

## CZECH REPUBLIC

### Ostrava

Who other than the NATIONAL MORAVIAN-SILESIA THEATRE's intrepid Intendant Jiří Nekvasil would have conceived the crazy idea of performing all eight of Smetana's operas in sequence during one week encompassing two weekends? It took years to build towards the cycle but the process has quickened during the past three years as productions have been created and revised in preparation for the composer's bicentenary, celebrated between March 2 (the birthday) and 10, and again between May 4 and 12 (the 140th anniversary of his death). The genius of this overview is that it shows how Smetana developed from opera to opera, never repeating himself but each time forging a new path.

*The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* remains the greatest rarity but is an astonishingly assured first opera. It is modelled on French *grand opéra* and suffers from some stiff ceremonial music for its political figures. In this performance in the ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK THEATRE, with the incursion of the paupers stirred into rebellion by the vagabond Jíra (an ebullient performance by Luciano Mastro), it loosened up, and the *concertato* finale of Act 1 swept all before it. The invaders are relatively benign compared with the renegade collaborator Jan Tausendmark, but his venal scheme to enrich himself and to abduct the mayor's daughter is offset by self-loathing, portrayed here with nuance by the baritone Pavel Divín. The feisty daughter Ludiše has a solo that foreshadows Mařenka's last-act aria in *Bartered Bride*; it was affectingly sung by Veronika Rovná, who indeed reappeared as Mařenka the next afternoon, as well as singing two other heroines over the following days, skilfully differentiating them with no vocal fatigue. Nekvasil's production played the piece fairly straight, without imposing a modernizing interpretation.

*Smetana's first opera: Jiří Nekvasil's production of 'The Brandenburgers in Bohemia' at Ostrava, with Luciano Mastro as Jíra and Veronika Rovná as Ludiše*

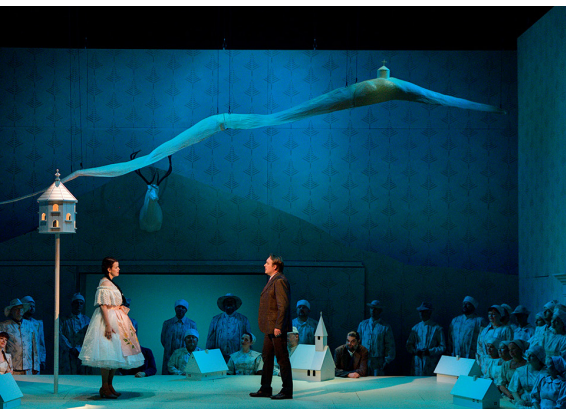


Czechs seem to have a problem with *The Bartered Bride*. (The most recent Prague production played it—entertainingly—in inverted commas as a rehearsal involving more than one Mařenka.) Here, Nekvasil's designer Daniel Dvořák supplied those wonky cut-out houses that used to be *de rigueur* in Czech folksy opera; and his choreographer, doubtless seduced by the three famous dance sections, ensured that the 12 dancers invaded many other scenes to wearisome effect.

*Dalibor* was a more sober affair, and was mercifully not updated by its director Martin Otava, boss of the theatre in Plzeň. He drew committed performances from a cast led by Tomáš Juhás, whose heroic tenor had genuine blade. The sopranos Jolana Fogašová and Anna Wilczyńska brought fierce sincerity and fearless attack to the contrasting roles of Milada and Jitka. Yet the prison duet at the end of Act 2, when Milada finds Dalibor, had a touching restraint; and the final scene of the failed jailbreak was more convincingly staged than I have previously encountered. Martin Bárta was an outstandingly firm Vladislav. *Dalibor* is an advance on *Brandenburgers* in terms of flexibility, both musical and scenic. Its thematic motifs are more seamlessly woven into the musical narrative.

If *Dalibor* was stirring, the next three operas were revelations. Each is a comedy, but each is more than a comedy. *The Two Widows* is a conversation piece. Originally its musical numbers were linked by spoken dialogue. The commonly performed revised version replaced dialogue with recitatives, but they are more subtle, more give-and-take than those of *Bartered Bride*. They evolve into duets, trios, quartets, and the trial scene in Act 1 is an extended sequence that flows naturally with the gathering drama. Its core is the contrasts and rivalry between the two recently widowed cousins, Karolina and Anežka. Their banter was acutely realized by Soňa Godarská and Veronika Rovná, their competitive humour leavened by a wistful undertone. Karolina's jauntiness masks her sadness in widowhood. Anežka's mourning is cover for repressed anger and guilt that she fancied the feigned poacher Ladislav while she was still married. The gamekeeper Mumlal is sometimes mistakenly played as a buffoon, but his old-fashioned bluster hides genuine respect and devotion. The ambiguities were brilliantly captured in this 2022 production by the director and designer Rocc. At the end he allowed Ladislav to depart through the audience before the joyful final chorus, which parted to reveal the two cousins reconciled in widowhood. A liberty, but in tune with the bittersweet nature of this comedy.

