

BEDŘICH SMETANA

MYTH, MUSIC, AND PROPAGANDA



KELLY ST. PIERRE

Bedřich Smetana



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Kelly St. Pierre



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Introduction

Bedřich Smetana recorded in his diary that he “began” work on “Vyšehrad,” the first symphonic poem of his cycle *Má vlast* (My homeland), in September of 1874.¹ Yet scholars have challenged the composer’s chronology for over a century, suggesting both earlier and later start dates and nuancing the definition of “began.” Václav Zelený argued in his 1894 memoir that Smetana actually first conceived “Vyšehrad’s” main motive—“a persistent four-note germ cell”—on October 20, 1874.² Vladimír Helfert combined sketch studies and a November 1872 report from *Hudební listy* (Music news) that the composer “intended” to write new orchestral compositions called “Vyšehrad” and “Vltava” to argue that Smetana began work on the movement in that month.³ Mirko Očadlík echoed (without directly acknowledging) Helfert’s study, also claiming that Smetana began “Vyšehrad” in 1872.⁴ Most recently, Brian Large presented his own sketch study of “Vyšehrad” to further support the 1872 dating.⁵

These authors’ investment in correcting Smetana’s own noted starting date for “Vyšehrad” reflects more than a desire to render history accurately. Their newly-proposed timings each coincide with critical moments in Smetana’s biography that reinforce a mythology framing him as the lone originator of a specifically Czech music.⁶ Zelený’s dates correspond to Smetana’s first recorded experience of definitive hearing loss. This chronology positions “Vyšehrad” as a manifestation of the most romantically tragic and Beethovenian component of Smetana’s “genius”—his deafness.⁷ Helfert’s claim, by contrast, hinges on musical interrelationships within Smetana’s output. The author argues that Smetana incorporated themes from his most deliberately nationalistic work, the opera *Libuše*, into “Vyšehrad” (a comparison made easier if Smetana began “Vyšehrad” just after completing *Libuše* in 1872) and asserts that Smetana must have intended both works as “magnificent national apotheoses.”⁸ Očadlík also situates “Vyšehrad” as an extension of *Libuše*’s greatness and cites the report in *Hudební listy* to argue that Smetana began the movement in 1872.⁹ Large similarly underscores connections between “Vyšehrad” and *Libuše*, but focuses in particular on distancing “Vyšehrad” from the possibility of an additional, less desirable connection. He responds to similarities between “Vyšehrad” and

Zdeněk Fibich's nationalistic symphonic poem *Záboj, Slavoj and Luděk* (premiered before Smetana's recorded start date) by arguing that the nuances of Smetana's autograph manuscript "exonerated" the composer "from any suggestions of plagiarism."¹⁰ In all of these instances, discussions of the "facts" concerning Smetana's composition dates are politically driven: they emphasize Smetana's tragic deafness, Czechness, greatness, genius, and—in the case of Large—explicitly aim to preserve the composer's idealized autonomy.

This disagreement raises important questions about the links between nationalism and historiography: If a desire to portray Smetana as a freestanding and self-motivated instigator of a Czech school of music has affected even basic understandings of his biography, what else has been influenced by this agenda? And what information about the composer has been overlooked or even deliberately written out of history as a consequence of authors' ideological aims? And how and why did the ideas we *do* have about the composer become so fixed that scholars as late as the 1970s were still tweaking century-old "facts"? This book explores these questions by examining not only the composer but also the powerful organizations that formulated and propagated Smetana's myth through the twentieth century. During the 1870s, Smetana helped found an influential nationalist organization called the Umělecká beseda (Artistic society; hereafter UB) whose members produced the earliest scholarly and critical prose on the composer as part of their calls for political action. Within the increasingly radicalized discourses of the early twentieth century (and after Smetana's death), individuals attacked the UB for not being nationalist enough and produced their own revisionist histories of Smetana and his works. This book investigates Smetana not only as a nationalist composer, but also as a national symbol. It reveals the composer's legacy as a dynamic political apparatus whose mythology has been rewritten time and time again to suit shifting political perspectives.

