

## The opera *Hubička (The Kiss)* by Bedřich Smetana, a *dramma giocoso* in the Czech national spirit

Leonard DUMITRIU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** 2024 occasions the anniversary of 200 years from composer Bedřich Smetana's birth, considered the founder of Czech national music. Two of his works, the opera *The Bartered Bride* and the symphonic poem *Vltava* also receive wide acclaim nowadays. In the eight operas he finalised, quite different in action and meaning, the composer puts together Bohemian folklore and mythology, Wagnerian sonorities, influences from French comic opera in a manner identified with the style proper of Czech national opera. The opera *Hubička (The Kiss, 1876)* was catalogued as folk opera. Due to the comic nature of the music and to the contrasting episodes of the action, this study debates on and argues in favour of the inclusion of the work in the subgenre called *dramma giocoso*.

Key-words: Smetana, opera, *dramma giocoso*, style, Czech

### 1. Introduction

For human civilisation, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an extremely tumultuous one, marked by events that defined the future. From a historical point of view, there are pertinent opinions stating that this century begins with the French Revolution of 1789 and ends once national states were constituted after World War I. From a musical point of view, I would say that the milestone with the 18<sup>th</sup> century is represented by Schubert, while Debussy and Schönberg are found on the border to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their works local, national influences are merely starting points, do not constitute aesthetic goals and ideals. Schubert, Debussy and Schönberg were born and active in countries, which decided the development of European politics and offered cultural models to smaller peoples. Many artists, especially people of letters and composers owned up to their national cultural sense of belonging and began to write works inspired from the folklore and mythology of their people. One of the them was the Czech Bedřich Smetana.

For a few hundred years, the historical regions of Bohemia and Moravia had been part of the Habsburg Empire (which had become the Austro-Hungarian

---

<sup>1</sup> «George Enescu» Arts University from Iaşi, leonard.dumitriu@unage.ro

Empire in 1867), a time in which they had known its profound social, religious and cultural influence. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Czechs begin to reject the Austrian models and, arising at the level of the elites, a so-called «Národní obrození» (Cultural Revival) is increasingly manifested. “The growth of a self-consciously Czech high-art culture after approximately 1800 was one of the results of the Cultural Revival. This oft-discussed phenomenon was a multigenerational nationalist project started by a few individual scholars and amounted to rediscovery (and reinvention) of the Czech language, followed by the creation of a system of arts and media around it” (Locke 2006, 17). Distancing themselves from German-language Austrian influence, which they considered oppressive, the Czech intellectuals openly owned up to the Cultural Revival, a project centred on their people’s language and spirituality.

In Czech music, Bedřich Smetana is considered the greatest representative of the Cultural Revival. Educated in the German language, he began to learn thoroughly the grammar of the Czech language as an adult, with the intention of speaking and writing preponderantly in the language of the people he was part of. “In the newly growing self-awareness of our nation I too must also make an effort to complete my study of our beautiful language so that I, educated from childhood only in German, can express myself easily, in speech and in writing, just as easily in Czech as in German” (Sadie and Tyrrell 2001, 540).

Beside lieder, choral, chamber and orchestral works, the composer wrote eight operas, with a ninth one only in sketch phase. In what follows, I will first discuss opera creation in Prague in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then I will review the works, which Bedřich Smetana dedicated to lyrical theatre. I will particularly research the opera *Hubička* (*The Kiss*) and I will look for elements that can justify framing the work in the category of *dramma giocoso*.

### **1.1. Czech composers and their opera work in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century**

As early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Prague had become an important political, educational (the university in the city was founded in 1349) and cultural-artistic centre, dominated by German-language spirituality and the Catholic Church. After the latter had been strongly shaken by Jan Hus’s movement, the moment of the emancipation of the Czech language was now drawing near. In the early 1800s, the opera company in the city, headquartered at the Estates Theatre, was hosting lyrical performances of German, French and Italian composers. A few years before, Mozart himself had chosen the city of Prague as the venue for the premieres of his operas *Don Giovanni* (29 October 1787) and *La clemenza din Tito* (6 September 1791). Works by Czech composers were also performed, yet the music and the recitation of their texts were imitating the manner of imported works.

