

Šárka, a legendary female character, in two lesser known Czech operas. Overtures and compositional techniques

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Abstract: The lyrical works of Czech composers from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century are very little known, and not just to Romanian musicians. Even when it comes to composers who have gained notoriety, such as Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák or Leoš Janáček, without consulting a dictionary, we cannot name more than one of their titles: Smetana’s *Prodaná nevěsta*, Dvořák’s *Rusalka* and Janáček’s *Jenůfa*, even though each of them wrote countless other works dedicated to the opera. When we think of composers like Zdeněk Fibich and Otakar Ostrčil, obscurity is almost total. Beyond the fact that this study attempts to make a contribution to the knowledge in this field, other objectives include analyzing the compositional language that two composers embraced in homonymous operas and observing the manner in which they related to the mythology of their people. One of the major characters of the Czech national mythology is called *Šárka*, a title that both Leoš Janáček and Zdeněk Fibich have attributed to one of their operas. In studying the action of the two stage works, this research also turns to the Czech writers of that period and the manner in which they reflected the fundamental Czech myths in their literary works. Details related to the time of appearance of the operas and, in the case of Zdeněk Fibich, brief but welcome information on his biography and creation are also presented. The original contribution of this study consists in analyzing the overtures of the two homonymous operas in terms of compositional techniques, elements of construction and musical expression and, last but not least, observing the similarities and differences of vision between the two creators.

Keywords: Šárka; myth; opera; Janáček; Fibich.

Introduction

For the history of Europe, the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the last century are periods of technological breakthrough, but also of great political, social and ethnic turmoil, a conjuncture that led to the outbreak of World War I and the emergence of national states. For their part, the members of the cultural and artistic elites had very different reactions and orientations. In the period of time to which we are referring, the history of

European music witnessed inherent crystallizations and positionings, the route of the syncretic genre of the opera being of particular interest to the purpose of this article.

The two coryphaei of the 19th century lyrical theater had distinct visions: Giuseppe Verdi preserved and polished the ancient Italian operatic tradition, drawing inspiration from the great German, French and English literatures, while Richard Wagner was the father of musical drama, where he processed and stylized the myths of the Nordic peoples. In the second half of the century, verism appears in Italy and *grand opera* in France, its momentum dying out in the delicate *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Claude Debussy, a work that marked the dawn of the 20th century.

In all this time, Slavic composers also ventured into the realm of the opera and tried to carve out a path that would differentiate them from their great contemporaries. Several aspects unite them, but also separate them, namely, the recourse to the musical-literary folklore of their peoples and the librettos that were influenced or composed by fellow countrymen writers and poets. When it comes to opera creations, the most important Russian composers of the period are:

- Mihail Glinka, who wrote music for the piano, as well as chamber and orchestral music, melodies for voice, piano and choirs. He is the author of *Жизнь за царя* and *Руслан и Людмила* (*A life for the Tsar*, also known as *Ivan Susanin* and *Ruslan and Ludmila*);
- Piotr Tchaikovsky wrote symphonic, chamber, concert and religious music. He is the author of the works *Евгений Онегин*, *Орлеанская дева*, *Мазепа*, *Пиковая дама*, *Иоланта* (*Eugene Onegin*, *The Maid of Orleans*, *Mazepa*, *The Queen of Spades*, *Iolanta*) and of the ballets *Лебединое озеро*, *Спящая красавица* and *Щелкунчик* (*Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*), to which works for voice and piano are added.

The above-mentioned composers are joined by the members of the so-called group of *The Five*, including:

- Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who, apart from symphonic music, also wrote the operas *Млада*, *Садко*, *Снегурочка–весенняя сказка* and *Сказание о невидимом граде Китеже и девице Февронии* (*Mlada*, *Sadko*, *The snow Maiden* and *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya*);
- Alexander Borodin, the author of the symphonic poem *В средней Азии* (*In the Steppes of Central Asia*) and of the opera *Князь Игорь* (*Prince Igor*);

- Modest Mussorgski, the signatory of works that quickly became famous, such as the suite for the piano *Картинки съ Выставки* (*Pictures at an Exhibition*), the symphonic poem *Ночь на лысой горе* (*Night on Bald Mountain*) and the opera *Борис Годунов* (*Boris Godunov*).

Going further to the West, a Polish composer of utmost importance is Stanisław Moniuszko, who wrote symphonic and chamber music, as well as the operas *Flis*, *Halka*, *Hrabina*, *Paria*, *Straszny dwór* and *Verbum nobile*, but also comic operas, operettas, pastorals and vaudevilles, and many songs for voice and piano. For his exceptional compositional contribution, he is considered to be the father of the Polish national opera.

As for the Czech composers, the following have earned a place in the universal history of music:

- Bedřich Smetana is famous for his cycle of symphonic poems entitled *Má vlast* (*My fatherland*), comprising six works: *Vyšehrad*, *Vltava*, *Šárka*, *Z českých luhů a hájů*, *Tábor*, *Blaník* (*Vyšehrad*, *Vltava*, *Šárka*, *From Bohemia's Woods and Fields*, *Tábor*, *Blaník*). Among Smetana's nine works, the most famous, perhaps because it expresses the Czech national musical spirit the best, is the opera *Prodaná nevěsta* (*The bartered bride*). We shall see that the third symphonic poem, *Šárka*, but also the opera *Libuše*, written between 1869-1872, are greatly connected to the theme of this study;
- Antonín Dvořák has a very rich creation, both in the symphonic and chamber fields, as well as in the vocal and opera fields. Among the works related to our theme, we mention the famous *Slovanské tance* (*Slavonic dances*), small symphonic works bearing the national stamp, grouped 8 each under the names of *opus 46* and *72*, and the opera *Rusalka*.
- Leoš Janáček was a complex personality, composer, conductor, professor, folklore collector and essayist. The music in his first opera, *Šárka*, and that in his only ballet, *Rákos Rákoczy*, bears a strong Czech national-folkloric imprint.

