

Week 7

Music and Czech Nationalism

Can Music Be Inherently Czech (or German, or Russian)?

In Search of Czechness in Music

- Michael Beckerman, 1986 article in *19th-Century Music*
- Czechness + Russianness + Germanness: cannot be defined precisely/objectively
- It is not IN THE MUSIC ITSELF but rather IS PERCEIVED/CONSTRUCTED by the audience
- P. 73: “Czechness” itself comes about when in the minds of composers and audiences, the Czech nation, in its many manifestations, becomes the subtextual program for musical works, and as such, it is that which *animates* the musical style

Viewpoint

In Search of Czechness in Music

MICHAEL BECKERMAN

Writing about abstract principles of musical composition in his 1910 study, “The Importance of Real Motives,” Leoš Janáček makes the following cryptic remark: “To nourish instrumental motives with Czechness (*českost*) is only to take them to the source, into the present, into the sphere of Czechness.”¹ At first glance the word “Czechness” may appear amusing, a product of Janáček’s peculiar and volatile mind.² But the fact is that every scholar who attempts to deal with nineteenth-century Czech music ends up trying to articulate that very element which makes Czech music Czech. For example, in his *Music of the Romantic Era* of 1947, Alfred Einstein writes of Smetana’s chamber works: “All three compositions are autobiographical, full of original and vigorous invention, but formally underdeveloped and rhapsodic. Yet all three are not only very personal: they are very Czech.”³ This is followed by the pregnant question: “In what does this ‘Czech’ element consist? In the genuine use of

the folk melodies? Smetana saw quite clearly that the matter did not end there.”⁴ Leaving the question open, Einstein goes on to discuss the operas, but returns to the idea of “Czechness” in his final remarks about *The Bartered Bride*: “The ‘Czech’ element was not costume or folk masquerade; the spiritual element was not psychology or naturalism; and thus was realized the ideal of a merry folk opera.”⁵ End of inquiry, leaving the reader only with an idea of what Czechness isn’t!⁶

Since the publication of Einstein’s work, there has been renewed interest in treating the issues raised by Janáček. Although the question of “national style” is often dealt with in a straightforward manner in both introductory and specialized works of music history, it is, in fact, riddled with the most puzzling assumptions and contains endless philosophical *cul-de-sac*.⁷

Particularly in the last decade, scholars have

¹*Ibid.*

²*Ibid.*, p. 300.

³Even Gerald Abraham writes: “Dvořák’s music is profoundly Czech in a way that Smetana’s is for all his patriotism, seldom is.” *The Concise Oxford History of Music* (Oxford, 1979), p. 697.

⁴For an example of the difficulties of dealing with national styles, see Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music* (New York, 1984). The author’s discussion of nationalism begins oddly with a discourse on the Viennese waltz. Also, the grouping of such utterly diverse composers as Berwald, Tomášek, Sterndale Bennett, and Tchaikovsky under a single “nationalist” banner seems to deprive the word of any meaning whatsoever. See also my fn. 17.

⁵*19th-Century Music* X/1 (Summer 1986), © by the Regents of the University of California.

⁶Leoš Janáček, “Váha reálných motivů” (“The Importance of Real Motives”), *Dalibor* 2 (1909–10), 227. Also in *Leoš Janáček: Hudebně teoretické dílo 2*, ed. Zdeněk Blažek (Prague, 1972), pp. 141–43.

⁷For some examples of Janáček’s flamboyant writing style, see *Leoš Janáček: Leaves from My Life*, ed. and trans. Vilém and Margaret Tausky (New York, 1982).

⁸Alfred Einstein, *Music in the Romantic Era* (New York, 1947), p. 299.

Symbolic Markers of Czechness in Music

- *Libuše*, 1871–72 (for the coronation of Franz Joseph as the King of Bohemia, 1881, first opening of the National Theater)
- Explicit programmatic/nationalistic elements (symphonic poems, dances, opera)—2:31:00
- References to historical styles and works (Hussite chorale)—2:26:00
- Folk-likeness—1:26:30
- Synthesis of various “mainstream” and “peripheral” traditions (Wagnerian + folksy music)—overture
- Referencing the styles of earlier national composers (Smetana)

Complexities of Musical Nationalism: *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia, 1866*

- Smetana's first opera (written already in 1863)
- Seen as nationalistic + ethnic + inherently Czech + anti-German + anti-Habsburg + anti-Austrian + victory of the Czechs over the Germans
- 13th-Century Bohemia: invasion of Brandenburger mercenaries
- Czech peasants vs. Brandenburgers
- Act II, Scene 1: peasant chorale, 58:30
- Act II, Scene 1: the Brandenburgers, 1:04:00

