Center Stage

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Opera Nation

Emancipation from German Culture

Looking back on the National Theater’s first season, František Adolf Šubert proudly pointed out that not one German work had been performed. This anti-German sentiment, shared by many members of Czech society, was something of an idée fixe. A glance at the repertoires of the Provisional Theater and the National Theater in its first decade shows that most of the competition for Czech drama and opera did not come from Germany or Austria but from France and Italy.

This lasting antagonism toward German culture was rooted in a Czech sense of inferiority compounded by the arrogant German attitude that the Czechs were a nation without history or culture. Šubert wanted to prove to the Germans, and even more so to his fellow countrymen, that the National Theater could thrive without German-language dramas and operas. In 1882 he announced that no German works would be shown, even producing exclusively Czech operas for the first six weeks of the season. These included Smetana’s Libuše and The Bartered Bride, two operas each by Antonín Dvořák and Karel Bendl and some other Czech works.

But the National Theater could not have fulfilled its educative duty to the Czech public without showing some foreign works. Šubert staged classic drama by Shakespeare, Corneille, Calderón and Schiller as well as operas by Mozart. It was contemporary works such as Carmen, Faust, and Aida, however, which were most popular. While these lavish productions increased the pressure on the German theater to compete, they were also a challenge to Czech opera. Smetana’s The Kiss and The Two Widows flopped on the large stage of the National Theater as did new compositions by Bendl and Fibich. When members of the intelligentsia and music nationalists complained that native works were disadvantaged,
Šubert responded by warning that the Czech audience might be lost to the Estates Theater if deprived of the latest sensations and international repertoire pieces.

This reasoning led to the first production of a German opera in the second season: Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Demand to see the first Wagner work in Czech was so great that the premiere was sold out by ten o’clock in the morning. Unlike its performance in Lemberg in 1877, *Lohengrin*’s Prague premiere was a triumph. The critics praised the lavish sets by Viennese studio Kautsky and Brioschi, which were strikingly similar to the sets for *Libuše*.¹ The audience cheered the performers, including the theater’s controversial principal tenor, Dalmatian Carlo Raverta, who had learned the part of Lohengrin in the Czech translation. Šubert, too, was much lauded for opening the National Theater to music drama and hence to “aesthetic progress.” The various reviews of 1885 show that, for the most part, the Czech music scene had made its peace with Wagner.² Music theorist Otakar Hostinský, whose creative, positive reception of Wagner contradicted leading Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, played a key role in this.

Contemporary Czech critics and musicologists seized upon the importance of narrative content in Wagner’s work. Following the premiere of *Lohengrin*, the newspaper *Národní listy* wrote, in accord with Hostinský, that Wagner gave the libretto priority over the music. This was an adventurous interpretation of Wagner’s Zurich essays, in which he actually described text and music as equally valid means of conveying drama.³ Nevertheless, Hostinský’s view shaped the further development of Czech opera, especially influencing Zdeněk Fibich, whose work is characterized by leitmotifs, continuous music, and an emphasis on drama. Hence the development of Czech opera took a different path from that of Polish opera in the 1880s and 1890s, which continued to take its cue from the set-number style of Italianate opera.

With its brilliant production of *Lohengrin*, the National Theater struck a blow against the Germans’ claim to cultural supremacy in Bohemia. For decades, the Estates Theater had been known as one of the leading venues for Wagner operas and even been the site of Europe’s first Wagner cycle in 1856. Now the National Theater’s comparable success—in the first season alone there were 18 reprises of *Lohengrin*—challenged the very existence of the Estates Theater. Not all theater-goers shared the critics’ view that Czechs should only attend the National Theater and Germans the German Theater. Many were quite prepared to try out the competition.⁴ By 1884, the city’s most famed institution was facing mounting losses. A year later, it was nearing bankruptcy. This did not bode well for the German-speaking population. Since the 1848 revolution, Prague had become a 90 percent Czech city in which the German and German-speaking Jewish communities had dwindled to small minorities, and whose theater had now also failed.
It did not, however, spell the end of the German competition, as it had in Lemberg in 1872 and Budapest in 1889. Prominent members of Prague’s German-speaking population founded a theater association and embarked on a fundraising campaign following the Czech example. Thanks to the generous donations of some wealthy German and Jewish members of the *haute bourgeoisie*, within the space of just a few years, the New German Theater was built according to a design by Viennese architects Helmer and Fellner. Opened in 1888, the new opera house provided the German speakers in Prague with a venue that could rival the National Theater in terms of opulence and technical equipment.

Even if *Lohengrin*’s positive reception in Prague signified a new Czech openness toward German culture, parochialism often prevailed in everyday life. The National Theater prided itself on the fact that, with the exception of some soloists, its ensemble was comprised exclusively of Czechs, or people who identified themselves as such. Nationality was not easy to define, especially among the generation that had begun their careers at the Provisional Theater. As in the case of Smetana, who conducted his private correspondence in German right up until the 1860s, it was the individual’s sense of allegiance that was decisive.

Twenty years later, a scandal surrounding Czech actress and singer Marie Pospišilová showed how intolerant Czech nationalism had become. One of the stars of the newly opened *Národní divadlo*, she was dismissed in late 1884 after falling out with Šubert. She subsequently toured Poland and returned to Prague six months later to give a performance—oh, the treachery of it!—at the Estates Theater. In fact, Pospišilová was acting in all pragmatism, since there was no other equivalent venue in Prague. But Šubert was furious, and the national press fumed that she should be banned from the National Theater. The case was not yet closed as Pospišilová had friends in high places, including the governor, with whom she was having an affair. She now used her excellent political connections to rally support. In early 1886, a sizable group of subscription holders demanded her reinstatement in an open letter to Šubert. But this did not sway the director, who was determined to make an example of her. Nine years on, enough water seemed to have passed under the bridge and the executive committee of the National Theater Association proposed a guest performance by Pospišilová. On this occasion, however, the audience proved obstructive. Although the actress had pledged her earnings from the four evenings to Czech charities, “a storm of cat-calls, whistles and boos resounded,” that did not abate until the police had made numerous arrests. Such a commotion in response to a perceived act of national disloyalty would have been unimaginable in Dresden, Lemberg, or Budapest, where the Habsburgs’ compromise with the Poles and the Hungarians had reduced linguistic rivalry and eased tensions.

Tenor Carlo Raverta—the first Czech Lohengrin—also fell foul of national bigotry. The critics could not forgive him for failing to sing all of his parts in
Raised near the Adriatic Sea under the influence of Italian culture, Raverta was prone to getting carried away and bellowing out his solos—especially the well-known arias—in Italian, repeating them if the applause warranted it. A part of the audience loved this traditional belcanto, but the newspaper Národní listy and the music journal Dalibor demanded purely Czech performances. Finally, in 1886, the National Theater dropped Raverta, despite the protests of a group of over eighty subscription holders. They did not know that an excellent replacement for Raverta was already waiting in the wings. Šubert had persuaded young tenor Władysław Florjański, an accomplished performer of lyrical as well as heroic roles, to leave Lemberg for Prague. A native Polish speaker, he was able to learn Czech with relative ease and Florjanský, as he was known in Czech, soon became a favorite of the Prague audience. The rakish and constantly impecunious tenor was especially adored by his female public, who helped to finance his glittering lifestyle by paying for private performances and signed photographs.

Fostering a star cult was part of Šubert’s financial calculus. As many European stars of the stage were persuaded to appear in Prague as possible. Besides Emma Turolla, these included Maria Wilt from the Royal Opera in Vienna in 1884 and the indisputable queen of opera, Adelina Patti, in 1885. The large fees demanded by such international personalities were easily recovered by higher ticket prices. After a time, Národní listy reflected on the hyperbole surrounding these appearances with the ironic commentary: “The dearest to us was Miss Turolla, the fattest was Ms Wiltová . . . and the most expensive, Ms Adelina Patti.” Despite signs of public fatigue, the guest performances were continued because they helped to make money and to publicize the National Theater throughout Europe, which was essential for the Czechs to gain recognition as a cultural nation.

In 1885 Šubert extended his network to France and invited Camille Saint-Saëns to the theater. The founder of the Société Nationale de Musique had recently experienced the animosity of the Prussian public when a concert he gave in Berlin was booed, apparently in retaliation for Paris’s rejection of Tannhäuser in 1861. It was, then, a strategic moment to invite Saint-Saëns to Prague. The composer’s gala concert at the National Theater was a great success, and he was moved by the audience’s cheers and unusually warm response. The Czech newspapers declared it appropriate compensation for the scandal in Berlin and contrasted their own civilized nation with the uncouth behavior of the Germans. The old axiom that your enemy’s foe is your friend had proved right again.

