

Brandenburgers in Bohemia, The [*Braniboři v Čechách*]

John Tyrrell

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O005970>

Published in print: 01 December 1992

Published online: 2002

Opera in three acts by Bedřich Smetana to a libretto by Karel Sabina; Prague, Provisional Theatre, 5 January 1866.

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Volfram Olbramovič <i>mayor of Prague</i> | bass |
| Ludiše <i>Volfram's daughter</i> | soprano |
| Vlčenka <i>Volfram's daughter</i> | soprano |
| Děčana <i>Volfram's daughter</i> | contralto |
| Oldřich Rokycanský <i>knight</i> | baritone |
| Junoš <i>young citizen in Prague</i> | tenor |
| Jan Tausendmark <i>young citizen in Prague</i> | baritone |
| Varneman <i>a Brandenburg captain</i> | tenor |
| Jíra <i>a vagrant</i> | tenor |
| Elder | bass |
| Constable | bass |
| Knights and squires, Volfram's retainers, country folk, the Brandenburg army, deserters, Prague beggars, judges | |
| <i>Setting</i> Prague, and the countryside near Prague in 1279 | |

Smetana's first opera was written for the opera competition sponsored by Count Jan Harrach to provide the recently-instituted Czech Provisional Theatre with new Czech operatic repertory. Since no entries were received by the deadline of 30 September 1862 it was extended by a year, thus allowing Smetana, who had returned from Sweden in 1861, to enter. The libretto that he acquired from Karel Sabina in February 1862 was in two acts and had to be revised to suit the three-act format stipulated by Harrach. Smetana completed the full score of Act 1 by 8 January 1863, Act 2 by 16 February and Act 3 by 23 April. The judges took three years to reach a decision about the four entries submitted, thus denying the opera a public showing in the theatre until January 1866, when a production was

finally conceded. Three months later, on 25 March 1866, the judges awarded Smetana first prize, despite their reservations about the libretto. The opera was a great success in its first season, much more so than its successor a few months later, *The Bartered Bride*.

Following the death in 1278 of the Czech king Přemysl Otakar II, his seven-year-old son Václav II was taken from Prague in February 1279 and imprisoned by his guardian Otto of Brandenburg in an attempt to gain control of the Czech kingdom. The opera's subject is the public reaction to the interregnum following the Brandenburg invasion and the driving out of the Brandenburgers from Bohemia - historical events which in reality spread over several years.

Synopsis

ACT 1.i

Volfram's estate, a garden in front of his house The opera begins unconventionally. There is no overture; 30 bars of orchestral turbulence lead into a recitative discussion between Oldřich and Volfram about the unhappy state of the country and what should be done. When Junoš arrives with news of the abduction of the young king and his mother, all three (and the male chorus) set off for Prague. Ludiše, Volfram's daughter and Junoš's beloved, is left. After her recitative and *adagio* aria her other admirer (the German Jan Tausendmark) finds her, but she angrily rejects his advances: their confrontation culminates in a cabaletta-like Allegro agitato. The cut of the opera becomes increasingly imitative of European models when Ludiše, joined by her two sisters and with antiphonal choral support, invokes God's help in an *andante religioso* Prière. They go off and the scene ends with Tausendmark leading Brandenburgers on to the farm, against the sound of cries and alarm bells.

1.ii

An open place in Prague, midnight The poor of Prague are seen looting, and celebrating their new-found freedom. This genre scene is elaborated in a series of set pieces: a chorus; a song (with choral support) for the mob's leader Jíra; a 'ballet' characterized by syncopations and abrupt major-minor juxtapositions; and finally a 'revolutionary' chorus 'Uhodila naše hodina' ('Our hour has come'), in whose middle section Jíra is crowned king. Suddenly Ludiše runs on begging help against Tausendmark, who soon appears, sword in hand, with Brandenburg soldiers guarding her sisters. Their arrival marks the beginning of the finale: a substantial slow concertato for chorus and the six soloists. At its close Jíra manages to seize Tausendmark's sword, but in the confusion the Brandenburgers take off all three girls - just before the arrival of Volfram and the others. Tausendmark accuses Jíra (still with Tausendmark's sword) of abducting the girls and is believed: Jíra is arrested and the act ends with an *allegro con fuoco* ensemble - the stretta conclusion to the concertato.

ACT 2.i

A village green A village Elder leads his people antiphonally in a 'chorale', 'Pane, v prachu se kloníme' ('Lord, we kneel in the dust'), as they prepare to leave their village for the safety of the forest. Varneman, a Brandenburg captain, arrives demanding food for his forces and his captives (Volfram's three daughters), but he is overtaken by events – a constable announces a decree from Otto of Brandenburg (the king's guardian) that foreign forces must withdraw from Bohemia within three days. The people celebrate and Varneman instructs the Elder to seek out Volfram to ransom his daughters.

2.ii

A court house in Prague At his trial (a scene conducted in declamatory recitative) Jíra puts up a spirited defence but Tausendmark's false witness is believed and Jíra is condemned to death despite Junoš's late news that Volfram's daughters are safe, awaiting ransom.

2.iii

A garden overgrown by trees A new atmosphere is created in a series of set pieces: a long, contemplative prelude which leads into an aria for Děčana, then a trio for the three sisters, lamenting their captivity. Left alone, Ludiše sings a strophic song, 'Byl to krásný sen' ('It was a beautiful dream'). Junoš, who has crept in unnoticed, supplies the third verse. The folklike suggestions of this number are emphasized by its contrast to the next: a formal cantabile-cabaletta duet for Ludiše and Junoš at the end of which Junoš hides again. He overhears Varneman declare that since he has received no ransom, he will take the women back to Brandenburg with him the next day. Ludiše is defiant and she and her sisters proclaim the belief that they will be released.

ACT 3

The same garden, evening The action of this act is confused and its dramatic impact weakened by two insert arias canvassed by the original singers. Tausendmark's aria, 'Tvůj obraz, dívko' ('Your picture, my girl'), is a response to Varneman's refusal to take him and the girls back to Brandenburg. Later the Elder is similarly granted a lyrical aria. In the dark the company assemble: the Elder, naively following Tausendmark's instructions to send the girls in different directions; Varneman, attracted by the commotion; a male chorus (with an extended homophonic celebration of night); Junoš; and Jíra, now released from prison by Junoš. Varneman reveals Tausendmark's plan and the girls are sought and quickly found. So is Tausendmark, who is led away for trial. In an elaborate concertato Junoš, the sisters and the chorus beg Jíra to return to Prague with them (he declines). Volfram arrives, asks Jíra's forgiveness for believing Tausendmark and offers him shelter. The opera concludes with a brief stretta ensemble.

The initial popularity of *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* owes something to local enthusiasm for the attempts of Czech composers such as Smetana and Sebor to compete in the hitherto alien medium of opera. *The Brandenburgers* is Smetana's most derivative opera, in its plot, conception, choice of vocal

types and musical forms; its melodic freshness is not enough to disguise the weaknesses of its libretto, in particular the sheer muddle of the final act. Its less ambitious successor, *The Bartered Bride*, was able to build on more obviously Czech roots and thus it, rather than Smetana's first opera, established itself as the quintessential Czech opera.