These are joined by two other important composers, renowned not only in the Czech Republic:

- Zdeněk Fibich¹, a name that is rather obscure in Romania, wrote symphonic and chamber, vocal, choral and piano music, stage music and seven operas. The subjects of two of these, *Šárka* and *Blaník*, are connected to Czech spirituality;
- Otakar Ostrčil², an almost unknown creator in Romania, wrote symphonic and chamber, vocal, choral and opera works. The works dedicated to the stage include *Vlasty skon* (*The death of Vlasta*) from 1903.

The myth, national imprint and source of inspiration for Czech composers

In the second part of the 19th century in particular, two of the most important musical genres impressed through the vigor with which they succeed in conveying feelings and experiences of national essence. We refer to the newly invented symphonic poem and the reinvented opera, whose program and libretto, written by the composers themselves or by writers of the time, bring popular spirituality and national themes to the fore.

It might seem curious to the average modern music lover that opera, that most elite of genres, came to be seen as music's pre-eminent contributor to nationalism. This apparent contradiction derives, however, from two common misconceptions: on the one hand, that nationalism was essentially an expression of popular (nineteenth-century) revolt; on the other, that opera's associations with the aristocracy should debar it from relevance to more general political concerns. Such misconceptions might seem appropriate for an ideology such as nationalism, which has always covered the traces of its invention by rewriting history in its own image, but opera too is defined by its continual reinvention of itself.³

If Verdi himself made politics through his opera *Nabucco*, so did composers belonging to nations in full affirmation of their own individuality, in the second part of the 19th century and the beginning of the following one. The most valuable means of national individualization are turning to one's own musical folklore and specifically to popular themes, and Czech composers make no exception.

¹ Zdeněk Fibich (1850-1900), prolific Czech composer. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zdeněk_Fibich, consulted on 23 September 2022.

² Otakar Ostrčil (1879-1935), Czech conductor and composer. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otakar_Ostrčil, consulted on 23 September 2022.

³ Suzanne Aspden, *Opera and national identity*, in *The Cambridge companion to opera studies*, edited by Nicholas Till, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 276.

When it comes to the Czech writers of the period to which we are referring, one of their favorite directions was the myth. Inspired by *Chronica Boemorum*⁴, writers such as Josef Wenzig⁵, Julius Zeyer⁶, Alois Jirásek⁷ and Karel Pippich⁸ wrote poems and dramas treating great mythological themes. In order not to broaden the research area too much, we shall only refer to some of them that are closely related to the Czech people and to the city of Prague and which fall at the same time into the current of the “Amazons”:

Warrior maidens, daughters of Ares and Artemis, some say. In some accounts their mother was Aphrodite or Otrere. They came from Asia Minor or Scythia and made a practice of breaking the arms and legs of all male infants to keep them subservient. They cut off one breast to make it easier to use a bow or spear. There were three tribes, each with its own city and ruled by one of three queens. Some say that they killed and ate any men who landed on their shores.⁹

Another characterization of the Amazons, this time in the Slavic acceptance, is of “women fighters led by Vlasta”¹⁰. Returning to the Czech Republic, one legend says that *Libuše* or *Libussa* was the third and youngest daughter of *Czech*, the leader of the homonymous eastern tribe who settled on the lands of the present Czech Republic after crossing three rivers: the Oder, the Elbe and the Vltava. Married to *Přemysl*, *Libuše* thus became one of the founders of the Czech people¹¹ and of the future city of Prague¹². As mentioned above, *Libuše* is the title of an opera by Bedřich Smetana.

⁴ *Chronica Boemorum* is the first history in Latin of the Czech countries, written by Cosmas of Prague in the 12th century. Retrieved from

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronica_Boemorum, consulted on 23 September 2022.

⁵ Josef Wenzig (1807-1876), writer and librettist from Bohemia. As a teacher at a high school in Prague, he put the Czech language on the same level as the German language. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josef_Wenzig, consulted on 23 September 2022.

⁶ Julius Zeyer (1841-1901), a Czech writer, poet and playwright of Jewish origin. Among other things, he wrote the poem *Vyšehrad*, inspired by Czech history and mythology. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Zeyer, consulted on 23 September 2022.

⁷ Alois Jirásek (1851-1930), a Czech writer. In 1894 he published a volume of *Old Czech Legends*. See Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold*, New York, Hill and Wang, e-book, 2011.

⁸ Karel Pippich (1849-1921), Czech lawyer and writer. He wrote the drama *Vlasty skon* (*The death of Vlasta*), becoming a source of inspiration for the work of the same name by Otakar Ostrčil. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karel_Pippich, consulted on 23 September 2022.

⁹ J. A. Coleman, *The Dictionary of the Mythology*, London, Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2007, p. 56.

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹ See Peter Demetz, *op. cit.*

¹² Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libuše> and <https://pragueeventery.com/good-to-know/prague-myths-and-legends/>, consulted on 23 September 2022.

A second legend bears the name *Dívčí válka* (*The maiden's war*):

Vlasta, Libussa's favorite, felt abandoned and angry when the men held the maidens up to ridicule. They seized arms, and the "maiden's war" against the menfolk began. Vlasta deftly organized her army and trained the many women who were leaving their husbands, brothers, and fathers to join the fight; the strong were chosen to lead the attack, and the most beautiful to entice the men away from their battle groups to be killed.¹³

Before presenting the third legend of Czech tradition, which has *Šárka* at the center of attention, we find the similarity between this fighter's name and two other legendary male names interesting: *Sarkany*, a demon from the Hungarian-European tradition, who "has the power to turn people into stone"¹⁴ and *Sarkap*, a hero-fighter from the Indian tradition who "earned the name Beheader from his habit of decapitating those whom he defeated in games"¹⁵. Here is the legend of the character *Šárka*, closely related to the previous one, about *Libuše*.