A few weeks after Saint-Saëns’s appearance, Šubert traveled to Italy, where it was rumored that Guiseppe Verdi had composed a new opera at last. Although still a relative unknown among European theater directors two years into his tenure, Šubert managed to make contact with Verdi through Czech soprano Teresa Stolzová, who had performed the title role in the world premiere of Aida in Cairo and was the maestro’s lover. At a meeting she arranged in February 1886, Verdi asked
Šubert about the Bohemian and Austrian theater scenes and opera at Prague’s National Theater and warmed sufficiently to Šubert to promise him first performance rights for *Otello* after the world premiere in Milan. In early 1887, the Vienna Court Opera and a number of German theaters began vying for the same rights. The Vienna Opera’s offer of a large sum of money and a premiere in German on the emperor’s saint’s day was accepted and Šubert brushed aside by Verdi’s publisher Ricordi. But thanks to Tereza Stolzová’s mediation, Verdi renewed his promise to Šubert. *Otello* was hastily translated into Czech and given its first performance north of the Alps on January 7, 1888, in Prague. With this major coup, the National Theater finally gained recognition as an opera house of renown in Central Europe. Theater directors, conductors, and critics from Berlin, Dresden, Vienna, and many other cities attended the premiere in Prague which was well received on all sides. Verdi telegraphed his congratulations from Italy, expressing his “thanks and respect to all those who took part in the performance.”

*Otello* also marked the introduction of some important changes in performance practice at the National Theater, including a realistic style and more deliberate approach to stage direction. Director (and actor) Josef Šmaha urged the singers to move and act more expressively, forming a stark contrast to the opulently decorated but scantily directed productions in vogue at the major German royal theaters. Furthermore, Władysław Florjański gave a superb performance as Otello, which established him as the theater’s star tenor. Henceforth, he sang all the leading roles of the opera repertoire. The Prague public received *Otello* with gratitude and appreciation, in contrast to audiences in Vienna, Berlin, or Dresden, who responded to the progressive style of Verdi’s late work with surprising reserve. It was reprised 26 times in Prague in the season 1887–88. On account of this success, Šubert was granted extensive directorial rights, equivalent to those of Seebach in Dresden and Jahn in Vienna. Thanks to its many guest performances and spectacular premieres, the National Theater became known throughout Europe, increasing the fame not just of Czech opera. Whereas in the early nineteenth century, Prague was perceived as a German city, it was now a Czech city in the eyes of Italy and France.

**Crisis and Triumph in Vienna**

Promoting native authors and works was one of the most important goals of Czech theater ever since the Provisional Theater opened its doors. A considerable body of works was built up over the years, the authors of which became a force to be reckoned with. In 1874, the Association of Czech Dramatic Writers and Composers (*Jednota dramatických spisovatelů a skladatelů českých*) concluded a contract with the managers of the Provisional Theater which stipulated fixed rates for fees and royalties, many privileges, and greater protection of the works. Hence it
gave native composers the distinct advantage over foreign artists. Shortly before the opening of the National Theater, when public interest in Czech operas was at a peak, authors’ fees were significantly raised again. Thus Czech composers formed a national cartel, influencing the price of their products and ensuring their place in the repertoire. Although composers were still unlikely to make a fortune, their prospects had markedly improved since the 1850s, when Smetana, for example, could not even afford his own piano. But in tandem with better conditions there was increased pressure to produce. The Czech public was hungry for new pieces that could compete with the European repertoire. And since the National Theater had shown only native operas in the first six weeks, the public expected its appetite to be satisfied.

By 1884, however, it was becoming clear that Czech opera’s potential had been overestimated. Only a few native pieces, such as Smetana’s *Libuše* and *The Bartered Bride* and Dvořák’s *Dimitrij*, were able to hold their own in the repertoire next to the lavish international operas of the day. As well as *Aida*, Goldmark’s *Queen of Sheba* and Leo Delibes’s *Lakme*, set in India, were presented on a breathtakingly elaborate scale. No expense was spared on sets by the influential Viennese studio of Brioschi, Burghart, and Kautsky or the equally renowned Quaglio workshop in Munich. Additional cultural transfers took place involving the costumes, which were frequently based on Viennese designs.

The most popular piece of the third season was not an opera but a ballet. Šubert had returned from his visit to Italy with performance rights to the ballet *Excelsior*, which had already been a great success there and in France. In Prague, it set a new record of 41 performances in the first season after its premiere in August 1885. The ballet yielded a total of 80,000 guilders—more than a quarter of the season’s total ticket sales. In the years that followed, *Excelsior* was reprised over 130 times, even outnumbering performances of *The Bartered Bride*. What was the secret of its success? In part, it was petticoats and panties. But it also gave an exciting impression of distant places and scientific development in the world, featuring scenes in a ruined Spanish city, the Sahara desert, China, a telegraph building, and the laboratory of genius inventors. The combination of pretty girls, exotic settings, and awe-inspiring innovation perfectly satisfied the tastes of the Prague public.

What did Czech opera have to offer in comparison? Since Smetana had hitherto proven to be highly popular, Šubert tried introducing his lesser-known works, *The Two Widows* (*Dvě vdovy*) and *The Secret* (*Tajemství*), but they flopped after a few performances. Critics blamed the director for not investing enough in the sets, but in fact these pieces had the inherent weakness that they had been written for the smaller Provisional Theater. On the large stage of the National Theater they seemed somewhat forlorn. Even *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* proved less appealing in 1885, because public interest in nationalist plots had waned.
But even more contemporary pieces such as *The Bride of Messina* (*Nevěsta messinská*) by Zdeněk Fibich failed to get established. Czech music theater in general was struggling to make an impact. While the theater activists’ call to the Czechs to fulfil their patriotic duty by patronizing native operas had initially motivated the public, in the long term, it diminished the prestige of Czech opera. Failed premières and restructured repertoires were the result. The number of opera nights featuring native pieces—a lasting preoccupation of the Czech public—fell from 90 in the season 1883–84 to only 33 in 1888–89.19

Šubert came under increasing attack from critics among the intelligentsia in consequence. The editor of the influential music journal *Dalibor*, Václav Vladoj Zelený, accused him of neglecting native opera and investing only in light entertainment and opulent sets.20 Zelený called for a canon of national operas to be recognized and operetta banished in favor of a strictly highbrow repertoire. No doubt this would just as soon have led to bankruptcy as it did in Lemberg, when operetta was banned in the early 1890s. Indeed, Šubert countered by drawing attention to the demands of the market as well as the low productivity of native composers. In defense, the latter promptly sent a memorandum to the National Theater Association, calling for greater consideration for Czech operas and composers. But the association sided with Šubert and favored an international repertoire, following the example of the Vienna Court Opera.21 Šubert’s argument was strengthened by his undeniable success with the public and the fact that he had personally removed operetta from the repertoire, as he pointed out. While he was prepared to make compromises with the entertainment-seeking public, then, he essentially shared the critics’ belief in the need for a nationally oriented, educational theater. Ultimately, Zelený was dismissed as editor and Šubert was vindicated.

Hopes for Czech opera were raised again by the premiere of *Dalibor* in 1886, with Władysław Florjański in the lead role and Tereza Arklowa—another Jewish singer from Lemberg—as Milada. In this opera, the noble knight Dalibor comes into conflict with Bohemia’s royal authorities and is sentenced to death for the murder of Milada’s brother, a high-ranking nobleman. Despite the adverse circumstances, Milada falls in love with Dalibor and helps him to flee from prison. But the lovers face a tragic end, thwarted by the overwhelming might of the enemy powers. Thus Smetana’s most popular dramatic work blended a romantic love story with a political conflict in the style of French grand opera. The plot was loosely based on historical incidents, lending it the aura of a “true” story, and alluded to various national myths, especially that of the Czechs as a musical nation. In the second scene of the second act, Dalibor dreams that his murdered friend Zdeněk visits him in the dungeon and plays a tune on the violin to which Dalibor sings an aria. When he awakes, his beloved Milada has not only brought him tools for him to engineer his escape but also a violin to musically accompany
it. Dalibor fights and sings his way out of the dungeon, mirroring the political strategy of the Czechs in the Austrian empire. Dalibor’s aria to his friend Zdeněk is among the most beautiful in Czech opera, and the scene seems to anticipate the focus on psychological themes to come at the turn of the century. Gustav Mahler was sufficiently impressed by this work, which is rarely performed outside the Czech Republic today, to perform it at the Vienna Royal Opera, in spite of the increasingly nationalist, anti-Czech mood in the imperial capital.  

Smetana’s alleged Wagnerism, which was held against Dalibor in 1868, now turned to his advantage. In 1886, nobody criticized the parallels with Lohengrin. Both works were based on a medieval saga and told the story of a heroic knight and his tragic love for the female protagonist. Moreover, both were influenced by the political context of the time of writing, when the Czech and German national movements respectively were on the verge of gaining a mass following. Both composers were convinced national activists who deliberately used themes taken from national history and legend to proclaim the historicity of the nation. There are some direct parallels in the narrative: Dalibor’s murder charge and appearance before the royal court mirror Telramund’s charge against Elsa and Lohengrin’s trial. In both operas, the trial scene is heralded by four trumpeters playing a specific motif and both scores feature extended wind passages and lavish instrumentation, posing comparable challenges to the musicians. Overall, however, it would be wrong to measure Smetana against Wagner. Smetana invented his very own musical language which was still perceived as fresh and modern even after his death, when his works began to be performed outside Bohemia.  