Two principal objectives structure this study's larger discussion. The first is to provide an account of the UB's membership and activities in order to explore an important context for Smetana research generally. A group of UB members founded their own publishing house in 1871 called the "Matice hudební" (Music foundation; hereafter MH) and used this platform to produce nearly all nineteenth-century collections of source material on the composer, including reviews of his works, anthologies of his personal correspondence, and supposedly definitive scores. But UB members' motivations were not only scholarly: they carefully rendered Smetana as Lisztian and Wagnerian (later read as "not Czech") so that the composer came across as cosmopolitan and relevant—that is, so that Czechs might also appear cosmopolitan and relevant enough to warrant their own autonomy under Habsburg rule. Their scholarship was deeply

entwined with political advocacy, and even modern scholars are thus forced to negotiate their past political platforms.

The second objective of this study is to reappraise the role that the secondary literature has played in constructions of Smetana. In particular, the scholarly activities of Zdeněk Nejedlý, who later became the first Minister of Culture and Education under the Communist administration (1948–62), have profoundly shaped understandings of Smetana. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Nejedlý led an “offensive” against the UB to support new and more zealous forms of Smetana advocacy, which included the founding of the organization *Hudební klub* (Music club, 1911–27) and the journal *Smetana* (1910–26).¹¹ Whereas past UB members used their publications to construct Smetana as cosmopolitan, Nejedlý and his colleagues called on then-emerging formalist methodologies to refashion Smetana as more idealistically and rigidly Czech. They removed the possibility of Smetana’s Wagnerian influence from their histories, so that Smetana emerged as a strictly Czech hero—one more suitable to the increasing radicalization that characterized the early twentieth century.

Smetana has not received substantive critical attention in English in either a biography or full-length study since John Clapham’s *Smetana* (1972). Such a lengthy span of time means that any Western researcher’s most recent, in-depth reference on the composer is deeply (and understandably) informed by Cold War politics. But outside of even basic literature on the composer, this study helps to expand our understanding of nationalism in musical discourse, particularly notions of “Czechness.” As Marta Ottlová and Milan Pospíšil point out in their volume, *Bedřich Smetana a jeho doba: vybrané studie* (Bedřich Smetana and his times: Selected studies, 1997), past scholars have typically approached studies of Smetana from a strongly nationalist perspective, working to preserve Smetana’s status as a national hero.¹² Michael Beckerman adds in his “In Search of Czechness in Music” that even this myth operates from the assumption that a distinctly “Czech” music does exist, which, itself, is highly problematic.¹³ Shifting focus from celebrations of Smetana as an autonomous hero to an examination of the composer as a participant within collective social movements complicates traditional, nationalistically-motivated, and sometimes genius-centered renderings of Smetana and his works. It calls into question his status as a monolithic “voice” for the nation while also allowing for the diverse, conflicting, and sometimes even desperate needs of the audiences that hoisted him to that position. It also deconstructs systems of national codification in analysis, as more recent scholars like Shay Loya and Daniel Grimley have done in their own studies.¹⁴

As a means to facilitate this discussion, this book is divided into five chapters. The first three center on the UB and understandings of Smetana during the nineteenth century, and the remaining two on understandings of Smetana within the increasingly radicalist and eventually Communist discourses of the twentieth. Chapter 1 situates the UB within the Czech National Rebirth, which, especially from the 1850s, dominated Prague's middle classes. Despite the implication of its name, and as Gary Cohen and Rita Krueger point out, the Rebirth was not aimed at "rescuing" a once-thriving Czech culture, but oriented around an envisioned "reawakening" to the possibility of nationhood.¹⁵ The UB's founding, along with its members' advocacy for Smetana, is best understood within this movement's then-forming community.