Šárka, Vlasta's lieutenant, entrapped a band of armed men led by *Ctirad* by tying herself to a tree, claiming that the rebel maidens had tied her there and put a horn and a jug of mead out of reach to mock her. *Ctirad* believed her story and untied her from the tree, whereupon she poured mead for the men to show her thanks. Little did the men know that *Šárka* and the maidens had put a sleeping potion into the mead. When all the men had fallen asleep, *Šárka* blew the horn as a signal for the rebel maidens to come out of their hiding places and join her in slaughtering the men. *Ctirad* was captured and then tortured to death in *Děvín*. The valley where it happened is today called *Divoká Šárka* (*Wild Šárka*).¹⁶

The legend that we have described immediately above inspired Czech composers to write several musical works, including:

- The symphonic poem *Šárka*, the third title from the six of the symphonic cycle *Má vlast* (*My Fatherland*) by Bedřich Smetana;
- The opera *Vlasty skon* (*The death of Vlasta*) by Otakar Ostrčil;
- The opera *Šárka* by Leoš Janáček;
- The opera *Šárka* by Zdeněk Fibich.

The last two, or rather, their overtures, are the subject of the research below.

¹³ See Peter Demetz, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Coleman, J. A., *op. cit.*, p. 908.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶ Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Maidens'_War, consulted on 26 September 2022.

The opera *Šárka* by Leoš Janáček

Leoš Janáček's interest in the opera as a genre appeared gradually due to his journalistic activity at the *Hudební listy* (*Musical leaves*) newspaper published in Brno between 1884 and 1888, on the initiative and under the leadership of the Czech musician. As a reaction to the German Theater in Brno, founded in 1882, the elite of the Czech intellectuality in the city decided to establish in 1884 a theater in which to show mainly creations of fellow national authors. Seated in a rather inappropriate building on Veverří Street¹⁷, the institution was initially called *Na Veverří* Theater. In 1894, it received the title which it still carried nowadays - the National Theater of Brno.

The publication of the newspaper previously mentioned is almost exclusively due to establishing that theater and to Janáček's desire to make the operas performed there and their authors as popular as possible. Among the authors of the opera and operetta performances that Leoš Janáček attended and later commented on in his many reviews, we mention Karel Bendl¹⁸, Karel Richard Šebor¹⁹ and Josef Richard Rozkošný²⁰.

Janáček cut his teeth reviewing a total of thirty-three operas and operettas (several times, in many cases), for his journal *Hudební listy*, which he started partly for this purpose. His reviews provide most of the information about what he saw and what he thought about it, and this can be amplified by his collection of piano-vocal scores and librettos of operas [...] Janáček's regular reviewing, until the journal folded in the summer of 1888, provides the background for the composition and revision of his first opera *Šárka* (1887-8).²¹

¹⁷ Detailed and very interesting information on this subject is provided by <https://www.theatre-architecture.eu/en/db/?theatreId=349>, consulted on 27 September 2022.

¹⁸ Karel Bendl (1838-1897), a Czech musician, worked as an orchestra and choir conductor, singer, composer, publisher and professor. Highly prolific, he wrote chamber and symphonic music, songs for voice and piano, liturgical works, mixed and male choirs, a cappella and with orchestral accompaniment, cantata. He also wrote many operas with a national, historical, comical character, in the genre of the *grand opera*, operettas and ballets, theater music.

Retrieved from

https://www.ceskyhudebnislovník.cz/slovník/index.php?option=com_mdictionary&task=record.record_detail&id=7406, consulted on 26 September 2022.

¹⁹ Karel Richard Šebor (1843-1903), a Czech opera composer, music director of the theaters in Prague and Leipzig, then marching band leader in the Austro-Hungarian army. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karel_Šebor, consulted on 26 September 2022.

²⁰ Josef Richard Rozkošný (1833-1913), a Czech composer and pianist. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josef_Richard_Rozkošný, consulted on 26 September 2022.

²¹ John Tyrrell, *Janáček, years of a life, Volume I (1854-1914), The lonely blackbird*, e-book, London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 2006, cap. 25.

Being surrounded by the operatic atmosphere of the performances he attended and commented on, Janáček decided to write his own opera and did so, choosing to use the theme of a libretto written by Julius Zeyer²².

At the request of Dvořák, Zeyer produced a libretto by adapting the fourth part (*Ctirad*, 1879) of his five-part verse epic *Vyšehrad*; perhaps on the lookout for something more internationally attractive, however, Dvořák was reluctant to set *Šárka*.²³

After this failure, the writer turned to Bedřich Smetana to compose the music, but the latter did not follow up on his request. Disappointed, Zeyer published the libretto in three issues of the *Česká Thalie* magazine in January-February 1887²⁴. A correspondent of the magazine, Karel Sázavský, brought the libretto to Janáček's²⁵ attention, who decided to use it as text for his first opera. Without asking for the writer's permission, he decided to bring some changes to it, in accordance with his own opinions on the composition of an opera score. When Janáček finally asked for his opinion, in two letters that he addressed to him, Julius Zeyer refused to grant him permission, the first time politely and relatively delicately, the second time directly and categorically²⁶. In these circumstances, even though he had already written the music for the opera between 1887-1888, the composer had to abandon the idea of a premiere and the work was shelved. From the preface of the printed score of an orchestral work from the same period of creation, we learn how, where and by whom the score of the *Šárka* opera was rediscovered:

It is Janáček's only and, moreover, not quite accurate, reference to this work; otherwise, the composer never returned to the work and nowhere makes mention of it - not even when his pupil, Břetislav Bakala, discovered the composition, along with the opera, *Šárka*, in 1918, in the dowry chest from Moravské Slovácko.²⁷

With great enthusiasm, Janáček revisited, in 1918, the score he had written 30 years previously and made some changes to it, and in 1919 he abandoned the project of a stage production once again. Meanwhile, Julius

²² See footnote no. 6.

²³ John Tyrrell, *op. cit.*, cap. 26.

²⁴ Information taken from Nigel Simeone, *The Janáček Compendium*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2019, p. 244.

²⁵ Information taken from the preface of the score of opera *Šárka*, edited by the Universal Edition / Editio Moravia, UE 31654 / EM 74200, p. XXV.