Dalibor’s success was followed up by Antonín Dvořák’s acclaimed opera Jakobin. At about the same time, Zdeněk Fibich was beginning to establish himself as a composer. Fibich’s major musical accomplishment was Hippodamia, a trilogy of melodramas about the ancient Greek line of the Pelopidae, using spoken text underscored by continuous music. The oratorio-like performance made huge demands of the actors and especially Josef Šmaha in the role of Oinomaos. This three-part work, consisting of The Courtship of Pelops (Námluvy Pelopovy), The Atonement of Tantalus (Smír Tantalův) and Hippodamia’s Death (Smrt Hippodamie), was inspired by a previous Bohemian innovation. Jiří (or Georg) Benda (1722–1795), a composer born in Staré Benátky and long-standing conductor of the royal orchestra in the German town Gotha, had introduced melodramas set to music with Storm and Stress-like emotionality in the late eighteenth century. His work Ariadne on Naxos (1775) was widely acclaimed and performed in Paris, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, and many other countries.  

Fibich’s trilogy turned toward a universal subject matter at a time when most opera composers in central and eastern Europe—the German composers of the post-Wagner generation, the Polish composers discussed above, the “mighty handful” in Russia, and Ferenc Erkel in Hungary—were still drawing on national
themes and mythology. With *Hippodamia*, Fibich showed that ancient subject matter was supremely suitable for setting to music. While interpreting ancient sources was essentially nothing new, in the late nineteenth century, it provided fresh impetus for music drama. The role of text-writer Jaroslav Vrchlický, who had also treated chiefly national subject matter as a young man but developed a more symbolist style later in life, should not be overlooked. His prose text broke conventions—prose did not gain broad acceptance in German opera until after the turn of the century—and stressed the intonation and rhythm of the spoken word, anticipating later developments in Czech opera such as the work of Leos Janáček.

Music example 6. Opening scene from the musical melodrama *Hippodamie*. 
The significance of Fíbich’s major work can be gauged in comparison with Dresden, where a tetralogy on the Odyssey by August Bungert appeared almost a decade later but, meandering between Meyerbeer and Wagner, was musically obsolete. The Hippodamia trilogy would surely have been a better investment for Ernst von Schuch had it not been in Czech. The challenge of translating it prevented it from being widely exported abroad. Until the turn of the century, it was only performed in Croatia and Antwerp and not in a German translation until 1924, at the Vienna Volksoper. Although far from light entertainment, it was nonetheless positively received in Prague. From the premiere in February 1890 to the summer break, The Courtship of Pelops was reprised eight times. The second part of the trilogy, The Atonement of Tantalus, was first performed at the grand Bohemian exhibition of 1891, and the third part, Hippodamia’s Death, late in the fall of that year.

The so-called Jubilee Exhibition was an auspicious event for the National Theater. While the public flocked to Prague from the surrounding areas to visit the exhibition center, housing a world’s fair in Bohemian miniature, Šubert saw to it that as many of them as possible also visited the Národní divadlo, and made the ensemble perform on 87 afternoons in addition to the evening performances. During the five-month run of the exposition, 222 performances were given, 112 of which were of homegrown pieces. The theater was rewarded with record takings, and native authors and composers benefited from the increased publicity. For the first time in many years, native works outnumbered the others on the program. Šubert deliberately focused on native works, presuming that the operatic newcomers from the country would respond better to them than to international innovations and elaborate sets. In the space of less than half a year, he performed all of Smetana’s operas, to much greater acclaim than in 1884 and 1885, as well as reinstating other Czech composers in the repertoire. The ballet Rákoš Rákoczy, set in eastern Moravia, was the first piece by Brno’s still unknown organ school principal, Leoš Janáček, to be shown at a major theater.

Like in 1868, Prague and the Czechs once again bathed in the glow of pan-Slavic unity. In late June, the Polish Theater from Krakow, directed by Stanislaw Koźmian, gave a performance which Národní listy described as confirmation of the brilliant reputation of Polish stage drama. A performance by the Ruthenian choir Bojan followed in late July, featuring some compositions by the Ukrainian national composer Lysenko, and in September, the Polish choral society Lutnia from Lemberg made an appearance. Delegations from Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bulgaria each gave one evening’s performance at the National Theater. Even the emperor complemented his visit to the exhibition with a night at the theater in late September. Guests from Slavic countries were ceremoniously greeted on arrival at the station and escorted with song through the town. In contrast to the foundation stone festivities of 1868, however, there was a striking absence of
Russians. But this was compensated for by an even larger Polish contingent, with whom an experiment in bilingual Polish-Czech performance was conducted. The similarity between the two languages was closer then than today and, with a little effort, each side could understand the other. Communication was even easier through song, since the visiting Poles were familiar with Czech as well as Polish songs. Indeed, pan-Slavism was to a large extent rooted in the practice of men—women were rarely among the official delegations—singing together. This form of encounter created especially emotional bonds.

The boom in attendance during the Jubilee Exhibition glossed over the financial crisis which had crept up on the National Theater since the New German Theater had opened. As well as the strong competition offered by the Germans under Angelo Neumann, drawing audience members away, rapidly rising expenditure had turned the high net profit of the first three years into a growing deficit since 1886. The fees for leading soloists rose inexorably over the 1880s. Florjański, for example, earned 8,000 guilders—far less than the top salaries at the New German Theater but still fifty percent more than the highest fee in 1883. The increased number of orchestral musicians, ballet ensemble members, and technicians compounded the problem. Although the wages for the minor staff stagnated, the total expenditure for the ensemble rose from 240,000 guilders in 1884 to 300,000 guilders in 1894. More was also spent on sets to satisfy the higher expectations of the public. As a result, the theater’s reserve melted to just half of its original level of 120,000 guilders between 1886 and 1888.

Šubert tried to stem these losses by coming to an arrangement with the main competition in Prague. In 1888, the National Theater concluded a contract with the New German Theater imposing an upper limit of 6 percent on royalties for new operas and obliging both sides to secure performance rights of new pieces for both theaters. They also agreed to premiere all new German-language operas in the German theater and all new Italian and French works at the National Theater. In 1892 and 1894 a number of extra clauses were added to the contract, regulating minor details of the theaters’ affairs, such as prohibiting the headhunting of each other’s singers. The tone of the more than 400 letters between Šubert and Neumann was respectful and friendly. But their cooperation was kept under wraps. Nationalistic sentiment prevailed in public and politics, and Šubert did not want to be seen to be conspiring with the enemy.

Despite these agreements, both theaters struggled with structural deficits in the late 1880s. Angelo Neumann, who was not only a great Wagner director but also an astute businessman, compensated to some extent by staging spectacular tours. Several guest performances of Wagner’s Ring cycle in St. Petersburg and Moscow in spring 1889 yielded over 100,000 marks. Meanwhile, the Jubilee Exhibition increased Šubert’s receipts. But these isolated events did not provide lasting solutions to their financial problems. Consequently, in 1891, the
two directors decided to appeal to the emperor to convert both establishments into royal theaters.

This request was nothing short of a sensation, the political significance of which has hitherto been overlooked. The National Theater Association was serving Emperor Franz Josef the Czechs’ most prestigious national project on a plate. Rieger and his fellow party members proceeded with due discretion. Hardly a word about the offer was printed in the Prague newspapers and in Vienna nothing was leaked out of the direct communication channels to the court. Prime Minister Count Taaffe supported the application as a way of crowning his efforts toward a German-Czech compromise. But the emperor and his closest advisors failed to see the political opportunities that converting the National Theater into a royal theater might have held. Franz Josef turned the request down, not wishing to set a precedent for other national theaters. Thus a unique opportunity to strengthen the monarchy was passed up. Count Taaffe later resigned and the Czech and German elites in Bohemia looked on as their political representatives once again became embroiled in mutual mistrust, invective, and boycotts.

Prominent experts on the Habsburg Empire, such as Robert Kann and Jan Křen, have attributed its decline to nationalism and mass politics. This incident of a petition to change the National Theater into a royal theater points in a different direction. It indicates that a lack of foresight on the part of the emperor and Austrian neglect of cultural policy were responsible for the failure to reach compromise between the Germans and the Czechs.