“The historians assign to František Škroup the status of the first Czech opera composer, and to his Singspiel *The Tinker* [*Dráteník*, n.n.] (1826) that of the first Czech opera”. (Tyrrell 1988, 60). The Czech composer František Jan Škroup (1801-1862) is the author of numerous choral, chamber and orchestral works. He also wrote ten operas, all performed in Prague for the first time; four of them (*Dráteník*, 1826; *Oldřich a Božena*, 1828; *Libuřin sňatek*, 1835 and *Drahomíra*, 1848) are inspired from Czech literature, the other ones from the German one (Sadie, and Tyrrell 2001, 481-482). Priest and composer Josef Vorel (1801-1874) wrote the opera *Sládci* (*The Brewers*) from 1836 to 1837. I will also mention here the Czech composer, pedagogue and music critic Josef Leopold Zvonař (1824-1865), who, in 1859, finalised the opera *Záboj* (legendary character, N.B.). Operas in the Czech language were also written by composers Jan Bedřich Kittl (1806-1868) and František Skuherský (1830-1892). Approximately in the same period there activated in Brno composer František Bedřich Kott (1808-1884), author of the opera *Žižkův dub* (*Žižkův oak*). This is the first opera by a local composer performed in Moravia, in Brno, with the premiere on 28 November 1841. Almost all of the works above are either comic or treat a subject from Czech mythology.

## 1.2. A few words about *dramma giocoso*

Over the course of its history, the opera genre knew a multitude of ramifications and classifications, some certain, others debatable. I will not list them here, because the information sources are multiple and sometimes, they themselves generate question marks. Among the certitudes there lies the genre of *opera buffa*, with its extension of *dramma giocoso*. “Comic drama. 18th-cent. Italian term for comic operas containing tragic features” (Warrack, and West 2003, 625) is the most concise definition of the collocation, which clearly tells us that the opera, which is attributed this name, is a comic one. The statement must, however, be augmented, since *dramma giocoso* and *opera buffa* are not identical. The elucidation of the problem leads towards the make-up of the libretto. “Carlo Goldoni, Italy's leading playwright, was coining a new kind of libretto for comic opera. It was he who, with the help of Venetian musicians like Galuppi, created the *buffo* finale, that long chain of unbroken action and music to enliven the act ending – an invention of epochal importance for all opera that followed”. (Hertz 1979, 993). Departing from *commedia dell'arte*, Goldoni brings to his libretti typologically contrasting characters, some tragic, some comic and, finally, some middle-ground characters. “His name for such an amalgam, applied fairly consistently from 1748 on, was *dramma giocoso*” (Hertz 1979, 993).

It follows that the *buffo* ending and the typological blend of characters represent the ingredients of an authentic *dramma giocoso*. Operas in this category

were written by composers Baltassare Galuppi, Egidio Duni, Niccolò Piccini and Joseph Haydn (all of them on Goldoni's libretti), then Domenico Cimarosa, Giuseppe Sarti, W. A. Mozart, Antonio Salieri, Gioacchino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti. We will see below if Bedřich Smetana's opera *Hubička* (*The Kiss*) can receive the name of *dramma giocoso* but not before briefly discussing the composer's entire lyrical body of works.

## 2. Opera among Bedřich Smetana's works

Compared to the works of the composers that I have presented above, Smetana's lyrical works were immediately recognised as net superior in value, a reason for which the musician was honoured with the title of "father of Czech opera". This decision was influenced neither by the differences between the subjects of the respective operas, nor by their diverse stylistic expression, factors which result from the following chronological list: *Braniboři v Čechách* (*The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, the premiere on 5 January 1866), a historical opera based on Czech mythology; *Prodaná nevěsta* (*The Bartered Bride*, the premiere on 30 May 1866), comic opera; *Dalibor* (the premiere on 16 May 1868), historical opera based on Czech mythology; *Libuše* (the premiere on 11 June 1881), festival opera based on Czech mythology; *Dvě vdovy* (*The Two Widows*, the premiere on 27 May 1874), comic opera; *Hubička* (*The Kiss*, the premiere on 7 November 1876), folk opera; *Tajemství* (*The Secret*, the premiere on 18 September 1878), comic opera; *Čertova stěna* (*The Devil's Wall*, the premiere on 29 October 1882), Romantic-comic opera. Beside these eight titles, Smetana also sketched a ninth opera, *Viola*, which remained unfinished.