²⁶ For details, see John Tyrrell, *op. cit.*, cap. 26. The full translation of Zeyer's response letters can be read in the preface to the score of the opera *Šárka*, edited by the Universal Edition / Editio Moravia, UE 31654 / EM 74200, p. XXVI.

²⁷ Theodora Straková in the preface to Leoš Janáček, *Adagio für Orchester* (1891), Partitur, Vienna, Universal Edition, UE 16789, p. V.

Zeyer died²⁸ and Leoš Janáček was already a well-established composer, whose request to use the libretto the Czech Academy of Sciences - the institution that administered the writer's copyright - could not refuse. Finally, after further revisions and with the third act orchestrated by Osvald Chlubna²⁹, the premiere took place on the 11th of November 1925, at the National Theater of Brno. This is how John Tyrrell retells the action:

The action of *Šárka* takes place in the “maidens war”, the armed revolt of Czech women against the patriarchy. Women's power declined after the marriage of Libuše and even more after her death, when her consort Přemysl was left in sole command. In protest the women form an army of women warriors. Their success, especially the exploits of Šárka, the boldest of the women, caused consternation among the men. Ctirad offers to hunt Šárka down and equips himself for this task with magic weapons. In order to deal with this new challenge, Šárka has her women bind her to a tree at a place in the forest where Ctirad will pass. He discovers her and is deceived by her explanation that she has been left to die by one of her rivals. Hus pity is aroused, and then his love. Too late he realizes that this is an ambush; Šárka relieves him of his magic weapons and then, with her horn, summons her women, who make quick work of him. But Šárka has fallen in love with him. In remorse she throws herself on to his funeral pyre.³⁰

The main characters of the opera, whose action is so similar to the legend that I have described above, are the following³¹: *Přemysl* (baritone), *Ctirad* (tenor), *Šárka* (dramatic soprano) and *Lumir* (tenor). The musical organization consists of three acts preceded by an overture. In what follows, we shall analyze this introductory fragment in detail.

If we were to discuss architecture first, the overture of the opera *Šárka*, JW I/1³² is composed in a manner that does not fit into the – let us call them established patterns - of the opera genre. The form of the sonata or the lied, as they were understood by the great opera composers before Janáček or by his contemporaries, were not models for the overture we are analyzing, just as the

²⁸ A year after the composer Julius Zeyer's death, in 1902, the Czech composer Josef Suk (1874-1935) wrote the elegy *Pod dojmem Zeyerova Vyšehradu* (*Under the Impression of Julius Zeyer's Vyšehrad*), op. 23, for violin, cello, string quartet, harmonium and harp. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Josef_Suk, consulted on 27 September 2022.

²⁹ Osvald Chlubna (1893-1971), Czech composer, Janáček's student. According to Nigel Simeone, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³⁰ John Tyrrell, *op. cit.*, cap. 26.

³¹ According to the score of the opera *Šárka*, edited by the Universal Edition / Editio Moravia, UE 31654 / EM 74200.

³² It is about the catalog number of this work. For further details see Nigel Simeone, John Tyrrell, Alena Němcová, *Janáček's Works. A catalogue of the music and writing of Leoš Janáček*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

Wagnerian, leitmotivic conception was not used here by the Czech composer either. It is true that we do hear two themes, but the structure is fairly complex and, very importantly, we can already identify the compositional technique that has as its foundation the musical motif, its repetition, sequencing and processing. This is the method of work that Leoš Janáček used with increasingly greater certainty and imagination in the operas that followed, transforming it into his most important compositional tool and taking it to the highest heights of refinement. A first idea about the formal structure is the following:

- Introduction (mm. 1-21);
- Section A (mm. 22-44);
- Section B (mm. 45-66);
- Transition (mm. 67-76);
- Section C (mm. 77-107);
- Coda (mm. 108-114).

There are six clear fragments, which, briefly analyzed, only in terms of extent, are characterized by: an almost equal development, of around 20 measures, of the first three formal articulations, the same for the transition and the coda (maximum 10 measures); the most extended section, which I named C, covers 31 measures. Of course, the duration in time of the said musical fragments is not equal, because we are witnessing several changes in tempo.

The statements above continue with a new opinion, which we can adopt after we have passed the surface layer and taken a few steps into the depth of compositional thought. In this light, another form seems more plausible:

- Introduction (mm. 1-21);
- Section A (mm. 22-66)
 - A¹ (mm. 22-44);
 - A² (mm. 45-66);
- Transition (mm. 67-76);
- Section B (mm. 77-107);
 - B¹ (mm. 77-84);
 - B² (mm. 85-92);
 - B¹ repeated (mm. 93-100);
 - B² repeated (mm. 101-107);
- Coda (mm. 108-114).

We believe that the scheme above is closer to the composer's thought process due to the two large fragments, A and B, surrounded by an introduction and a coda and separated by a transition. Moreover, we hear melodic-rhythmic fragments that we can consider themes, especially the one in section B, the

expressiveness of which is undoubtedly impressive, thus dominating the melodic structure of the whole.

In order to delve even deeper into the details of compositional technique, the next steps of the analysis focus on each individual section. The introduction is based on the exposition, repetition, sequencing and brief processing of two musical-dramatic motifs:



Fig. 1 Motif 1, exposed for the first time in mm. 1-2



Fig. 2 Motif 2, exposed for the first time in mm. 2-3

We know that Janáček did not use the leitmotifs and that he did not leave us a program of the overture, therefore, we are left with the task of interpreting for ourselves the message that the two musical-dramatic motifs wish to convey. In our opinion, the first motif signifies, without disguise, strength and firmness, the second hides cunning and cruelty; in varying proportions, all the main characters of the work possess these qualities. In the first measures of the overture, the juxtaposition of motifs (each intoned by several instruments in unison) is followed by repetition and superposition. In the 10th measure, the composer temporarily gives up the first motif and attributes two expressions to the second one:



Fig. 3 The two expressions of the motif 2, mm. 9-11

Now, still, the second motif is accompanied by a group of sounds that process the intonation of the motif, which can be observed very clearly in the following figure.