In 1892, the Czech National Theater was once again at the top of the imperial agenda, albeit under quite different circumstances. Princess Pauline Metternich, granddaughter of the famous prerevolution prime minister Metternich, organized the first International Music and Theater Exhibition. Designed to showcase different countries like a world’s fair, the nationalities within the Austrian part of the empire were invited to present their own sections alongside the European nation-states. But more significant than the permanent exhibition, displaying instruments, old scores, portraits of, and artifacts belonging to well-known composers, were the performances by renowned European theater ensembles in the exhibition theater, in what resembled an international competition. When Princess Metternich, who had some sympathies for the Czech cause, invited Prague’s National Theater to take part, many influential members of the National Theater Association feared it would end in ignominy. But turning the invitation down would have meant passing up a unique opportunity for the Prague ensemble to prove its skill.

The Czechs arrived in Vienna as underdogs. The ensemble members traveled in second- and third-class train carriages in order to minimize the financial risk. They received expenses of a modest eight guilders per day. Despite the relative fame acquired with Verdi’s Otello, nobody expected the National Theater
to rival Berlin’s Deutsche Theater or the Comédie Française. But Šubert had devised a clever program for the week-long appearance, consisting mainly of music theater, which was far more popular than spoken drama, and forgoing international operas.37

Figure 13. Original program of the Czech National Theater’s guest performance in Vienna.
To open the National Theater’s guest appearance, The Bartered Bride was performed, which was virtually unknown abroad. It was an immediate success. The entire Viennese press raved about the dynamic music, the realistic sets and the contemporary subject matter.\(^\text{38}\) Indeed, The Bartered Bride was one of the few operas of the day which did not take audiences back in time with historical characters and scenery. As well as its contemporary relevance, its portrayal of rural life intrigued and delighted the urban public. On the second evening, Šubert presented Dvořák’s grand opera-style Dimitrij and on the third evening, the first part of Fibich’s trilogy Hippodamia. On the fourth night, the only non-Czech piece of the tour was performed, Tchaikovsky’s Eugene Onegin, which had been a great success in Prague in 1888. Šubert’s choices were a gamble: Fibich’s work represented a new genre of music theater, The Bartered Bride was unusually realistic and Eugene Onegin was a lyrical opera which broke with contemporary dramatic conventions. Moreover, all these pieces were virtually unknown internationally. They were followed by Dalibor and a play by Šubert himself, the realist drama Jan Výrava. Šubert had planned to stage operas by two lesser known Czech composers as a finale,\(^\text{39}\) but in view of the overwhelming enthusiasm for Smetana, he decided to simply repeat The Bartered Bride and Dalibor. Some Viennese critics placed these operas on a level with Wagner’s major works and the National Theater was invited to extend its guest appearance.

![Figure 14. Positivist costumes for The Bartered Bride in 1892.](image)
This success finally marked the National Theater’s international breakthrough and the Czechs’ long-awaited recognition as a cultural nation. The demand for Smetana’s major works abroad was tremendous and *The Bartered Bride* became a fixture on repertoires across Central Europe, at first in Vienna, then in Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Dresden, Aachen, Leipzig, and eventually all the larger cities of the German Empire.40 Even the less accessible *Dalibor* became established as a repertoire piece and Smetana’s minor works such as *The Kiss* and *The Secret* were performed in many theaters. Vienna also benefited greatly from the Music and Theater Exhibition. Hosting such an acclaimed event invested the city with cultural authority in the German-speaking lands and confirmed its position as a European music capital.41

The National Theater’s triumph in Vienna raised the status of Czech opera and boosted the self-confidence of the Czech elites. Smetana ascended into the pantheon of Czech national heroes and was revered as a Czech idol.42 A bust of the composer was erected in the National Theater and plans for a Smetana Museum were forged. Šubert staged a cycle of all Smetana’s operas, which was attended by numerous foreign guests. Since Czech opera had gained prestige abroad, it also appealed more to the Prague public. From 1893, Czech operas made up at least half of the National Theater’s repertoire, comparable to the ratio of native works in Vienna and Hamburg since Wagner’s breakthrough.43

At last the National Theater’s financial situation improved. The number of subscription holders soared, yielding revenue in excess of 100,000 guilders for the first time.44 Many prominent politicians and institutions now joined the National Theater Association. Count Jan Thun-Hohenstein, Prince Ferdinand Lobkowitz, Jan Lošták, director of the national bank of Bohemia in Prague, and the regional committees of twelve Bohemian districts all purchased shares.45

Czech music was, however, to a large extent received on biased terms. Critics praised the purely national character of the music but failed to acknowledge its universal significance. What European critics most admired about Smetana’s music was that it sounded “truly Bohemian.” This appreciation was colored by a romantic sense of the exotic and, on a deeper level, criticism of western civilization. Smetana and the Czechs were perceived as fresh, unspoiled, and natural. To maintain this appeal, the opera houses that staged *The Bartered Bride* usually imported the designs and costumes directly from Prague or copied them from the models by Josef Šmaha. Dvořák’s *Dimitrij*, by contrast, was less positively received even during the exhibition in Vienna because it lacked the distinctly national character that critics so admired.46

Nonetheless, Dvořák was consistently promoted as a Czech or Slavic composer on his concert tours.47 In 1892, he was invited to the United States to advise the Americans on developing an independent music tradition. Here, Dvořák not only composed his famous *From the New World* symphony but also concluded
that America should harness the musical potential of its former slaves and the
English language to establish its own operatic tradition. He later formulated this
theory in an essay on national music in the US.  

Although the purely national reception of Czech music theoretically con-
curred with the demands of Prague’s cultural nationalists, it opened it to preju-
dice. German critics, especially, commonly took a disparaging view of Czech
opera, bracketing it together with Polish and Russian opera. “Slavic opera,”
as they were collectively referred to, was only national, while German music
and above all Wagner was considered to have universal value. This dichotomy
between an eastern European national music culture and a German universal
music culture is still upheld in the German-language and most of the English-
language literature on opera today. Appreciation on a purely national level,
however, does not do justice to Smetana’s music and in the case of Dvořák is
completely inapposite.

Comparison with Wagner shows that it was the political context of reception
which determined music’s national character rather than any supposed inherent
national essence. Smetana’s nationalism was articulated mainly in his choice of
subject matter. Like Wagner, he avoided contemporary folk music and national
“color”—a common stylistic devise in grand opera. But, conversely, a number of
his compositions were absorbed into the nation’s body of folk song. In view of
this, The Bartered Bride must be seen as more than just a Bohemian country farce
with quaint drinking songs and dances. Smetana’s opera drew directly from real
life, but remains an artistic invention.

Unfortunately for the National Theater, since its triumph in Vienna, there was
sudden international demand for its singers. The bass Vilém Heš, who began his
career singing arias in his father’s tavern, and soprano Berta Foersterová-Lauter-
erová left for Hamburg in 1893–94. Heš subsequently went on to the Vienna Court
Opera. These departures unsettled the ensemble and put an end to the homely
atmosphere which had hitherto prevailed. Without its best singers, the National
Theater was reluctant to embark on any further tours and turned down invita-
tions from Frankfurt, Berlin’s Lessing Theater, the Metropolitan Opera in New
York, and the World’s Fair in Chicago. A guest performance in Vienna during the
summer break, however, seemed a feasible option and a corresponding offer was
made. But the directors of the Vienna Court Opera apparently felt it would lower
the tone of their house. Moreover, the authorities wanted to avoid enhancing the
political status of the Czechs in the imperial capital. Here is another example of a
missed opportunity in the history of the Habsburg Empire, caused by the Viennese
court’s resistance toward Czech ambitions.

Several requests came from Galicia for the National Theater to perform in
Krakow or Lemberg but Šubert felt the travel costs would be too high and the the-
aters too small. An extended tour of Europe, such as Angelo Neumann frequently
undertook, could have broadened Czech opera’s public. The requisite body of work was available: from 1903, in addition to Smetana’s works, entire cycles of Czech opera were staged in Prague, half-jokingly referred to as český Bayreuth. But Šubert and his successors lacked the spirit of adventure—and financial incentive—to attempt such an enterprise. The National Theater was doing very well in Prague and its regular public would have objected to lengthy absences.

France formed an exception in Europe for remaining impervious to Czech opera. An initial guest appearance in Paris following the Viennese Theater and Music Exhibition was canceled for economic reasons. Subsequently, a circle of lovers of Czech music tried to organize a production of The Bartered Bride during the Paris World’s Fair. A venue was found, the Théâtre de la Renaissance, but it required 10,000 francs to host the production. In best National Theater tradition, a fundraising campaign was launched. After some weeks, however, the music journal Dalibor posed the justified question: “Why is it still necessary to pay for someone else to discover the musical beauty of our beloved opera?” This performance, too, was abandoned and it was not until the interwar period that Smetana was “discovered” in France.

