

Bartered Bride, The [*Prodaná nevěsta*]

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Comic opera in three acts by Bedřich Smetana to a libretto by Karel Sabina; Prague, Provisional Theatre, 30 May 1866 (definitive version, Prague, Provisional Theatre, 25 September 1870).

Krušina <i>a farmer</i>	baritone
Ludmila <i>his wife</i>	soprano
Mařenka <i>their daughter</i>	soprano
Mícha <i>a smallholder</i>	bass
Háta <i>his wife</i>	mezzo-soprano
Vašek <i>their son</i>	tenor
Jeník <i>Mícha's son from his first marriage</i>	tenor
Kecal <i>a village marriage-broker</i>	bass
Circus Master	tenor
Esmeralda <i>circus artist</i>	soprano
Indian <i>circus artist</i>	bass
Villagers, circus artists, boys	
<i>Setting</i> A village at festival time in the afternoon and early evening	

Smetana commissioned a libretto for a comic opera from Sabina, librettist for his first opera (*The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*) and, according to his diary entry on 5 July 1863, received it apparently in the form of a one-act piece. On 1 September 1864 the periodical *Slavoj* announced that Smetana had completed the overture to a two-act opera of which he had now received the first act. As yet the opera had no name: it may well be, as František Bartoš (1955) speculates, that the 'comic overture by Smetana' played at the Umělecká Beseda on 18 November 1863 (in a four-hand arrangement) was the already completed overture to *The Bartered Bride*. Smetana seems to have finished the piano sketch during the first months of 1865 (only then did he give a name to the opera); orchestration was completed on 15 March 1866, simultaneously with sketching his next opera, *Dalibor*. Two duets for the Circus Master and Esmeralda, not

in the libretto, were added after this date. Smetana himself rehearsed and conducted the first performances; the producer was Josef Jiří Kolár, the designer Josef Macourek. The original cast included the chief prima donna of the company, the coloratura soprano Eleanora z Ehrenbergů, as Mařenka and the celebrated actor Jindřich Mošna as the Circus Master (this casting perhaps explains why the latter part places so few vocal demands on its interpreter).

At first the opera was far less successful than its predecessor, *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, and its popularity with the Czech public only gradual. Its worldwide popularity – for many years it was the only Czech opera in general repertory – dates from the performances given by the Prague National Theatre at the Vienna Music and Theatre Exhibition in 1892.

Its original version was much shorter, in two acts (the first act ended where the present second act ends), without dances and other numbers, and with spoken dialogue. Over the next four years many changes were made:

27 October 1866 (third performance): one duet for the Circus Master and Esmeralda (the couplet ‘Ten stavi se svatouškem’: ‘This man becomes a saint’) excluded and the Act 1 ballet from *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* (now labelled ‘Gypsy ballet’) inserted instead.

29 January 1869 (17th performance; ‘second version’): Act 1 divided into two scenes (the second set in the inn, beginning with a newly composed drinking chorus). A newly composed polka opened Act 2 (before Vašek’s aria) and Mařenka’s final solo was extended.

1 June 1869 (21st performance; ‘third version’): the opera divided into three acts corresponding to the final division except that the newly written *furiant* is at the end of Act 1 after the polka (now transferred to this position). Act 3 included a newly written *skočná* (to replace the *Brandenburgers* ballet) and introductory march for the circus troupe.

25 September 1870 (30th performance; ‘fourth’ and definitive version): newly composed recitatives replaced spoken dialogue, the *furiant* transferred to Act 2, after the drinking chorus.

Synopsis

ACT 1

Ex.1

Allegro vivo
Con vivacità

mf Proč by - chom se ne - tě - ši - li

ex.1

The village green beside a tavern The long, separate overture is a tour de force of the genre: wonderfully spirited (it is marked 'Vivacissimo') and equally wonderfully crafted. Its most striking features are the extended string fugato (heard immediately after the opening unison tutti) and the climactic tutti with prominent syncopations and third-beat stresses. It is followed by a leisurely prelude, providing a genre description of the village at church festival time. The prelude (based on an earlier piano piece) includes one of the first bagpipe imitations in Czech opera: open 5th drones, and perky, decorated wind parts. The chorus that it prepares for, 'Proč bychom se netěšili?' ('Why shouldn't we be glad?', ex.1), was noted down untexted as a 'Chorus for a comedy' in Smetana's 'Notebook of Motifs' in October 1862; Sabina was presumably instructed to fit his words to it. The solo middle section introduces the lovers Jeník and Mařenka, with ex.1 now inflected into the minor to suggest Mařenka's low spirits.