*The Kiss* is designated as a 'folk opera', perhaps because it is set within a small community where no relationship may be conducted in private. The villagers observe everything in Nekvasil's charming and thought-provoking production. The quarrel between Vendulka and Lukáš appears to be a trivial tiff between obstinate people, but its mundanity is what makes it so profoundly realistic. The exchanges are still conversational but are now through-composed. The extended scene in Act 1 between the lovers takes place over a rich undergrowth of sound which drives the narrative forward, tenderness and spikiness alternating, before Vendulka is left alone to sing her lullaby over the cradle of her widowed lover's child. In Act 2 they escape separately to the forest, a magical place where smugglers roam and lives may be transformed. They are guided by the enigmatic old smuggler Matouš and 'auntie' Martinka, one of Smetana's wise middle-aged women, who believes young girls have become soft 'like marzipan'. The loveliest of Smetana's operas, *The Kiss* offers a different angle on his recurrent motif of second marriages after widowhood. Rovná and Martin Šrejma, her



Two of Smetana's late operatic masterpieces in the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre's cycle of his complete operas: (l.) 'The Kiss', with Veronika Rovná and Martin Šrejma; (r.) 'The Secret', with Josef Škarka, Martin Gurbal', Soňa Godarská and Lucie Hilscherová

tenor partner also in *Bartered Bride* and *Two Widows*, were again responsive to every change of inflection, and Svatopluk Sem was outstandingly virile as his brother-in-law Tomeš. I would happily have sat through this opera again that same evening.

In some ways, *The Secret* is even more remarkable. The score is more polyphonic, its organic structure underpinned by two motifs. The village has become a small town, with rival political factions and personal animosities. The cast list is longer, enriched by subsidiary characters including the local ballad singer Skřivánek (Skylark), a Master Bricklayer, and the retired veteran Bonifác compensating for his frustration in love by snooping on everyone else's 'secrets'. They are part of the tapestry of town life with interwoven rivalries and lasting disappointments. A widower, Káлина, is again the central character, bitter with life, but this time he is matched by the middle-aged and unmarried Róza, sister of his rival, played with a mixture of sad defiance and wry humour by the mezzo Anna Nitrová. The constancy against the odds of the young couple Vít and Blaženka acts as a reproach and example to their cynical and flawed elders. The dodgy supernatural element bequeathed by the deceased Friar Barnabáš was tactfully handled in Tomáš Studený's deft production. At the end of Act 2 there is an octet and choral finale which miraculously gathers together all the mixed feelings and yearnings for reconciliation. It was overwhelming.

Any of these last three operas would enrich a repertory with their musical invention and humanity. Smetana's last opera, *The Devil's Wall*, is a trickier proposition. It appears diffuse and episodic after the previous three. Its fractured dramaturgy betrays a conflict between comedy, romance and the supernatural. I suppose you might say the same about another last work, Shakespeare's *Tempest*. The ambivalence is part of the attraction. Logic has become less important than symbolism. Nekvasil handled the supernatural elements, and the comings and goings of the rival 'friars', with discretion. The abstract design allowed easy transition between the short and disjointed scenes. The central character Vok stood for Smetana, worn down by the disappointments of life and love, indecisive about commitment, yearning for acceptance and reconciliation, finally succumbing to deafness. The shadow of tragedy haunts this strangely ambivalent

opera, on the one hand the menace of devilry, on the other a turning over into sadness and resignation. Yet, shortly before the end, there is a lovely bright and energetic chorus of women, then joined by their men. For some there is hope.

The company's young music director Marek Šedivý conducted this and three other operas with idiomatic flair. Jakub Klecker led *Brandenburgers* and *Secret*; Jiří Habart *Dalibor*. The Ostrava orchestra works hard: the restricted size of the pit in the attractive 513-seater theatre means a string strength of only 25. The 40-or-so-strong chorus are exceptional as singers and actors. The ensemble are likewise real performers with vivid diction of the Czech language, relishing its consonants and diphthongs.

For the final evening, these local forces yielded to the Prague Philharmonic Choir and Janáček Philharmonic Ostrava, conducted by the reliably stately Robert Jindra, for a concert performance of the ceremonial opera *Libuše* with the orchestra on the stage of the JIŘÍ MYRON THEATRE, which normally houses operetta and musicals. As a drama, this pageant suffers from having an ordained outcome, except for its best scene, the quarrel and reconciliation of the proud Chrudoš and errant Krasava. Yet the richness of the score, with its melancholy undertow, and the fervour of its execution ensured a memorable performance to round off a week that was the most rewarding I have enjoyed at the opera for some time. The National Moravian-Silesian Theatre is certainly my nomination for Opera House of the Year 2024.

NICHOLAS PAYNE

## DENMARK

### Copenhagen

Philipp Kochheim steps down in May after seven years as artistic director of the DANISH NATIONAL OPERA (Den Jyske Opera). It is hard to think of a more transformative recent tenure at a Nordic opera company. The results of the German Intendant's initiative to revive a forgotten Danish opera each season (or commission a new one) have been uneven but consistently intriguing, popular and hugely significant for Denmark's understanding of its operatic self. The latest in the Danish Series—the first staging for 158 years of *The Raven* by J.P.E. Hartmann and Hans Christian Andersen, a wonderful if quite mad evening in the theatre—just won its director Kochheim the Hans Christian Andersen Prize.

Kochheim also opted to direct his own swansong. He cites Massenet's *Werther* as 'the core of all operas' and the work clearly means the world to him. The version we heard under the music director Kochheim appointed, Christopher Lichtenstein (on March 4 at the ROYAL THEATRE), cut five roles and the children's chorus, becoming a four-hander. This could have focused our minds on the pivotal theme of psychological strain, but instead proved thin, inadequate and frustratingly cool as couched within Barbara Bloch's sleek Bauhaus set.

The foundations of the love between Werther and Charlotte often seem shaky and were downright unstable in this cut version, even if the onstage chemistry between Angelos Samartzis and Marie Seidler was better than average. Over time, the portrayals wore thin; kicking over Christmas trees and rushing for the drinks cabinet betrayed a general lack of subtlety and ideas. Albert channel-hopped on the television as Werther died in the same room—one of many trivializing gestures that sucked tension off the