The Model and Transfer of Czech Music

The success of the Czech National Theater had by far the greatest impact on Germany, the Habsburg Empire, and southeastern Europe. All the Austrian Slavs were concurrently engaged in cultural nation-building, led by the Polish and Ruthenian national movements in Galicia and their equivalents in Croatia and Slovenia. Poland, with its history of statehood and tradition of national theater, initially preceded the Czechs in this process. But, hampered by a number of obstacles discussed above, the Polish theaters in Warsaw and Lemberg eventually fell behind the Prague National Theater. The Czech triumph in Vienna and simultaneous disgrace of the Lemberg Theater made this clear to an international public. Many Galician intellectuals therefore looked with respect and increasingly with admiration toward Prague. Lemberg actor and director Adolf Walewski, who briefly held the post of director of the Polish Theater, wrote in a pamphlet entitled Theater at Home and Abroad: “If any theater puts the democratic idea, the concept of ordinary emotions, the unity of the nation, into practice in a noble manner, it is without doubt the Czechs’ theater.” The Galician press routinely reported on events at the Prague National Theater. Although the Polish theater was run by impresarios until 1918 and never became a national theater, it nonetheless to some extent followed the Czech example. Director Heller, in particular, pursued a similar strategy to Šubert in Prague when he set up a Polish ensemble and tried to promote native composers. Of course, he also included Czech operas in his repertoire.
The Ruthenian elites were even more fascinated by Prague than the Galician Poles. Telegrams and delegations were sent as signs of Ukrainian sympathy for the National Theater cause, not to mention a donation of 100 guilders by the metropolitan of the Greek Catholic Church in 1868. Inspired by the foundation stone festivities, a group of Ruthenians launched an initiative to set up an own national theater in L’viv. The two Ukrainian delegates attending the opening of the Národní divadlo in 1883 declared: “The Ruthenian people will strive to adapt the fine example you have set to achieve a great goal.” The Ruthenian national theater, too, was to be financed by public donations and built on a broad social basis. But the conflicts between rival factions within the Ukrainian national movement—some tending to align with Russia (the Russophiles), others taking a more independent stance (the Ukrainophiles)—slowed the initiative’s progress. Nevertheless, by the eve of the First World War, the Ukrainian theater project in Galicia had reached about the same stage as the Czechs’ in the 1870s. It had a fund of initial capital and a design for the building, combining classic Western theater elements with Ruthenian sacred architecture.

The relationship between the Ruthenians, or Ukrainians, and the Czechs was based on reciprocal appreciation of their cultures. In 1891, for example, the National Theater invited a Ukrainian choral society and a Ruthenian drama ensemble to take part in the Jubilee Exhibition. Evidence exists of a number of cultural transfers, going as far as the Russian part of the Ukraine. The work of the leading Ukrainian opera composer prior to World War I, Nikolai Lysenko (1842–1912), contains parallels with Smetana’s music of a generation earlier. Lysenko, too, used comic material as well as themes from national myth and history. His instrumentation betrays a Wagnerian influence as well as incorporating folk rhythms. These cultural transfers were effected less by the study of scores or from work to work than by personal contact. Lysenko was a student in Leipzig just as Wagnerism was gaining ground and in Ukraine he saw many Czech musicians and conductors performing works from their home country.

There is also evidence of direct cultural transfers from Prague to Posen and the Prussian partition of Poland. One year after the foundation stones were laid in Prague, which received in-depth coverage in Polish newspapers, a commission was formed in Poznań with the aim of constructing a national theater. In 1871, this commission became a shareholding company which began fundraising with such success that construction was symbolically inaugurated (in the former garden of the Potocki estate) only two years later. By 1875 the theater was already complete, thanks mainly to donations from rich aristocrats, and bore the same legend over the entrance as the National Theater in Prague was to later: Narod sobie—“the nation unto itself.”

Some equally striking cultural transfers to the Germans in Bohemia can be observed. The German-speaking population in Prague was slow to develop initia-
tives in support of nationally defined cultural institutions since German culture was traditionally preeminent. Performances at the Estates Theater were already given chiefly in German, and the influential aristocrats among the audience did not sympathize with the modern trend toward linguistic nationalism. When the German theater went bankrupt in 1885 as a result of maladministration and competition from the National Theater, Prague’s Germans took matters into their own hands and, following the Czech example, began fundraising for the construction of a German national theater. Unlike the Czech theater’s supporters, the German theater’s sympathizers were almost exclusively urban, numbering far more upper-class Jewish Prague citizens than German speakers of Bohemia’s border regions. This situation gave an early indication of the later rift between the “Sudeten” Germans and the German-speaking minority in Prague. The New German Theater thus remained essentially a theater for Prague and failed to become a German-Bohemian national theater. In view of its director, Angelo Neumann, and the composition of its public, it is perhaps best described as a German-Jewish theater and an example of the fruitfulness of this symbiosis.

Southeastern Europe, including Bulgaria as well as Croatia and Slovenia, also looked on the Czech National Theater as a beacon. Following the demise of neo-absolutism, the Croatian elites pursued a similar political strategy in the Habsburg Monarchy to the Czech national movement, demanding cultural equality and autonomy for the historical territory of the kingdom of Croatia. In 1861, the provincial diet resolved to found a Croatian university, national museum, and national theater. When the foundation stones for the Czech National Theater were laid in 1868, prominent Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian intellectuals were in attendance. Slavic solidarity was demonstrated by countless congratulatory telegrams from practically all Croatian and Slovenian towns.

Prague’s National Theater remained a role model for the Croats not least because the founding of their own national theater was hampered by problems and delays. These were due less to the political resistance of Hungary, to which Croatia belonged, than to the limitations of the capital city Zagreb, with a population of less than 30,000 in 1880. Nevertheless, the Croatian National Theater (Hrvatsko narodno kazalište) was opened in 1895. The neobaroque building was built by the Viennese architects Fellner & Helmer, who had also designed the remarkably similar New German Theater in Prague. At the inauguration, attended by Emperor Franz Josef, the historical opera Nikola Šubić Zrinski by Ivan Zajc was performed, telling the story of the brave eponymous hero. With its heroic plot and ample incorporation of folk music motifs and dances, this work followed the pattern of the majority of national operas.

The pomp of the inaugural ceremony could not disguise the shortfalls on Croatia’s cultural scene. Like the Provisional Theater in Prague, the Croatian National Theater did not have enough native-language pieces to make up a repertoire. Good
actors were scarce and experience of staging operas minimal. But the Czech National Theater reliably provided a helping hand. Croatian theater studies expert Slavko Batušić describes the transfer between the two nations thus: “Due to the similarity in our political, cultural, and social circumstances, European influences in general often came to us via the Czechs. Where theater was concerned, the Národní divadlo, this Czech equivalent to the Burg Theater, served us as a more acceptable model than the original itself.”

Prague’s assistance took a number of forms, from dispatching soloists, actors, and stage technicians to lending costumes. The national theater in Zagreb even requested help casting the chorus when it was short of three sopranos and altos for the opening. The costume designs for the first Croatian performance of Lohengrin did not come from Vienna or nearby Graz but from Prague. Josef Šmaha had a particular influence on the Croatian theater scene, giving several guest performances in Zagreb in which he demonstrated his innovatively realistic style. In 1898, he was made an honorary member of the ensemble. Conversely, members of the Zagreb ensemble traveled to Prague to see the latest operas or productions of particular interest and gain inspiration for their own performances.

The Prague National Theater had even greater significance for what is now Slovenia. Šubert and his ensemble maintained close links with the Dramatic Association in Ljubljana (Dramatično Družstvo v Ljubljani), which organized performances and raised funds toward the construction of a Slovenian national theater. A new theater was opened in 1892, where performances were given in both German and Slovenian, although precedence was given to the latter. The architects of the building, the principal soloists, and many musicians were Czechs, and even the scores and costumes came from Prague. The Prague National Theater lent the Slovenians the scores and some costume designs for The Troubadour and Rigoletto, Lucia di Lammermoor, La Muette de Portici, The African Maid, Faust, Carmen, Halka, and The Flying Dutchman. Even Italian opera was communicated via Prague, despite Slovenia’s geographical proximity to Venice and Trieste, because of the similarity between the Slovenian and Czech languages, making translations from Czech to Slovenian easier than from Italian. On the issue of devising a program for the inauguration, the Slovenian theater activists wrote admiringly to their colleagues in Prague: “We thought at first of a Czech opera . . . You have brought honor to all Slavs.” In the event, the theater opened with the comic opera In the Well (V Studni) by Blodek, a piece that does not make excessive demands of the singers and was therefore suited to an ensemble with limited strength and experience. It was followed a short time later by The Bartered Bride and other lighter works but by the end of the century the Slovenians, too, were taking on Dalibor. The repertoire in Slovenia in the late nineteenth century was strikingly apolitical. True, Halka—an opera criticizing feudal injustice—was especially well received, according to the press.
program’s overall emphasis on grand opera, however, indicates that the Slovenian theater intended to cultivate a standard European repertoire like the Czech theater it was modeled on.