The following two chapters take the competing chronological positionings of "Vyšehrad," as laid out at the outset of this introduction, along with the various political aims they represent as a starting point for more focused study. The second chapter looks more closely at a UB propaganda campaign that promoted Smetana as Lisztian during the nineteenth century. Smetana's cycle of symphonic poems, *Má vlast*, was warmly received as nationally "Czech" after its premiere in 1882, but its success was due in large part to the activities of UB members who promoted the collection as indebted to Liszt and the so-called New German School from as early as 1873. For UB authors, Smetana's conquest of supposedly German sounds especially in *Má vlast*'s first movement, "Vyšehrad," embodied the revolution necessary to gain autonomy under Habsburg rule, so that even listening to Smetana became a political act during the era.

Chapter 3 examines a second component of the UB's propaganda campaign, which promoted Smetana as Wagnerian. Unlike members' attempts to link Smetana and Liszt, the move to yoke Smetana to Wagner was especially charged for many Prague audiences, a circumstance which led to the "music battles" of the 1870s. In the past, scholarly discussions of the "battles" have focused on either disparaging Smetana's opponents, such as František Pivoda, or rescuing the composer from the possibility of Wagner's influence. Here, however, I explore UB members' careful positioning of Smetana not as a Czech Wagner, but a Wagnerian Czech—an artist-prophet whose music, and especially its appropriations of Wagner, had the potential to transport Czechs to a happier and better time. This distinction opens up new understandings of the composer and his compositions, especially of his fourth opera and most deliberately nationalistic work, *Libuše*.

The book's fourth and fifth chapters consider twentieth-century assessments of early UB members' writings in order to theorize the close relationships between "Vyšehrad" and *Libuše* and to contextualize the publication gap that has emerged in Smetana research since the 1980s. Chapter 4 orients around

a landmark publication in Smetana scholarship, *Motiv Smetanova "Vyšehradu"* (The motive of Smetana's "Vyšehrad," 1917), which was written by Vladimír Helfert (at that time one of one Nejedlý's closest affiliates) and produced with the support of the Music Club and journal *Smetana*. In his study, Helfert sought to prove definitively that "Vyšehrad" and *Libuše* together served as one great monument to the nation. He argued that their "organicism" confirmed their status as Czech "national apotheoses."¹⁶ Despite the apparent timelessness of his scholarship and attractiveness of his conclusions, Helfert's study was deeply indebted to the political context in which he produced it. This chapter situates Helfert's study within the shifting political dynamics of his time to reveal both his and his supporters' investment in reimaging Smetana to suit new political ideologies.

Examining the political and ideological circumstances that interacted with Smetana scholarship through the twentieth century illuminates not just the ways the composer's myth was transformed to meet new audiences' needs, but also the humanity of this research—the stakes, interests, and sometimes perils of those who studied him through the twentieth century. This book's fifth chapter, then, broadens to consider the thinkers and politicians that helped formulate Smetana's myth during the era. The so-called "dispute over the meaning of Czech history" initiated by Tomáš Masaryk—future first president of Czechoslovakia upon its founding in 1918—occupied researchers like Nejedlý and Helfert through the 1930s. Within the "dispute," scholarship became a platform for reimaging a Czech past and prescribing the nation's future—especially as that future concerned scholars' own possible roles as its policy makers. Under the Communist administration, however, Smetana research became a vessel for "ideovost," or the conscious reinscription of state ideology.¹⁷ These shifting conceptualizations meant that Smetana was transformed from a platform for self-promotion at the beginning of the century to a flattened symbol of the state by its end, and that the composer became part of a legacy that was shed upon the end of the Communist regime in 1989, rather than a continued topic for investigation. This chapter hopes to illuminate the block that has lodged in Smetana scholarship toward reopening inquiry into the field.

Before beginning these discussions, a few remarks on terminology are necessary. First, descriptors like "Czech" and "German" (along with their comparable nouns like "Czechness") will only appear within quotes upon their first appearance unless their treatment calls for particular emphasis. These quotes are in no way an effort to undermine the validity and reality that these distinguishers held for past audiences, but rather to acknowledge the subjectivity inherent in their use, whether describing sounds or notions of ethnicity and race.