In the following recitative, originally of course prose dialogue, Mařenka explains her unhappiness. Mícha is due to arrive in the village to negotiate a marriage between her and his son Vašek. She fears that her parents will try to force her into it. Of course she will remain faithful to Jeník, but she knows so little of his past, as she explains in her aria; why had he left his native village? Jeník responds (in recitative) that he was the son of a wealthy father, but his mother died young, his father married again and his stepmother drove him from home. Their charming duet 'Jako matka' ('Like a mother') is followed by a brief recitative link that leads into the well-loved section about constancy ('Věrné milování'), with its lilting clarinet accompaniment in 6ths. They go off singly.

Another celebrated number follows: Kecal the marriage-broker, accompanied by Mařenka's parents Ludmila and Krušina, announces that everything is ready, 'Jak vám pravím pane kmotře' ('As I said to you'). Kecal's verbose and self-important character (his name means 'babbler') is immediately established by his music – at first limited to two pitches and then to rapid patter. Ludmila thinks they are moving too fast – there might be some obstacles. In his most portentous vein, Kecal declares that their wills and his cleverness will overcome all obstacles.

In the following recitative Krušina says that he knows Mícha, the father of the proposed bridegroom, but has never met his two sons – which one is being proposed? Kecal replies that it is the second, for the first is a good-for-nothing vagabond, and in a terzetto he provides a flattering character reference for Vašek. Mařenka enters. In the conversational quartet that follows, Kecal tells Mařenka that he has a husband for her, and Mařenka declares that there may be a problem: with the return of the lilting clarinet theme she explains that she already has a lover. In his typical staccato patter Kecal orders that the lover be sent packing; Mařenka responds in long notes, *con espressione*, that she has already given her heart. Little is resolved in the following recitative, especially when Kecal reveals that the prospective bridegroom is shy and not used to talking to women; Kecal resolves to talk to Jeník himself. The discussions are cut short by the polka that now breaks out as young people surge on to the stage and dance. The act concludes with choral voices added to the polka.

ACT 2

A room in the tavern The act opens with a strophic drinking song for the male chorus celebrating beer ('To pivečko'). Between the second and third verses Jeník and Kecal are heard, championing (respectively) love and money above alcohol. This chorus scene ends with a *furiant*, and paves the way for the chief business of the act: the separate attempts by Mařenka and Jeník to overcome the obstacles placed in their marital path. The fact that these are uncoordinated and unknown to each other leads to the near-tragedy of Act 3. First Mařenka seeks out Vašek, charms him and, painting her in the blackest colours, attempts to put him off his promised bride. Vašek does not of course realize that this gruesome creature is Mařenka herself and readily swears devotion to the engaging young woman he has just met. Vašek is introduced with a short solo, 'Má ma-ma-ma-tič-ka po-po-povídala' ('My m-m-mother s-s-said' – his stutter is a notable feature). Mařenka conducts her campaign first in recitative and then in a duet (*Andante amoroso*, 3/4), 'Známt' já jednu dívčinu' ('I know a girl who burns for you'), in which her lyrical lines and Vašek's stuttering responses are brilliantly contrasted. The music flows into a brisker 2/4 as Mařenka extracts her promise: its *stretto* ending leads to a triumphant *fortissimo* version of the opening 3/4 *Andante*.

Kecal and Jeník follow them on to the stage. Their duet 'Nuže, milý chasníku' ('Now, dear young fellow') is one of the longer musical structures of the opera. In the first section (2/4, *Allegro comodo*) Kecal learns that Jeník is from 'far away'; he recommends that he return home since the local girls aren't up to much. Maybe, Jeník responds, but Mařenka is a 'real diamond'. The next section (3/4, *Moderato*) is mostly a solo for Kecal in which he argues that all the beauties of the world will fade. In the final section (2/4, *Allegro comodo*), Kecal offers Jeník a rich bride and money, 'Znám jednu dívku' ('I know a girl who has ducats'), with Jeník happily repeating after Kecal all the wonders offered him. The real bargaining, however, happens in the final recitative, as Jeník pushes up Kecal's original offer for renouncing his bride to 300 florins. Jeník makes a decent show of unwillingness, but eventually agrees to 'sell' his bride (as the Czech title has it – 'bartered' is less accurate if more euphonious). But he makes his own conditions: Mařenka must marry no one but Mícha's son, and as soon as Mařenka and Mícha's son are married Mícha's debt to Mařenka's father must be cancelled. Kecal agrees and runs off triumphantly for witnesses to the contract.

'How can he believe that I would sell my Mařenka?' ('Jak možná věřit') Jeník asks in a short aria when left alone. The finale begins with a return to the opening of the overture as Kecal's witnesses (the entire chorus) flood on to the stage. Kecal dictates the terms and Jeník confirms them. Krušina is impressed by Jeník's 'good heart' in giving up Mařenka voluntarily, until he hears about the money that Jeník will receive. The chorus is similarly shocked at such callous behaviour and the growing groundswell of disapproval brings Act 2 to an end.