The involvement of so many Czech singers and musicians in the theaters of other Slavic nations of the Habsburg Empire—and vice versa—also worked to the advantage of the National Theater in Prague. If there were no suitable Czech tenors available, Šubert enlisted Raverta from Dalmatia or Florjański from Lemberg. After the turn of the century, Croatian mezzo soprano Gabriela Horvátová was among the National Theater’s leading soloists. Thus Prague’s National Theater had access to singers who could learn Czech with relative ease and so supplement the ensemble. Without these imported artists, and especially Florjański, Czech opera might not have been in a position to rival the German competition in Prague or convince audiences at the Music and Theater Exhibition in Vienna.

The Czechs also played a key role for the most distant and southerly Slavic nation, the Bulgarians. In contrast to the Austro-Slavs, they had achieved independence in 1878. But the Bulgarian government still faced the challenges of developing national awareness and building an education system. Since there was no national elite to speak of, the young state looked abroad for leaders and especially to Prague. Here, the Bulgarian envoy was struck by an extraordinarily talented young man named Konstantin Jireček, son of the well-known author, who had qualified as Professor of History at the age of 25. The Bulgarian government appointed him General Secretary of the Ministry of Education in 1879, promoting him to Director two years later. Although Jireček stayed only a few years in Bulgaria, he left an enduring legacy, installing grammar school and higher education systems.

The construction of an emblematic theater, however, had to be postponed, since Bulgaria had no cities large enough to accommodate one. Sofia was a former Ottoman garrison with a population of only 100,000 at the turn of the century. Still, by 1906, plans for a Bulgarian national theater had progressed far enough for the government to look for a potential director. Again, a suitable candidate was found in Prague, where Josef Šmaha had been suffering a creative crisis since the Young Czech National Theater Association had taken over the theater. Not only had he fallen out of favor politically, but the realism he championed in theater in the 1890s was becoming outmoded. Šmaha gladly accepted the post in Bulgaria and moved to Sofia. Although he was not able to fulfill local hopes for an opera ensemble, he did establish a highbrow repertoire, a body of native works and a permanent theater ensemble.⁷³

Thus the Czech model was transferred in two respects: first, on an institutional level, and second, on a musical level, since the Czechs led the way in creating an opera culture that was both a demonstration of status and in touch with the people.
Art Nouveau in Prague

Cracks began to appear in the carefully crafted edifice of Czech national culture in the 1890s. The Manuscript of the Queen’s Court (Rukopis Královédvorský), said to prove the existence of a specifically Czech school of literature in the Middle Ages, was revealed to be a forgery. The discovery was hugely damaging for the construction of national history which historians, writers, and composers had been engaged in since the prerevolution period. Meanwhile, the younger generation took the existence of the Czech nation and Czech culture as a given that did not need constant verification in a European context.

In 1895, a group of young authors who rejected prevailing theater conventions came up with a “Manifesto of Czech Modernity,” calling for an end to sociopolitical and national subjects and greater focus on emotional and psychological issues. The modernists opposed the dominant view in theater that social reality should be portrayed on the stage and argued for conveying content in a symbolic way, forgoing the naturalism that had given rise to verismo in opera in the 1890s. In practice this style resulted in works made up of a predictable sequence of love, betrayal, violence, and death—with correspondingly dramatic arias—rather than credible portrayals of real life.

In the search for new inspiration, influential authors turned to another ancient genre: fairytales. Julius Zeyer, who became a renowned symbolist beyond Bohemia, and Jaroslav Kvapil, who went on to become director of spoken drama at the National Theater, were the two leading Prague playwrights to publish works in this genre. Kvapil’s Princeska Pampeliška and Zeyer’s Radúz a Mahulena were both premiered in 1898 and, remarkably, both set to music, the former by Josef Bohuslav Förster, and Zeyer’s Tatra tale by Josef Suk. The music in these works was not designed to create dramatic effect but to conjure up a lyrical mood and reflect the enchantment of the fairytale. Radúz a Mahulena caused quite a stir among the critics, who responded positively despite its length of over three hours. The music by Suk, a pupil of Dvořák, was so popular that it was compressed into a half-hour suite to be performed independently. With nearly 50 reprises, Princeska Pampeliška was an even greater success.

A year later, Dvořák’s Čert a Káča was the first production of a true fairytale opera by a contemporary Czech composer. This work, too, was warmly received and became the most often performed Czech opera in the year after its premiere. Kvapil went on to base his next project on another fairytale, the story of the mermaid Rusalka, inspired by a visit to Danish Bornholm and the story by Hans Christian Andersen. With Šubert’s help, he contacted Antonín Dvořák, who had dealt with a similar theme in his symphonic poem Vodník, and showed him his draft of the libretto. Dvořák was immediately convinced and composed the music for Rusalka in only seven months. It was a cooperation between unlikely
partners—Kvapil, a young playwright bent on breaking theater conventions, and Dvořák, a (supposed) traditionalist whose chief influence had been the neo-Romantic composer Johannes Brahms.\textsuperscript{78}

The opera is an interesting illustration of the day’s attitudes and preoccupations. The nymph Rusalka falls in love with a prince who appears at her lake. The witch Ježibaba agrees to help Rusalka win the prince—in exchange for her voice—by turning her into a human, but warns that if he is unfaithful, they will both be damned. The prince is fascinated by Rusalka and takes her to his castle but at the same time finds her strange and her silence alienating. At a ball, he flirts with a princess and Rusalka sees them embracing. Facing her doom, Rusalka lets the Water Sprite take her back to the lake, where Ježibaba tells her she can gain release if she kills the prince. She refuses to do this, but the prince seeks her out, sensing their fate. Full of remorse, he asks Rusalka to kiss him and dies in her arms.

This libretto is pervaded with fin-de-siècle pessimism and melancholy. Both main characters are trapped by circumstance; the nymph in nature, the prince in his social world. Death is the only escape and in it the two are united at the end. The prince’s materialism and life at the court, symbolized by a conventional ballet interlude, are portrayed as superficial and shallow. Dvořák’s music alternately reflects this glossy emptiness, the nymph’s natural idyll and the allure of the dreamworld. When the action takes place in the real world, the music is hard and rhythmic, driven by traditional contrapuntal devices, but when Rusalka and the prince surrender to their desires, it becomes soft, full of \textit{ritardandi}, resulting in an impressionist style. The aria \textit{Měsíčku na nebi hlubokém} (\textit{Song to the Moon}), in which Rusalka sings in silvery sparkling tones of the heavens and her sense of longing, is among the greatest European arias of the turn of the century. The contrast between the material world and the shadowy world of dreams, and the melancholy realization that the two main characters cannot overcome nature, binds the work into a dramatic whole.

Unfortunately the partnership between Dvořák and Kvapil was not to be continued. Aged sixty at the time of \textit{Rusalka’s} premiere in 1901, the composer passed away three years later. Zeyer and Dvořák’s pupil Suk collaborated once again on the dramatized fairytale \textit{Pod jabloni}. Kvapil worked with Otakar Ostrčil, who became director of the National Theater’s opera department in the First Republic, on the piece \textit{Sirotek}.\textsuperscript{79} These works, accompanied by incidental music, were considerably more successful than most new Czech operas, of which only nine were shown at the National Theater between 1900 and 1906. Another extraordinarily popular piece was the ballet \textit{Pohádka o Honzovi} with music by young composer Oskar Nedbal. The musicologist Brian Locke has attempted to classify the music of this era in terms of the opposite poles of traditional folk music and abstract modernism.\textsuperscript{80} This dichotomy, however, no more reaches an incisive definition than classification according to certain schools.
Music example 7. Aria to the moon in *Rusalka*.

There is no broadly recognized equivalent in music history for the art nouveau genre (or *Jugendstil* in German) of art and architecture that so eminently shaped the face of Prague and Central Europe as a whole. But similar themes of nature, symbols, fairytales, dreams, and ethereal beauty were dealt with in both the visual arts and in music. Dvořák’s music for the opera *Rusalka* contained all the essential stylistic elements of art nouveau: lyricism, mysticism, color, and
symmetry. The term “impressionist” does not adequately describe the music of the era and can only be applied to a few western European operas, such as Debussy’s *Pelleas et Mélisande*. In the Habsburg Empire, the principles of art nouveau, by contrast, were evident in compositions by Mahler, Zemlinsky, Korngold, early period Schönberg and the Czech composers mentioned above as well as Mieczysław Karłowicz in Galicia. It seems appropriate, then, to apply this art-historical term to music history. Doing so brings Prague’s significance as a center of musical modernism, alongside Vienna, deservedly into focus.

Music example 8. *Pohádka o Honzovi*.