All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated, and I include the original Czech in the notes alongside the citations. I quote liberally from František Bartoš's *Smetana ve vzpomínkách a dopisech* (1941), using Daphne Rusbridge's translation, *Bedřich Smetana: Letters and Reminiscences* (1955). To describe Bartoš's anthology as "popularizing" is to put it lightly, but dealing with the body of source material canonized in this collection is important, because it reveals with particular clarity the shaping and perpetuating of the mythologies surrounding Smetana.¹⁸ In addition to Bartoš, I quote frequently from Brian Large's *Smetana* (1970) and occasionally from John Clapham's *Smetana* (1972). Together, these three sources allowed the Smetana mythology to travel to England and overseas and, as such, are of great interest to me here—perhaps even greater interest than the more "accurate" or "original" material in Smetana's own diaries and letters (and even despite Large's especially problematic impulse to absorb and perpetuate nineteenth-century aesthetic attitudes). When the English language translations from these sources contain ungrammatical material, I have made adjustments for the purpose of intelligibility.

Finally, given the title of this book and the themes that will follow in its subsequent pages, it is necessary to briefly situate the word "propaganda." The activities of various dictatorships throughout the twentieth century have justifiably caused this word to become associated with deception and misinformation, giving it a very negative cast. But particularly during the nineteenth century, "propaganda" can refer more neutrally to the dissemination or propagation of ideas, and it is this meaning of the word that I intend in the following discussions, with the exception of those passages that address scholarship produced under Communism. The word's duality is helpful for acknowledging the continuity between UB members' activism on behalf of Czechness—a large component of which was dedicated to rewriting history and manipulating its artifacts—and twentieth-century scholars' intentionally biased renderings of information.

Together, the UB's nineteenth-century publications, those of UB critics during the twentieth century, and the shifting historiographical platforms of Czechoslovakia's changing administrations through the twentieth century, reveal Smetana and his legacy as multi-dimensional and dynamic political tools. Smetana and his works operated as symbols of revolution during the nineteenth century, were reconstructed and celebrated as a rigorously Czech during the twentieth, and were relegated to an unwanted Communist legacy after 1989. Exploring these changing constructions reveals the close relationship between politics and scholarship, while opening a window onto the wider complexities of nationhood during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Chapter One

Smetana Advocacy and Czech Nation-Building

When the UB was founded in 1863, its fundamental objective was to facilitate the “general cultivation of the fine arts.” Its designation as a “beseda” also situated the organization as “a friendly meeting” or “a neighborly gathering for a chat.”¹ Despite its relatively neutral beginnings, the UB, born in the midst of a “reawakening” or Czech “*národní obrození*” (national rebirth), unofficially transitioned to cultivating and building specifically Czech arts by the 1880s.² This shift resulted in a new kind of activism among members; whereas in the past, the UB had aimed simply to bring together a Czech community, now members wanted to promote “Czech” as an aesthetic category, inventing its history and identifying its artistic leaders, including Bedřich Smetana.

Examining the UB’s origins and shifting political work creates an important framework for this study, not only by contextualizing Smetana’s compositions, but by illuminating nuances of nationalist thinking that still deeply impact research on the composer today. On one hand, the activism of UB members—for whom the act of promoting (or not promoting) Smetana became equivalent to serving the nation—reminds us that nationalist movements were typically divided, their internal struggles undermining any sort of united front.³ We should also note that while though nationalists spoke on behalf of a presumably much larger nation, they actually represented a narrow social and economic demographic—those who could afford to publish and disseminate their ideas.⁴ These circumstances mean that Smetana’s status as a “Czech” composer was by no means stable; rather, it was hotly contested among audiences even within the UB.⁵ Additionally, his supposedly Czech musical language did not actually give voice to a nation in the largest sense, but a group of social elites. As one of the main set of sources for contemporary writings on the composer, UB

members' promotions illuminate a narrow perspective, despite their universalizing rhetoric that still frames discussions of Smetana today.