9
Horn 1&2 in F
a2
f

V.1
f *sf* *f* *sf*

V. 2
f *sf* *f* *sf*

V-le
sf *sf*

Vc.
sf *sf*

Cb.
sf *sf*

Fig. 4 Motif 2 in the horns and its processing, accompanied by the strings, mm. 9-11

The musical material is then repeated until the 15th measure, when Janáček brings back the first motif, which he immediately repeats twice, in several registers. The transition to section A is made starting with the 18th measure, through a short fragment that brings back the sonority of the first measures, this time in small and very small nuances.

25
V.1
Theme I in sequence
p

V. 2
Motif 2

V-le

Vc.
f

The musical score shows four staves: V.1 (Violin I), V.2 (Violin II), V-le (Viola), and Vc. (Cello). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. A bracket labeled 'Theme I' spans measures 22, 23, and 24. In measure 22, V.1 and V.2 play a melodic line starting with a half rest, followed by a quarter note, and then a sequence of eighth notes. V.1 has a *pp* dynamic and a hairpin crescendo. V.2 also has a *pp* dynamic and a hairpin crescendo. V-le and Vc. have a *p* dynamic. In measure 25, V.1 and V.2 continue the theme. V-le and Vc. play a different melodic line. A bracket labeled 'Motif 1' spans measures 25, 26, and 27, primarily involving V-le and Vc. Dynamics include *pp* and *p*.

Fig. 5 Theme I exposed and sequenced, and polyphony with motif 2, mm. 22-27

Section A¹, which begins with measure 22, carries the first motif towards a theme (we shall name it theme I, given that another one appears later), its message transforming the initial feelings of strength and firmness into a dual experience, rushed but slightly sad. This is how the violins should sound here in octaves, then the second violins and the violas, which bring back the theme in a slightly modified sequence. The composer resorts to polyphony and entrusts the cellos with a melodic-rhythmic route where the second motif lies intact.

The polyphonic process of combining theme I with motif II is also repeated in the following measures, starting from different sounds. The string instruments are the ones that maintain the melodic-rhythmic priority, the woodwind instruments and the horns being only accompanying tones, with coloristic significance.

Section A² has a completely different development, which results in an obvious change in musical attitude and in the aesthetic messages sent to the listeners. Due to its quicker tempo (*Allegro* compared to *Moderato*, the movement in which the overture began), the first sense is one of crowding, from which the theme and the melodic expressiveness disappear. The change in sound perception is also due to Janáček's decision to move from contrapuntal to homophonic syntax. The latter is not thought according to the usual pattern of distinct sound planes, in which one dominates the other(s), but rather in the form of several layers interdependent with each other. In his following lyrical works, Leoš Janáček will use intensively and perfect the sound layering technique, here already at an advanced stage. Between measures 45 and 64, therefore in almost the entire A² section, we remark upon

the permanent presence of at least three layers: the strings and woodwinds dominate the melodic aspect, while the brass follows a harmonic path.

45 **Allegro**

Trb. 1,2,3

V.1

V. 2

V-le

Vc.

Cb.

Fig. 6 Melodic layers at the strings, harmonic start at the trombones, mm. 45-47

The two characteristics, the melodic and the harmonic, are in a balance the relative equilibrium of which is destroyed by the rhythmic element, the point of maximum interest of the section. The composer ingeniously models the inner life of the measure of 6 fourths: the 12 eighths are not grouped into two groups of 6, which would preserve the ternary pulsation, but into four groups of 3, which transforms the rhythm into a binary one. If we eliminate pitches and tones, the importance of which is not primordial here, the rhythmic development of a fragment from section A² looks like this:

45 **Allegro**

1

4

5

6

The musical score consists of three systems of six staves each, numbered 1 through 6. The first system starts at measure 49. The second system starts at measure 53. The third system starts at measure 56. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and rests. There are also dynamic markings like *sf* (sforzando) and articulation marks like accents and slurs. The staves are connected by a brace on the left side.

Fig. 7 Fragment from the rhythmic path of section A², mm. 45-58

We notice the masterful combination of rhythmic layers, the manner in which the binary rhythm merges with the ternary one in a unitary but at the same time diverse whole. The harmonies and fragments of melodies are

downright melted by the force of the rhythm, which creates the feeling of a war confrontation, of an almost desperate fight.

This war-like state dies down gradually, beginning with measure 67 (Fig. 8), when the tempo slows down (*Meno mosso*) and the transition to section B begins. What draws the attention about this segment of the overture is the ingenuity with which the composer succeeds in opening the path to another state of spirit without letting go of the previous motivic thinking. Could this constancy be the reason why Janáček does not use a theme with an impact on the listener from the very beginning, but prefers to use two small but highly expressive musical fragments?

We are only speculating, but if it is so, it means that, despite his young age when he wrote this work, the Czech musician already showed an outstanding power of insight and synthesis. Moreover, apart from using the two previous motifs, Janáček sets here, *avant la lettre*, the setting for the next theme, which will resound in section B.

Figure 8 shows the technique of repetition and sequencing, here in a descending sense, which Janáček would use in all his works.

The musical score for measures 67-70 is titled "Meno mosso" and is in 1 & 2 time. It features five staves: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in Bb (Cl. in Bb), Bass Clarinet (B. Cl. in Bb), and Bassoon (Fg.).

- Flute (Fl.):** Measures 67-70. Motif 2 (a2) is played in *p espr.* in measures 67-68 and repeated in measures 69-70. A dynamic marking of *pp* is shown below the staff in measure 69.
- Oboe (Ob.):** Measures 67-70. Motif 1 (a2) is played in *pp espr.* in measures 69-70 and repeated in measure 70.
- Clarinet in Bb (Cl. in Bb):** Measures 67-70. Motif 2 (a2) is played in *p espr.* in measures 67-68 and repeated in measures 69-70. A bracket labeled "Next theme fragment" spans measures 69-70.
- Bass Clarinet (B. Cl. in Bb):** Measures 67-70. Motif 1 (a2) is played in *p espr.* in measures 69-70 and repeated in measure 70.
- Bassoon (Fg.):** Measures 67-70. Motif 1 (a2) is played in *espr.* in measure 67 and *pp* in measure 68.