Although the National Theater continued to stage new pieces after 1900, a trend toward fostering tradition emerged in opera, and it became increasingly difficult for young composers to gain recognition. This and the rampant intolerance
of contemporary nationalism are illustrated by an incident involving Karel Weis, composer of the opera *The Polish Jew*. Weis submitted his work to the National Theater in 1901 but received no response from Kovařovic. The opera director’s colleague delegated to assess it brusquely advised Weis to approach the German Theater instead. Why did the National Theater brush him off in this way? Weis was a Prague Jew who had based his opera on a German libretto. In turn-of-the-century Prague, he was therefore regarded as a *German* composer, although he had explicitly offered to translate the libretto into Czech. Angelo Neumann, to whom he subsequently submitted his work, knew him as a *Czech* composer and hesitated to accept the piece as the National Theater held the first performance rights to Czech operas.

Shortly after the work was successfully premiered in the New German Theater, Schuch performed it in Dresden, where it was perceived as a *Czech* opera. Ludwig Hartmann, the critic writing for the newspaper *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, however, peculiarly credited the composer as “Karol Weisz,” using a partially Hungarian spelling. The different responses to Weis’s work in Prague and Dresden show how Prague’s Jewish population fell between all national stools. In Prague, Weis was considered a German composer—contrary to his own attitude—while in Dresden he was regarded as Czech or something more exotic. The music critic Emanuel Chvála, a close friend of Kovařovic, told Weis on the success of his opera: “Now you are a German composer and you can only continue to act as such. There is no going back for us. You have burnt all your bridges.”

National rivalry was partly responsible for *Rusalka* not reaching audiences in Vienna, unlike the works of Smetana in previous years. Gustav Mahler, then director of the royal opera, had scheduled its Viennese premiere for August 1902. But the anti-Czech mood under Mayor Lueger was very strong. When Vílém Heš—due to sing the part of the Water Sprite—fell ill, the performance was dropped. Meanwhile, at home Dvořák was accused by the critic Zdeněk Nejedlý of lacking in popular awareness and progressive spirit. Ironically, Dvořák had written his later operatic works in the belief that they could achieve what his symphonies had not and reach all of society.

Around this time, Leoš Janáček approached the National Theater with the first version of his opera *Jenufa*. After close consideration, Kovařovic rejected the opera on account of “flaws” in the music. He returned the score with notes criticizing insufficient leitmotifs, uneven and frequently homophonic instrumentation, especially an overemphasis on strings, and the absence of horns where they would be expected. Moreover, he objected to the frequent repetition of certain words and motifs which, in his view, failed to create suspense. Kovařovic, a late Romantic Smetana aficionado who had himself written some folkish operas, was not ready for Janáček’s ethnographic approach. Indeed, the subsequent preparations in Brno for the premiere of *Jenufa* showed how unconventional and
complex his music was. 50 rehearsals were needed for the orchestra to master the piece and its unusual rhythms. The opera was not performed in Prague until 1916, after much reworking.

According to Němeček, the National Theater rejected Janáček’s first opera primarily because it feared incurring further losses. By the end of the 1903 season, a deficit of 30,000 crowns had accumulated, despite higher subsidies. For this reason, Schmoranz and Kovařovic felt compelled to stage more operettas and pursue a conservative program policy. Unlike a royal theater, the *Národní divadlo* could not rely on the resources of higher authorities. The theater’s finances were supervised by the members of the theater association who could get quite unpleasant in defense of their investments. Comparison with the Šubert era, however, shows that the ability to take artistic risks was largely a question of conviction. Šubert had staged Fibich’s *Hippodamia* trilogy, despite the National Theater’s unpredictable financial circumstances, and even taken it to Vienna.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to view the National Theater’s development from 1900 as following a downward trajectory. The quality of the orchestra improved sufficiently under Kovařovic to venture a production of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, considered one of the most sophisticated pieces of the international repertoire, in 1913. On January 1, 1914, the curious situation arose that *Parsifal* was premiered simultaneously in both the New German Theater and the National Theater in Prague. Other German operas were also translated into Czech and performed at an astonishing rate, including *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, which was shown just one month after its world premiere in Dresden. Richard Strauss himself conducted performances of *Elektra* in the National Theater in 1910, to the chagrin of the New German Theater. The works of Italian composers, by contrast, were performed distinctly less after the fashion for *verismo* had waned. Although Verdi remained a permanent fixture on the repertoire, older Italian operas usually ran only one or two seasons after their first performance. The decrease in once so popular French opera was even more pronounced. But here, too, generalizations must be avoided, especially since the success of a work was dependent not only on the style of the music but also on the sets and singers. In broad terms, the foreign repertoire was shared between Italian, French, and German opera, indicating a remarkable rise in the popularity of German opera—in view of the fact that Prague also had the specialist New German Theater—and distinct parallels to Lemberg and Budapest.

Prague’s response to *Der Rosenkavalier*, however, was not entirely positive, despite the record number of reprises. The premiere audience took exception to the scenes in which Ochs von Lerchenau and others behaved improperly to the female characters. Whistling at the open display of sexuality, the Prague audience, though much less religious, reacted similarly to the Catholic audience in Lemberg. In Dresden, meanwhile, the director objected to the negative light
Der Rosenkavalier threw on the aristocracy. The fact that this opera picked up on contemporary issues on a number of levels certainly contributed to its outstanding success.

The drama section of the Czech National Theater maintained even closer contact to Germany than the opera section. Jaroslav Kvapil, who was at first merely literary advisor but promoted to chief stage director in 1906 and to head of drama in 1911, maintained regular contact with Munich’s Künstlertheater and Max Reinhardt in Berlin, whom he invited to Prague on several occasions. In 1906, the Moscow Art Theater, directed by Constantin Stanislavskii, made its first guest appearance abroad in Prague.94 The Art Theater was inspired by the authentic characters and portrayal of emotions in the plays of Anton Chekhov. Instead of the quick-fire dialogues, numerous entrances and exits and artificially streamlined plots of Parisian comedies, Chekhov devoted more time to moments of reflection, interrupted dialogue, and stream-of-consciousness expression. Here, the characters were multidimensional, sometimes broken; in other words, they mirrored the complexity of twentieth-century Freudian man and woman. Stage direction and set design underwent a thorough transformation. Kvapil reduced and abstracted the sets in order to allow more space for the artists to make a personal impact. He instructed the actors to release their inner feelings to captivate the audience on an additional, subconscious level.

If one compares photographs of performances in Prague with those in the royal theaters in Berlin and Dresden at this time,95 the difference is striking. While the historical stage sets in the German cities were cluttered and over-ornate, Prague could present its audience a thrillingly modern theater. Reduced stage sets and costumes opened up new scope for stage direction in opera. In Prague, new productions of nearly all the older works in the repertoire were created between 1900 and 1914, while at the royal operas in Dresden and Vienna, as well as at the Garnier Opera in Paris, existing productions were reused for decades. Having adopted stage direction as a significant element of stagecraft relatively early on—under Kvapil and Kovařovic—the National Theater was able to continue drawing a mass audience to the operas of Smetana and Dvořák, and had less need to present new works. In this way, both modernism and the cultivation of tradition contributed to the development of a standard central European repertoire, which is considered more closely in the next chapter. Prague’s National Theater etched itself on to the cultural map of Europe as a theater which had grown in significance since its founding phase. No longer simply a site of national art, as it was in the 1880s and 1890s, it was now also a center of modernism in opera.
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Figure 15. Symbolist stage sets for Libuše.

Notes

1. See the review in Národní listy, Jan. 14, 1885, 3 (which alludes to many Germans having visited the Czech National Theater); see also the comments in Teuber, Geschichte, Dritter Theil, 779.

2. On Wagner’s reception, see Hostinský; also Locke, Opera and Ideology, 23–28.

3. On the different interpretations of Wagner’s work, see Národní listy, Jan. 14, 1885, 3; also Bernbach, Der Wahn, 191.

4. See Národní listy, June 3, 1885, 1. Teuber directly attributes the bankruptcy of the Estates Theater in 1885 to competition from the National Theater and especially its opera section. See Teuber, Geschichte, Dritter Theil, 789.

5. On the history of the New German Theater, see Ludvová, Nationaltheater, 44; also Tancsik, Die Prager, 31–33. For an English-language analysis see Cohen, The Politics of Ethnic Survival, 94, 115–16.


7. The mere arrangement of this guest performance made it to the front page of Národní listy (see the edition of June 3, 1885). On the internal debates in the National Theater Association, see NA, Fond ND, Sign. 97, 56–57, PVS of Jan. 15, 1885.

8. See the letter signed by 84 subscription holders which was also sent to the executive committee, in Národní listy, Aug. 29, 1886.