Therefore, we observe three operas with mythologic-historical subjects, four comic operas and one named folk opera. As far as their musical language is concerned, the mythologic-historical ones present Wagnerian influences, in the sense of ample and sombre orchestration, but also have features of the French grand opera style. The other ones allude to French comic opera and, to a smaller extent, to Viennese operetta. An unquestionable national streak unites all Smetana's operas, which it crosses through melodies, colours and rhythms influenced by the Czechs' folklore. This aspect helped the composers' sympathisers to impose their opinions in the numerous and quite tough fights against his detractors. Finally, I will mention that all premieres took place in Prague in various theatres, while some of the works knew successive change-overs (Sadie and Tyrell 2001, 549).

### 3. The opera *Hubička (The Kiss)*

#### 3.1. The moment of creation, elements of construction and plot

Beside the happy anniversary of 50 years of age, in the year 1874 one of the most tragic events for a musician happened in Bedřich Smetana's life: rapid deterioration of his hearing, which began in June and ended in October, when the composer went completely deaf. Yet, "Deafness in no way crushed Smetana's spirit or diminished his musical imagination; on the contrary, throughout all the final decade of his life, he took advantage of being able to compose undisturbed" (Sadie, and Tyrrell 2001, 542). Isolated from the external sonic world and unwillingly submerged in his internal hearing, Smetana was quite prolific in the last ten years of his existence. This is the period of works like the cycle of the six symphonic poems *Má vlast (My Fatherland)* or of "his autobiographical string quartet *Z mého života (From my Life, 1876)*, in which the onslaught of deafness and the maddening tinnitus which accompanied it are vividly depicted" (Tyrrell 1988, 71). It is in this period, also, that he wrote the opera *Hubička (The Kiss)*. The libretto was conceived by Eliška Krásnohorská (1847-1926), who took inspiration from another novel by Czech writer Karolína Světlá (1830-1899). For Smetana this was his first collaboration with the new librettist.

One of the reasons out of which all bibliographic sources accessed present it as a folk opera is that the action of the two acts of the opera *Hubička (The Kiss)* takes place in a Bohemian village. In act I we see how a young man (*Lukáš*, tenor), having quickly become a widower with a new-born child after an arranged marriage, now wants a new family with the girl (*Vendulka*, soprano) that he has loved for a long time. Encouraged by the aunt (*Martinka*, contralto), the girl's father (*Paloucký*, bass-baritone) agrees to the marriage, despite his reserves. The girl also joyfully agrees. In front of the match makers who join her future husband and of his brother-in-law (*Tomeš*, baritone), she refuses, however, to kiss *Lukáš* before stepping before the altar with him. This gesture, considers *Vendulka*, would not only stain the memory of his late first wife but it would also be an ominous deed. From this refusal there start line exchanges between the two lovers, in which they declare their love consecutively and repeatedly but also utter all sort of painful words to each other. *Lukáš* no longer stands the refusal to receive a kiss and leaves for the pub, whence he returns in the company of a few girls willing to grant him their favours. Deeply offended, *Vendulka* runs away from the village.

The second act takes place first of all in a forest, then in *Paloucký's* house. In the darkness of night and sheltered by trees there appears a group of smugglers led by *Matouš* (bass). They hide when *Lukáš* enters, tormented by shame and pangs of conscience, followed by *Tomeš*, who assures his brother-in-law that *Vendulka* loves him and that she will forgive him. Yet this only after *Lukáš* shows sincere remorse for his deeds and asks her for forgiveness. Believing in their

success, *Lukáš* and *Tomeš* leave for the village, while their place on the stage is immediately taken by *Vendulka* and *Martinka*. The aunt confesses that she is a smuggler and, in order to scare her and cause her to return to the village, she tells the girl that once an accomplice she will go to prison. Moreover, she scares her terribly when she bribes *Strážník* (*The Guardian*, tenor). Frightened, *Vendulka* accepts to return home but continues to refuse the kiss. In *Paloucký's* house, the servant *Barče* (soprano) brings the news of the young lovers' reconciliation. Before a whole cortege, *Vendulka* and *Lukáš* restate their love, only that – coup de theatre! – the young man withdraws his marriage proposal, considering himself unworthy of the girl's hand. Everyone tries to change his decision and, in a happy ending, he embraces *Vendulka* and receives the much-awaited kiss from her.