Situating the National Rebirth

The characteristics of the National Rebirth—a movement from around the 1830s during which many began self-identifying as “Czech,” rather than Austrian or Bohemian—are many and complex. The intricacies result in large part from the movement’s timespan, as Enlightenment-inspired political and scholarly interests from the end of the eighteenth century were recast in the nineteenth to suit newly formed Romantic ideologies. For this discussion it is helpful to briefly introduce the political circumstances of the Rebirth as well as the privileged role of social organizations, and especially musical ones, within the movement. Situating the UB’s origins, shifting attitudes, and even internal strife within the Rebirth will help reveal just how deeply Smetana and his music were immersed in and responsible for producing the nationalist discourses of the period.

From the UB’s beginnings in 1863 until 1879, the first official Czech political party under Habsburg rule, the *Národní strana* (National Party) boycotted the Diet. This meant that Czechs seeking a stronger political voice—the move at the core of the Rebirth—continued to lack one. The National Party broke into two factions as a consequence: the “*staročechi*” (Old Czechs)—those that supported the boycott—and the “*mladočechi*” (Young Czechs). The latter began attending meetings of the Diet from 1874 and established their own political party in 1888, the *Národní strana svobodomyslná* (National Freethinkers Party). In the absence of governmental representation during the boycott and as facilitated by the end of Alexander Bach’s oppressive rule in 1859, social organizations became the most powerful agents for change. Hundreds of Czech social clubs formed in the 1860s and 1870s worked to cultivate rigid distinctions between the Czech and German cultures and languages.⁶ Such distinctions were not of great concern previous to the Rebirth; many rural communities even through the end of the century would have expected members to be bilingual.⁷ But for urban, middle- and upper-class citizens from the middle of the century—citizens who might most benefit from representation in the Diet—cultivating a Czech identity distinct from their German counterparts served their political aims. Even traditionally German-language organizations like the *Bürgerresource* (*Měšťanská beseda*, or Burgher’s Club) as well as the Society for the Bohemian Museum came under Czech leadership during this

period. Additionally, Miroslav Tyrš founded a specifically Czech gymnasts' organization in 1861 in response to the formation of a comparable German club. His resulting Sokol club eventually played a significant role in national demonstrations through the twentieth century and still exists today.

Music became an exceptionally prominent social and political tool within this context. In 1873 alone, the journal *Dalibor* reported the existence of over 250 music clubs, one of the most prominent of which was a 120-member men's chorus called the Hlahol. Additionally, the Old and Young Czechs adopted specific platforms concerning the portrayal of nationalist sentiment in opera, both of which focused specifically on Wagnerian procedures. In general, the Old Czechs were opposed to the use of Wagner's compositional methods and supported instead the direct quotation of Czech folk song in national opera (such productions were called "prostonárodní" or "folk" operas), while the Young Czechs preferred the opposite in both instances. Either way, opera's status as an accepted means for nationalist expression made it a powerful political tool from the 1860s. Its centrality to burgeoning nationalism resulted in the building of the Czech National Theater (Národní divadlo), one of the most tangible manifestations of the Rebirth. The theater's construction was funded solely by Czech donations, and the laying of its foundation stones on May 15–17, 1868, was accompanied by one of the greatest national demonstrations that the Rebirth had yet seen. The theater was opened with great ceremony in 1881 then reopened in 1883 after a fire damaged the building. Its prominently-displayed dedication, "Národ sobě" (The nation to itself), reflected the theater's intended audience as well as its cultural program.

As an individual, Smetana epitomized the cultural ambiguities that characterized the Rebirth. His first language was German, as was appropriate for the middle-class household in which he was raised, and he only began consistently practicing and using Czech in his forties. Smetana acknowledged this circumstance, and his struggles with the language, in his diary.

With the newly awakened development of our nationality, it is . . . my endeavor to complete my study of our language and to express myself—I who from childhood have been used only to German instruction—with equal ease, verbally and in writing, both in Czech and German. . . . It is high time for me to keep my diary in my mother tongue now. Since, however, I started this book in the old manner in German, I would like to also complete it in German. In the meantime, I am making a study of my mother tongue, which I have unfortunately greatly neglected (mostly through the fault of our government and schools) so as to be able to write with ease and accuracy.⁸