The musical score for measures 71-74 features five staves: Flute (Fl. 1&2), Oboe (Ob. 1&2), Clarinet in Bb (Cl. in Bb 1&2), Bass Clarinet in Bb (B. Cl. in Bb), and Bassoon (Fg. 1&2). The key signature is three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab) and the time signature is 1&2. Measure 71 is marked with a '71' above the staff. Brackets above the Flute staff identify 'Motif 2 in sequence' (measures 71-72) and 'Motif 2 in sequence and repetition' (measures 73-74). Brackets below the Oboe and Bassoon staves identify 'Motif 1 in sequence' (measures 72-73) and 'Motif 1 in sequence and repetition' (measures 74-75). The dynamic marking *pp* is present below the Oboe and Bassoon staves in measures 72 and 74.

Fig. 8 The beginning of the transition, mm. 67-74

Section B begins with measure 77, best expressing the composer's relation with Moravian folk music and the influence that his great contemporary, Bedřich Smetana, had on him at that time. If we were to analyze the means of musical expression of this fragment of the overture, we could not say that the melody is the most profound expression of the composer's inspiration, just as the orchestration or the rhythm are not the strongest points of Janáček's thinking, because it is precisely in these regards that the influences and models of his time are noticed. At first impression, we are enchanted by the swirling and generous course of the melody, by the crystal sonority of the violins, the expressiveness of the flutes and the brilliance of the cellos in the high register.

The musical score for measures 77-84 is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 77-80, and the second system covers measures 81-84. The key signature is three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab) and the time signature is 1&2. The melody is written in a treble clef. The dynamic marking *pp* is indicated below the first system.

Fig. 9 The path of the melody in B¹, mm. 77-84

It is, however, only a surface impression. Only refined connoisseurs can understand that the essence of this music is harmony, that this is where the composer's originality is concentrated and that this is also where we find his connection with the living substance of popular music. A harmonic route of modal expression is brought to the fore, the roots of which can be found in the musical folklore of Moravia and Slovakia. Janáček combines the diatonic and chromatic scales, and creates a play between fixed and mobile steps, bringing musical freshness and vitality in a much greater concentration than the motifs that make up the previous sections.

While the armor continues to be that of *E-flat major*, which, in fact, we never hear in a distinct mode, the mode that makes up the musical material is made up of seven gradual sounds, with tonic on *E-flat*, which is actually the Aeolian mode with the minor third at the base and the 6th and 7th raised by half a step.



Fig. 10 Mode of seven steps

This structure is completed by several movable chords that adorn the scale and give it the Moravian specificity. We see how the movable chords, through their leading notes are gravitating around the 5th chord, *B-flat*, and thus giving it the recitativo character.



Fig. 11 Scale with movable chords

The melody continues in B^2 (mm. 85-92), maintaining its characteristics, but being accompanied by paths that complete a non-imitative polyphonic speech, from which the quintuplet formula on a three-beat movement and zig zag sounds emerges. Janáček decides to replay the fragments B^1 and B^2 exactly as they were, probably for reasons related to the balance of the formal construction of the whole, and also perhaps because he was aware of the strong impact that the repetition could bring on the listeners. Nevertheless, it is paradoxical that, even though it sounds the best in the entire *Šárka* opera overture, section B is the least original. The last seven measures of the overture (mm. 108-114) are a coda which does not have the character of a closure, but of a continuation, a bridge to the entrance on the scene of the opera's first character. We hear motif 1 again, more precisely the ascending octave, repeated by various woodwind instruments several times, supported by a harmonic foundation ensured by the trombones and the *tremolo* chords of the stringed instruments.

This is the end of an overture that, although as little known as the opera the beginning of which it represents, demonstrates the solid compositional technique, the folkloric inspiration, as well as the influence of present models, from the national and European sphere. A visionary, Janáček was right to trust his first creation in the field of lyrical theater.

Šárka, opera by Zdeněk Fibich

A Czech composer who is almost unknown in Romania, Zdeněk Fibich made a great contribution to the development of music in his country at the end of the 19th century. Part of the bibliography we have consulted³³ comprises rather brief information, such as the period of his life, the places where he studied and some of the works he wrote. Nonetheless, substantial studies have also appeared, dedicated especially to the Czech composer's opera creation. One of these makes a statement that can cause a sensation nowadays, given the limited spread that Zdeněk Fibich's music has had at international level:

Evidence of his contemporary standing is abundant, and his position in the firmament of Czech composers was characteristically summed up by William Ritter in 1896 when he described Fibich as the "Son" in the "Holy Trinity" of Czech music, in which Smetana was, naturally enough, the "Father" and Dvořák the "Holy Spirit".³⁴

John Tyrrell³⁵ continues and completes the statements above with the following opinions, which are now no longer surprising:

After Smetana and Dvořák he was the most prominent Czech composer of the second half of the 19th century, notably of operas and orchestral and piano music. [...] Fibich is often referred to as the greatest Czech Romantic composer. A cultured man with a broad knowledge of art and literature as well as an extensive familiarity with music of the past.³⁶

Born in Všebořice in 1850 and died in Prague in 1900, Zdeněk (or Zdenko) Fibich began studying music at the age of 14, in Prague, then

³³ See *Bakers's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Third edition, New York, 1919, p. 259; *Bakers's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians, Centennial edition, Volume 1*, New York, Schirmer Books, 2001, p. 1101; Paul Griffiths, *The Penguin Companion to Classical Music*, London, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 678.

³⁴ Jan Smaczny, *The Operas and Melodramas of Zdeněk Fibich (1850-1900)*, in "Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association", 1982-1983, Vol. 109 (1982-1983), pp. 119-133. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/766139>

³⁵ John Tyrrell (1942-2018), British musicologist, author of in-depth studies on Leoš Janáček and other Czech composers. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tyrrell_\(musicologist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tyrrell_(musicologist)), consulted on 3 October 2022.