The Politics of *The Brandenburgers*

- Weak libretto that does not present a clear distinction between the Czechs and Germans
- Confuses Smetana—one of his lesser works
- Rather than a simple nationalist propaganda (or a weak work)—the opera reflect the complexity of Bohemian population and politics in the early 1860s

Smetana's *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and Czech Nationalism: A Historical Reevaluation

MARTIN NEDBAL

Abstract

Post-WWII studies of Smetana's *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* view the work as an expression of the Czechs' resistance to various kinds of national oppression, by the Austrian Empire, and by Austrian and Bohemian Germans. This article shows that these views emerged only long after the opera was written in 1862-3 and premiered in 1866. An exploration of Czech political debates in the early 1860s, contemporaneous historical accounts of the thirteenth-century events the opera depicts, Smetana's sketches, censorship practices and records, and reviews of *The Brandenburgers* from the months after the premiere illustrates that the mid-nineteenth-century conceptualization of the Czechs' position within the Austrian Empire and their relationship to Germans and German Bohemians was less oppositional and binary than in later decades. This context in fact clarifies numerous ambiguous aspects of Smetana's opera, such as the main villain's characterization and the ambiguous depiction of the Brandenburgers. A brief survey of the opera's reception history shows, furthermore, that the intensely nationalistic, anti-German, and anti-Austrian perspective on *The Brandenburgers*, still accepted nowadays, became particularly prominent in reaction to various twentieth-century totalitarian ideologies and were strongly influenced by the opera's first post-WWII production at the former New German Theater in September 1945.

On September 4, 1945, a performance of Bedřich Smetana's opera *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* inaugurated the first post-WWII season in the building in central Prague that, until a few months earlier, had been commonly referred to as the New German Theater (Neues deutsches Theater). Completed in 1888 in part thanks to donations by Prague's German elites, the building was appropriated by a group of Czech artists during the uprising of Prague's Czechs against the Nazi occupation in early May 1945. In commemoration of the uprising, the building was then renamed as the Fifth of May Theater ("Divadlo pátého května"). Amidst mass deportations of German Bohemians out of Czechoslovakia on the principle of collective guilt for Nazi atrocities, the reopening of the former German Theater acquired a symbolic significance.¹ As Kelly St. Pierre has pointed out, post-WWII performances of Smetana's works operated "as symbols of endurance . . . [and] took place against the violent backdrop of ethnic 'cleansing' ('očista')."² The 1945 *Brandenburgers* emphasized recent events by using an elevated stage in the shape of a swastika that disintegrated at the end of the opera.³ The symbolic importance of this particular production was

¹ Throughout this article I use the term German Bohemians to refer to those inhabitants of Bohemia who identified as German. "German Bohemian" corresponds to the concept of "Deutschböhme" that often appears in German-Bohemian writings especially throughout the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century history of the distinction between the adjectives "Bohemian" and "Czech" is explained in Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691186382>.

² Kelly St. Pierre, *Bedřich Smetana: Myth, Music, and Propaganda* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2017), 102.

³ Tomáš Vrbka, *Státní opera Praha: Opera 1888-2003* (Prague: Státní opera, 2004), 253.

The Brandenburgers at the former Neues deutsches Theater turned into the Theater of the Fifth of May (now State Opera)

- September 4, 1945
- Czechs vs. Germans (Nazis)
- Bohemian
Germans=expelled
- Anti-Occupation Opera
- Late September 1968



The Politics of *The Brandenburger*

- 1860s: FLUID CONCEPT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY
- Multiple “Czech” Groups—not a unified ethnicity:
- Peasants—no folk-like music (instead historicizing chorales)
- Prague rabble (lůza)—receives the folk-like music (28:00) + not very patriotic
- Possibly a commentary on the Old Czech Party—and their leader František Ladislav Rieger (who thought that Czech opera should be based on folk music and not too cosmopolitan or Wagnerian)
- Prague’s Burghers: based on historical figure (Václav Vladivoj Tomek’s *History of Prague*, 1855)
- Slavicized names (though historically German)—Wolfram=Volfram OLBRAMOVIČ + 3 daughters (Christina + Elizabeth + Katharina=Ludiše, Vlčanka, Děčana)
- Tausendmark=the anti-hero—Czech or German-Bohemian?
- Most famous aria: Act 3—1:42:00
- Tausendmark judged by a Brandenburger: 1:41:00

The “Germans” in *The Brandenburgers*

- The Brandenburgers=the Prussians (1866—Austro-Prussian War)?
- The Brandenburgers vs. the Germans
- Early 1860s: no unified Germany: Prussians vs. Saxons vs. German-Bohemians
- An Anti-Austrian Opera
- Early 1860s: political situation in Bohemia—Austroslavism—hoping for acknowledging Bohemian state rights