9. A very negative view of Raverta can be found in Nejedlý, Dejiny, vol. 1, 138–39. See also the petition in NA, Fond ND, Sign. 158, 55–56; also previous contracts with Raverta obliging him to sing in Czech, ibid., 14–54.
12. On Saint-Saëns’s visit to Prague and the preceding scandal, see *Dalibor*, Feb. 14, 1886, 55–56; and Feb. 21, 1886, 64–65.
13. Šubert’s contact and negotiations with Verdi are described in detail in the former’s memoirs. See Šubert, *Moje Vzpomínky*, vol. 3, 21–40.
15. One example is an agreement between the National Theater and composer Karel Bendl concerning his opera Černohori in 1881. See NA, Fond ND, Sign. D 104/109 and Sign. D 105/9. Bendl, who was chairman of the association of Czech composers, was originally offered 500 guilders for this work but eventually managed to negotiate 1000 guilders and considerably better royalties.
16. Similar phenomena also occurred in other fields of the arts. On literature and the visual arts, see Storck, *Kulturnation*, 146–49.
17. This was where *Národní listy* mockingly suggested Excelsior’s appeal lay. See the edition of June 22, 1886, 2. For details of income, see Archive of the National Theater, AND, Annual Report 3 (1886), 34. On productions of Excelsior in Central Europe, see also Markian Prokopovych’s new book on the Royal Budapest Opera.
19. These statistics are taken from Šubert’s annual reports in the 1880s.
20. This controversy is summarized, from Zelený’s point of view, in Nejedlý, *Opera Národního*, 167–79. Šubert’s response and view of the matter is recorded in the National Theater’s annual reports. See AND, Annual Report 2 (1885), 12 and 34–39 and 3 (1886), 35–43.
21. This memorandum can be found in NA, Fond ND, Sign. 97, 55. See the reactions to it in NA, Fond ND, Sign. D 105/66, *MMC* of Feb. 12, 1883; NA, Fond ND, Sign. 97, 56–57, *PVS* of Feb. 15, 1885.
23. For a critique of Fibich’s Hippodamia, see Piper’s *Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters*, vol. 2, 200–205.
24. See Pišková, *Dramatická tvorba*.
27. An account of this by actor Roman Želazowski can be found in Idem, *Pięćdziesiąt lat teatru*, 86–88.
28. *Národní listy*, May 19, 1868, 1–2; May 20, 1868, 2; June 22, 1891, 1–2.
29. At the Estates Theater, the tenor was paid a salary of nearly 10,000 guilders, almost three times as much as the leading players of the Provisional Theater. See Teuber, *Geschichte, Dritter Theil*, 736.
30. The exact rate of fees and wages can be found in Šubert, *Dějiny*, CXLVIII–CLXVIII.
32. See Ludovová, *National Theater*, 50; In Tancsik, 61, it is reported that a guest performance in Berlin’s Lessing Theater in 1891 made a net profit of 60,000 marks.

35. On Pauline Metternich and her significance for the Austrian reception of Czech music, see Reittererová, *Vier Dutzend*, 82–84.

36. See Fond ND, Sign. D. 50, PVA of April 24, 1892; also *Národní listy*, April 25, 1892.

37. On the National Theater’s appearance at the exhibition, see Šubert, *Moje Vzpomínky*, vol. 2, 43–59.


39. See the original plans for the tour in NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 50, MMC of April 7, 1892; also *Národní listy*, May 10, 1892, 4.

40. In Vienna *The Bartered Bride* was first performed in German in 1893 at the *Theater an der Wien*. Its premiere in the royal theater followed in 1896 and further increased its fame. It was reprised 17 times in the first quarter after premiere. On the Viennese reception of Smetana and especially *The Bartered Bride*, see Reittererová, *Vier Dutzend*, 64–77, 225. On the Berlin production, in which conductor Adolf Čech and ballet director Augustín Berger were personally involved, see Šmaha, *Dělali jsme*, 151–52.

41. On Vienna’s status as a center of music, see Nussbaumer, *Musikstadt Wien*.

42. See Reittererová, *Vier Dutzend*, 36–37. The Czech public consistently rejected proposals from Vienna, however, to have a bust erected in the Royal Opera commemorating him as the greatest Austrian composer; ibid, 35.

43. On the ratio of indigenous pieces to foreign works in the repertoire of all the major German opera theatres, see *Opernstatistik für das Jahr 1894*, 6–30.

44. See NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 99/36, PVA, April 9, 1893. The situation was further improved by the diet raising the theater’s annual subsidy to 100,000 guilders. See AND, Annual Report 2 (1885), 16, 34–39; Annual Report 3 (1886) and Annual Report 11 (1895), 4.

45. See Šubert, *Dějiny*, 369.

46. See the review in *Wiener Extrapol* which is reproduced in *Nejedlý*.


48. In an interview with the *New York Herald* in May 1893, Dvořák said: “The future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies.” Quoted in Horowitz, “Dvořák and the New World,” 96.


51. This, at least, is the interpretation given in Šubert, *Dějiny*, 360.

52. On this cycle, see Němeček, *Opera Národního*, 116–17.

53. See Šubert, *Dějiny*, 359.


55. The first Paris performance was given to mark the 10th anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1928. See Reittererová, *Vier Dutzend*, 84.


57. Prominent intellectuals and the priest Stefan Kachala also traveled to Prague for the laying of the foundation stones. On Ruthenian attempts to found a national theater, see Lane, *The Polish Theatre*; also Got, *Das österreichische Theater*, vol. 2, 767–82. Citation from *Národní listy*, Nov. 20, 1883, 4.

58. For an overview of the development of the Ukrainian national movement in Galicia in the Habsburg period, see Rudnytsky, *The Ukrainians*.


60. See Ludovová, *Nationaltheater und Minderheitentheater*. 

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62. The speeches given by Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian dignitaries at the pan-Slavic congress are reproduced in *Národní listy*, May 19, 1868, 1–2; May 20, 1868, 1–2. This issue also contains most of the congratulatory telegrams.
64. On this piece, see Katalinić, *Nikola Zrinyi*; also Everett, *Aspects of Musical-Dramatic Form*.
65. The opera department of the National Theater was actually closed 1902–1909 because it had become a financial liability. See Batušić, *Hrvatsko narodno*, 187–89.
68. The extent of their cooperation is evidenced by the correspondence between the Czech and Croatian National Theaters. See NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 212, 153, 158, 161, 165, 194, 248; also NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 50, MMC Aug. 6, 1891.
69. See the relevant article in *EMTA*, “Nowy Teatr w Lublanie.”
70. See the correspondence between the Dramatic Association and the National Theater in NA, Fond ND, Sign. D. 212, 35–94.
74. This manuscript had inspired some of Dvořák’s compositions, including *Lieder aus der Königinhofer Handschrift* (Opus 7, 1872), as well as a piece by Fibich.
77. See *Národní listy*, April 6, 1891, 2.
78. On the relationship between Dvořák and Brahms, see Beveridge, *Dvořák*, 56–58, 80–87. The Dvořák anthology by Beckerman calls the composer’s classification as a traditionalist into question.
79. On these works and the opera repertoire between 1900 and 1906, see Němeček, *Opera Národního*, 109.
80. See Locke, *Opera and Ideology*.
83. Massenet’s two fairytale operas, *Cendrillon* and *Grisélidis*, which were first performed more or less contemporaneously with Dvořák’s fairytale operas, in 1899 and 1901, might be considered comparable.
84. For the composer’s view of this incident, see Weis, *Spravedlnost*, 4, 7, and his subsequent pamphlet in which he responds to the National Theater’s criticism of his person and his first pamphlet: Weis, *Moje odpověď*, 8–9.
85. The National Theater had staged his first opera, *Viola*, in 1892, in Czech. On this and the dispute between Weis and the National Theater, see Němeček, 142–44.
86. This review is in parts reproduced and translated in Weis, *Spravedlnost*, 12–13. The rival newspaper, *Dresdner Nachrichten*, reported on Weis without tampering with his name. See *Dresdner Nachrichten*, Sept. 9, 1901, 2.
87. Quoted in Weis, *Spravedlnost*, 9. Jan Němeček, by contrast, blames Weis for the fact that the opera was not accepted by the National Theater (Němeček, *Opera Národního*, 143). His unfounded claim that, in writing music for a German libretto, Weis was “pri-
marily concerned with material gain and the effect of the work in foreign theaters,” places his view in a questionable light. Should Weis have renounced all material concerns on account of his Jewish background? Němeček also criticizes the fact that Weis worked with a German libretto at all. This criticism is not only subliminally anti-Semitic but also false, in view of the amount of older Czech operas that were based on German texts.

88. *Rusalka* was, however, performed in Ljubljana and Zagreb before the outbreak of World War I.


90. The title refers to a naturalist play by Gabriela Preissová which was premiered in November 1890.


92. Like Bartok and Szymanowski, Janáček criticized the traditional folk style. He had criticized Kovařovic’s most successful opera *Poshlavci* for its superficial incorporation of national style elements and even dared to cast doubt on the work of the most exalted Czech composer, Smetana. Here, he was paying the penalty.

93. On the performance and reception of *Der Rosenkavalier* at the National Theater, see Němeček, *Opera národního*, vol. 1, 200–202.

94. See Černy and Kolárová, *Sto let*, 56.

95. A number of images are reproduced in a six-volume fifty-year anniversary publication on the National Theater. See *Dějiny národního divadla*, Praha 1933–1936.