³⁶ John Tyrrell, *Fibich, Zdeněk [Zdenko] (Antonín Václav)*, in "Grove Music Online", retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09590>

continued in Leipzig (at the Conservatory and privately) and in Paris, only to finish his training period in Mannheim, in 1870. Returning to Prague for various not very long periods of time he worked as a choir conductor for the Provisional Theatre for the local Russian Orthodox Church, then as a playwright of the National Theater. He was also a private music professor, his students also including Anežka Schulzová³⁷. He died in Prague on the 15th of October 1900 due to pneumonia.

His creation includes established genres, such as the symphonic, chamber, vocal, choral, stage music and opera, to which some of small circulation but of large scope are added, such as concert melodrama and stage melodrama. Given that they are related to the subject of our research, we will enlist the seven opera titles: *Bukovín* (1874³⁸); *Blaník* (1881); *Nevěsta mesinská* (*The bride of Messina*, based on Schiller, 1884); *Bouře* (*The tempest*, based on Shakespeare, 1895); *Hedy* (based on *Don Juan* de Byron, 1896); *Šárka* (1897); *Pád Arkuna* (*The Fall of Arkun*, 1900). It is important to note that

his opera, *Nevěsta messinská* (“The Bride of Messina”, 1882–3), to a libretto adapted from Schiller's tragedy by Hostinský, that has sometimes been praised as the finest Czech 19th-century tragic opera.³⁹

At the end of these few mentions about Zdeněk Fibich's life and work, we must say that he was very concerned with the symbiosis between words and music, which is why, most of the music critics of the time considered him - not always with good intentions - a Wagnerian, even if this label cannot be applied to his entire stage creation. Some of his operas focus on subjects from Greek antiquity, and the eye towards mythology turned to its national, Czech branch.

Proof of the latter orientation is the opera *Šárka*, which he composed almost 10 years after Leoš Janáček had approached the same subject, but without Zdeněk Fibich being aware of the work of his contemporary for the simple reason that it had been stored in an old dowry chest. The moment when the composer turned to this theme, namely when the supporters of the Czech nationalist spirit in art reproached him for a refractory attitude is worth mentioning:

At the time Fibich was aware of the distrust with which he was regarded in many quarters. Branded as a Wagnerian, Fibich's national

³⁷ Anežka Schulzová (1868-1905), a Czech librettist, she studied piano and composition with Zdeněk Fibich, who later became his collaborator and lover. She wrote the librettos of the composer's last three works. See John Tyrrell's study entitled *Schulzová, Anežka*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O006943>, consulted on 3 October 2022.

³⁸ Here and with the other titles, the year of the premiere appears in parentheses.

³⁹ See John Tyrrell, *Fibich, Zdeněk [Zdenko] (Antonín Václav)*, in “Grove Music Online”, retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09590>

credentials were increasingly called into question. The decision to embark *Šárka* was conditioned by his feeling that a setting of a familiar legend would do much to improve his tarnished image. The broad framework of the legend and the use of a theme based on a sixteenth-century song were as far as Fibich was prepared to go by way of compromise.⁴⁰

The libretto is an adaptation of the “war of the maidens” legend that Anežka Schulzová made after the story signed by Jaroslav Vrchlický⁴¹ and the subject of the opera is almost the same as that of the homonymous opera written by Janáček, the characters being more numerous, having the pair *Šárka-Ctirad* at the center of the action.

To the Czech people, nursing memories of tragic defeat from the Hussite times and the battle of the White Mountain, *Šárka* must have had – and probably still has – a peculiar appeal.⁴²

Throughout the work, the musical expression is very stylized, because the composer gives up the obvious display of the leitmotif technique and turns to verismo-style⁴³ allusions. As it comes closer to the genre of the *grand opera*, we notice that in Zdeněk Fibich’s *Šárka* the choir has a more extensive and difficult presence than in Janáček’s work of the same name. Solo voices have complicated and long paths, the ability to extend their vocal range, resistance and good adaptation to an often-massive orchestra being just some of the mandatory requirements for the performers of the main roles. The three acts have relatively equal durations, which add up to around 130 minutes. The premiere took place at the National Theater of Prague, on the 28th of December 1897, being followed in a very short time by 18 other performances⁴⁴, bearing testimony of an admirable success with the public. The sources we have consulted tell us that this title is even today in the current repertoire of the Czech lyrical institutions and inform us of the existence of several recordings, which can be heard in whole or in part on the YouTube channel. In our study, the overture is the only fragment we have focused on, basing our analysis only on the piano version⁴⁵, as the orchestral score was impossible to find. For this

⁴⁰ See Jan Smaczny, quoted study.

⁴¹ Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853-1912), famous Czech poet, nominated several times for the Nobel Prize for literature. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaroslav_Vrchlický, consulted on 3 October 2022.

⁴² Gerald Abraham, *The Operas of Zdeněk Fibich*, in *19th-Century Music*, Autumn, 1985, vol. 9, no. 2 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 136-144, published by California Press. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/746579>

⁴³ The idea is suggested by Jan Smaczny in the study quoted. Let us recall that Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* had premiered in 1890, seven years before Fibich’s *Šárka*.

⁴⁴ Information taken from Gerald Abraham’s study.

⁴⁵ [https://imslp.org/wiki/Šárka,_Op._51_\(Fibich,_Zdeněk\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Šárka,_Op._51_(Fibich,_Zdeněk))

reason, the impression of the instrumental colors will be limited to the one left by this audition⁴⁶. Here, the composer's interest in the melodic, rhythmic, dynamic, harmonic and coloristic aspects of his music does not seem to be that keen. When he approached a strategy that primarily aims to capture the attention of the widest possible masses of the public, we believe that Zdeněk Fibich was aware that he would leave the construction aspects we talked about above in the background. But he did so because he intended to achieve spectacular effects, which would somewhat manipulate the national, patriotic feelings of his listeners and critics, and the number of performances that took place immediately after the premiere seems to prove him right.