ACT 3

The village green beside a tavern Vašek is confused by the turn of events. As before he is seen alone; an orchestral prelude recalls the opening of his Act 2 aria and the duet music with which he was seduced. The music is dark (a rare minor key) and in its intensity he virtually loses his stutter. Once again he is the victim of others' machinations. The arrival of a small circus is announced with a brief, colourfully orchestrated march (trumpet, piccolo, percussion). In his opening patter the Circus Master describes his

troupe: the dancer Esmeralda, an 'Indian' and, their greatest attraction, an American bear who will perform a can-can with Esmeralda. Their wares are further displayed in the brilliant *skočná* (a fast 2/4 folkdance). But there is a crisis: the Indian announces to the Circus Master that the 'bear' has got too drunk to appear. They need a substitute and come upon Vašek, seen admiring Esmeralda's legs. Esmeralda begins chatting him up, describing the life of 'artists' in glowing terms. The recitative leads into a sparkling strophic duettino between the Circus Master and Esmeralda, 'Milostné zvířátko uděláme z vás' ('We'll make a nice little animal of you').

The circus people go off, and Vašek is joined by his parents and Kecal. All are amazed (in the following quartet) when he is unwilling to sign the agreement, and ask what he has against his prospective bride. She will poison him, he declares: he has been told so by an unknown girl. Vašek withdraws, his place taken by Mařenka and her parents. Mařenka has just heard about Jeník's renunciation of her but refuses to believe it. A further complication occurs when Kecal calls back Vašek, who announces that the girl with his parents is the one who spoke to him, and who he is perfectly willing to marry. He goes off. One obstacle is thus removed, but Mařenka says she needs time and in a sextet Kecal and the parents encourage her to think it over ('Rozmysli si, Mařenko!') and then leave her.

Her aria 'Och, jaký žal' ('Oh, what pain'), was extended in the 1869 revision with a much more substantial section, 'Ten lásky sen' ('That dream of love'). Here, as Mařenka sings of her disappointment, Sabina abandoned his usual trochees in favour of a more formal iambic verse and Smetana responded with more passionate and darker music than anywhere else in the opera. By the time Jeník appears she is able to dismiss him as heroically as a prima donna, refusing even to listen to his explanations. She will marry Vašek, she declares. She is further provoked when Jeník cannot hide his amusement: both vent their frustration in a spirited polka-like duet. Kecal joins them and in the following trio Jeník attempts to pacify Mařenka, who simply wants to get the whole affair over. Then Jeník steps aside.

The finale begins with the entry of the chorus and two sets of parents wishing to know Mařenka's decision. She says she will go ahead with her marriage to Vašek, calling Jeník's bluff, as she thinks. But when Jeník steps out, addressing Mícha as 'father', Vašek's parents are astonished to see the long-lost elder son. Although seemingly unwelcome, as he observes, he can at least claim the right to marry Mařenka, being the son of Mícha – as the contract specifies. At last Mařenka understands Jeník's behaviour, and falls into his arms. Kecal acknowledges himself beaten and fears for his reputation. All this business has been conducted in solo dialogue; now, however, the ensemble grows, with the chorus providing a continuous background, the parents expressing their frustration, Kecal his shame and indignation, and the young couple their triumph. The ensemble builds up to a climax, interrupted by cries of terror offstage: boys from the village run on to say that the 'bear' has broken loose and is heading that way. And indeed it appears, only to take off its headdress and reveal itself to be Vašek. His mother is mortified and marches him off but Krušina takes the opportunity of suggesting to Mícha that Vašek is not ready for marriage, and, as recitative gives way to sustained orchestral background, Krušina and his wife Ludmila persuade Mícha to consent to the marriage of Mařenka and Jeník. He does so and blesses the young couple. The music of the opening chorus (ex.1) returns slowly in the orchestra and as it quickens in tempo and grows in volume chorus and soloists join to acknowledge that all has turned out well.

Czechs consider *The Bartered Bride* as quintessentially Czech. The characteristic dances (polka, *skočná* and *furiant*) support this claim, as do individual details such as the bagpipe imitation in the opening prelude, but there is little else that is concretely 'Czech'. Czech productions usually lavish attention on the authenticity of the setting and costumes, but this is a matter of staging which anyway dates back only to the production made for Vienna in 1892. A better claim for the opera's intrinsic 'Czechness' derives from the fact that the somewhat casually concocted libretto was one of the few Czech librettos of its time to be written mostly in trochees or even prose (rather than high-style iambs), thus matching the natural first-syllable stress of Czech. Another claim may be made from the closeness to Czech dance metres of many individual numbers. Smetana's settings fall mostly into two main types: fast duple and slow triple, thus corresponding to the polka (and related dances) and the slow, triple-time *sousedská*. The simplicity of the music must also have encouraged audiences to see a stronger folk base in it than contemporary, more declamatory and complicated works and indeed than in Smetana's next opera, *Dalibor*.