February 1909 , and was warmly received . The *New York Times* commented on the excellence of the staging and musical characterisations , and paid particular tribute to " Mr. Mahler " , whose master hand was in evidence throughout . Mahler chose to play the overture between Acts I and II , so that latecomers might hear it .

= = = Modern revivals = = =

The opera was performed more than one hundred times during Smetana 's lifetime ( the first Czech opera to reach this landmark ) , subsequently becoming a permanent feature of the National Theatre 's repertory . On 9 May 1945 a special performance in memory of the victims of World War II was given at the theatre , four days after the last significant fighting in Europe .

In the years since its American premiere *The Bartered Bride* has entered the repertory of all major opera companies , and is regularly revived worldwide . After several unsuccessful attempts to stage it in France , it was premiered at the Opéra @-@ Comique in Paris in 1928 , sung in French as *La*

Fiancée vendue . In 2008 the opera was added to the repertoire of the Paris Opera , in a new production staged at the Palais Garnier .

In the English @-@ speaking world , recent productions of The Bartered Bride in London have included the Royal Opera House ( ROH ) presentation in 1998 , staged at Sadler 's Wells during the restoration of the ROH 's headquarters at Covent Garden . This production in English was directed by Francesca Zambello and conducted by Bernard Haitink ; it was criticised both for its stark settings and for ruining the Act II entrance of Vašek . It was nevertheless twice revived by the ROH ? in 2001 and 2006 , under Charles Mackerras .

A New York Metropolitan staging was in 1996 under James Levine , a revival of John Dexter 's 1978 production with stage designs by Josef Svoboda . In 2005 The Bartered Bride returned to New York , at the Juilliard School theatre , in a new production by Eve Shapiro , conducted by Mark Stringer . In its May 2009 production at the Cutler Majestic Theatre , Opera Boston transplanted the action to 1934 , in the small Iowan town of Spillville , once the home of a large Czech settlement .

= = Music = =

Although much of the music of The Bartered Bride is folk @-@ like , the only significant use of authentic folk material is in the Act II furiant , with a few other occasional glimpses of basic Czech folk melodies . The " Czechness " of the music is further illustrated by the closeness to Czech dance rhythms of many individual numbers . Smetana 's diary indicates that he was trying to give the music " a popular character , because the plot [ ... ] is taken from village life and demands a national treatment . " According to his biographer John Clapham , Smetana " certainly felt the pulse of the peasantry and knew how to express this in music , yet inevitably he added something of himself . " Historian Harold Schonberg argues that " the exoticisms of the Bohemian musical language were not in the Western musical consciousness until Smetana appeared . " Smetana 's musical language is , on the whole , one of happiness , expressing joy , dancing and festivals .

The mood of the entire opera is set by the overture , a concert piece in its own right , which Tyrrell describes as " a tour de force of the genre , wonderfully spirited & wonderfully crafted . " Tyrrell draws attention to several of its striking features ? its extended string fugato , climactic tutti and prominent syncopations . The overture does not contain many of the opera 's later themes : biographer Brian Large compares it to Mozart 's overtures to The Marriage of Figaro and The Magic Flute , in establishing a general mood . It is followed immediately by an extended orchestral prelude , for which Smetana adapted part of his 1849 piano work Wedding Scenes , adding special effects such as bagpipe imitations .

Schonberg has suggested that Bohemian composers express melancholy in a delicate , elegiac manner " without the crushing world @-@ weariness and pessimism of the Russians . " Thus , Mařenka 's unhappiness is illustrated in the opening chorus by a brief switch to the minor key ; likewise , the inherent pathos of Vašek 's character is demonstrated by the dark minor key music of his Act III solo . Smetana also uses the technique of musical reminiscence , where particular themes are used as reminders of other parts of the action ; the lilting clarinet theme of " faithful love " is an example , though it and other instances fall short of being full @-@ blown Wagnerian leading themes or Leitmotifs .

Large has commented that despite the colour and vigour of the music , there is little by way of characterisation , except in the cases of Kecal and , to a lesser extent , the loving pair and the unfortunate Vašek . The two sets of parents and the various circus folk are all conventional and " penny @-@ plain " figures . In contrast , Kecal 's character ? that of a self @-@ important , pig @-@ headed , loquacious bungler ? is instantly established by his rapid @-@ patter music . Large suggests that the character may have been modelled on that of the boastful Baron in Cimarosa 's opera Il matrimonio segreto . Mařenka 's temperament is shown in vocal flourishes which include coloratura passages and sustained high notes , while Jeník 's good nature is reflected in the warmth of his music , generally in the G minor key . For Vašek 's dual image , comic and pathetic , Smetana uses the major key to depict comedy , the minor for sorrow . Large suggests that Vašek 's musical stammer , portrayed especially in his opening Act II song , was taken from Mozart 's character Don

Curzio in The Marriage of Figaro .

= = Film and other adaptations = =

A silent film of The Bartered Bride was made in 1913 by the Czech film production studio Kinofa . It was produced by Max Urban and starred his wife Andula Sedláčková . A German @-@ language version of the opera , Die verkaufte Braut , was filmed in 1932 by Max Ophüls , the celebrated German director then at the beginning of his film @-@ making career . The screenplay was drawn from Sabina 's libretto by Curt Alexander , and Smetana 's music was adapted by the German composer of film music , Theo Mackeben . The film starred the leading Czech opera singer Jarmila Novotná in the role of Mařenka ( " Marie " in the film ) , and the German baritone Willi Domgraf @-@ Fassbaender as Jeník ( " Hans " ) .

Ophüls constructed an entire Czech village in the studio to provide an authentic background . Following the film 's US release in 1934 , The New York Times commented that it " carr [ ied ] most of the comedy of the original " but was " rather weak on the musical side " , despite the presence of stars such as Novotná . Opera @-@ lovers , the review suggested , should not expect too much , but the work nevertheless gave an attractive portrait of Bohemian village life in the mid @-@ 19th century . The reviewer found most of the acting first @-@ rate , but commented that " the photography and sound reproduction are none too clear at times . " Other film adaptations of the opera were made in 1922 directed by Oldřich Kminek ( Atropos ) , in 1933 , directed by Jaroslav Kvapil , Svatopluk Innemann and Emil Pollert ( Espofilm ) , and in 1976 , directed by Václav Kašík ( Barrandov ) .

= = List of musical numbers = =

The list relates to the final ( 1870 ) version of the opera .

= = Recordings = =

See The Bartered Bride discography .