The form of the overture is one often used in small-scale works, that of $A B A^1 B^1 A^2$ Coda, in which the sections are differentiated by the character and tempo of the music. The first feeling of listeners nowadays is one of grandeur, given by a massive orchestral ensemble, dominated by brass⁴⁷, which always resounds. In the first two measures, which take the place of an introduction, there is a minor chord with the tonic on *D*, this sound also being the tonic of the overture's basic tonality. First, the chord appears in *p* and in the low register, then in *f* and in the high register, and this sequence is repeated.



Fig. 12 Repeated chords of the tonic, mm. 1-2

In the first *A*, which lasts up to measure 36 inclusive, we identify at the beginning a theme of four measures, with a heavy and oppressive sonority, at the same time solemn and funereal, part of a speech that preserves the previous chordal construction. The harmonic path unfolds in *D minor*, with inflections towards the dominant tonality (*A minor*) and towards the subdominant of the relative major (*B flat major*). Usual note values appear in simple combinations, from which we can distinguish the dotted sixteenth-eighth grouping, which can be found in Moravian musical folklore.

⁴⁶ We used the version <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG-DpCyq0Vw>

⁴⁷ It is not excluded for the mentioned version to include some Wagnerian tubes or similar brass instruments.

Fig. 13 Theme from A, mm. 3-6

The thematic exposition is followed by four other measures with the same meaning, where the first two are repeated and the other two soar to the high register, followed by a slightly more extended fragment, which sounds similar to a Protestant chorale.

Measures 18 and 19 are the most banal so far, representing a string of sixteenth notes starting from the low register and then going higher chromatically, in accumulations of nuances and number of instruments. At measure 20, the theme resumes, this time in a high register and with a massive orchestra, from which the cymbals hitting each other, and the tremolos of the timpani are not missing, in an atmosphere of mythical grandeur that fades gradually.

Through a few passing modulations and intoned passages of bassoons and bass clarinet, the same chord in the *D minor* key is reached, the tonic of which is whispered by the tremolo of the double basses and timpani.

The legend has it that, once *Ctirad* unties her, *Šárka* blows the horn to call her companions for help⁴⁸. To give voice to this call-to-action, the French horn intones a characteristic signal, followed by a diaphanous, ethereal measure, in the form of a major chord with the tonic on *E*, the sounds of which are simultaneously exposed by the strings and an arpeggio by the horn. Zdeněk Fibich repeats the two measures and thus makes the transition to section B.

⁴⁸ See above how John Tyrrell described the action of the opera *Šárka* by Leoš Janáček.

37 **Più mosso** **Lento** **Più mosso** **Lento**

Hr. in F *mf* *pp* *mf* *pp*

V. 1 *ppp* *ppp* *ppp*

V. 2 *ppp* *ppp* *ppp*

V-le. *ppp* *ppp* *ppp*

Fig. 14 Transition to B, mm. 37-40⁴⁹

Section B (measures 41-73) probably illustrates the arrival of the women warriors and the ambush in which they surprise the men. We would have expected an unleashed, bustling music, but we only hear a new, rather long and not too impressive exposition of chordal blocks, the higher note of which constitutes the melody. Surprisingly uniform, the rhythm repeats an absolutely common formula countless times, the nuances fail to be unpredictable, because they start from *p* to gradually increase to *f* and, to complete the picture of lack of imagination, the discourse begins in the low register and rises slightly towards the middle one, as it happened in A.

Marciale non troppo mosso

41 *p* *mf*

Fig. 15 Fairly monotonous beginning of section B, mm. 41-46

⁴⁹ The orchestration is noted by Leonard Dumitriu based on the sound document.

As if a first exposition of 16 measures was not enough, Zdeněk Fibich resumes the entire musical material in B an octave higher (mm. 57-73) and in a crowded orchestration, a procedure he also used in section A. Once more, we would have expected a greater involvement of his creative imagination, the use of more musical techniques and procedures and, why not, some more sophisticated than repetition, the accumulation of nuance and the transition to the upper octave. By the end of the overture of the *Šárka* opera, the composer no longer uses any other musical material, any other manner or technique of composition and orchestration, and the evolution of the harmonic paths are devoid of modulating boldness. As mentioned above, A¹ B¹ and A² follow, with very little differences compared to the previous sections, which consist only in shortening the extend of said fragments. The coda includes the last nine measures and repeats the musical motif from the first measure of the overture three times, ending in an apothotic and at the same time tragic sonority.

At the end of our analysis, we emphasize once again the composer's lack of concern for authentic musical innovation, for sparkling melodicy and thrilling rhythms, for richly colored orchestration and surprising dynamics. Extracted from the context of the performance and played in concert, the overture of the *Šárka* opera by Zdeněk Fibich cannot capture the audience's attention for the reasons we have just exposed above. Nevertheless, revealing the shortcomings in the musical conception cannot hide the composer's wish to create a sound framework as illustrative as possible for the future action of the opera. Moreover, transported through time, we can say that, beyond what it actually represents, Fibich's music can constitute a very expressive sound background for an artistic film, as well as for a historical or geographical documentary.

Conclusions

Apart from casting a historical look at the operatic trends in the music of the Slavic peoples at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, this study brings to light several legends of the Czech people and analyzes the overtures of two operas of the same name, *Šárka*. These lyrical creations are little known around the world and the Romanian lyrical theaters, for instance, have never included them in their repertoire. Leoš Janáček's overture is the proof of a vivid creative imagination, of a well-structured compositional strategy, from which the soaring melody and the rough rhythm emerge, and even if the orchestration does not yet reach the peaks of his late lyrical works, the color palette is far from monotonous, and the same could be said about the evolution of nuances. The same praise cannot be given to Zdeněk Fibich's overture, which is much more concerned with the general impression it leaves on the audience than with compositional techniques and strategies.

The information that we have presented, some of it new for the Romanian reader, and the observations that we have expressed in as objective a manner as possible, aim at awakening and stimulating interest in the interpretation and research of operas that are not in the limelight nowadays and about which little or nothing has been written in our country.

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