Each act begins with an orchestral introduction and is made up of nine scenes, in which arias, duets, a tercet and several moments of the vocal soloists together with the choir. The following characters have arias: *Tomeš*, *Vendulka*, *Paloucký*, *Martinka*, *Lukáš*, *Barče* and *Matouš*. The duets take place between: *Paloucký* and *Lukáš*, *Tomeš* and *Lukáš*, *Martinka* and *Vendulka*, *Martinka* and *Strážník*. Beside these, there are very numerous duet moments of variable dimensions between *Vendulka* and *Lukáš*. The tercet has *Vendulka*, *Martinka* și *Matouš* as protagonists. Next to the soloist fragments there are sections of the mixed choir and of the male choir.

### 3.2. Character typologies

We will start the typological research from the *dramma giocoso* manner, the way Goldoni thought out his characters in his libretti. Should we leave the music aside and only concentrate on the way in which the libretto of the opera *Hubička* (*The Kiss*) is populated, we surprisingly ascertain that the only character in the category of comic ones is *Strážník* (*The Guardian*), a veritable banana, a congenial and actually good-natured corrupt character, who appears for a single minute.

Even if they are peasants, the lovers enter the category of tragic characters. After he is forced by his family to marry, *Lukáš's* wife dies and he remains the only parent of a new-born. Abandoned, *Vendulka* would have married herself without loving or would have stayed a spinster. Even if married to *Lukáš*, she will only be the child's step mother. Also tragic is the character *Paloucký*, who foresees the fights between the future spouses and only accepts their marriage so that he may have the peace that he desires. He is the type of the pessimist, of the incurable misanthropist. *Martinka*, *Matouš*, *Tomeš* and *Barče* are so-called middle-ground characters, their character is neither very well outlined, nor do they decisively influence the others' actions and experiences.

The above two paragraphs analyse all the characters of the libretto of the opera *Hubička* (*The Kiss*); profoundly the main ones, in general lines the secondary

ones. The conclusion of researching the typologies is that all heroes, of capital or reduced importance, have characters which can be included in the mandatory patterns of a *dramma giocoso* libretto.

### 3.3. Drama and comedy in music

Should someone read the libretto before listening to or seeing the opera performance, they will ascertain that the way the music sounds, abundantly embellished with stylised folkloric sonorities, does not change the picture they have already drawn of the characters. Only that, after the audition and/or viewing, that person now has all the arguments in order to fully understand the labelling of the opera *Hubička (The Kiss)* as folk opera and not *opera buffa*. This impression is also strengthened by the fact that the only truly comical musical moment in the entire opera, illustrated by parodic, hilarious sonorities, is the one of the duets between *Martinka* and *Strážník (The Guardian)*, which takes place at a late time in the second act.

Nevertheless, the fact that *Hubička (The Kiss)* is not an *opera buffa* does not mean it cannot be a *dramma giocoso*, and this statement is justified with edifying arguments. As we have seen, the core of the plot is represented by the stubbornness of two young people in love, each of them loving sincerely and aware that they are loved. Impatient, *Lukáš* expects and insists to be kissed immediately, he rejects any of his lover's logical or mystical arguments. Vexed and disappointed by her lover's intransigence and coldness, *Vendulka* takes it into her head to refuse and only climbs down at the end of the opera. And the other characters only evolve around the two. For spectators, the action of the entire work dons a playful and amusing attire. Even if they do not laugh, the public smiles and feels almost from the start that there will be a happy ending.

In most of the choral moments, in a few arias and duets, Smetana's music paints very well the world of the Bohemian village through specifically traditional, signally cheerful melodies, rhythms and colours. There is also a wonderful bucolic moment at the beginning of the second act, where Smetana proves an excellent craft of writing for a male choir and a bass soloist. All of these convey a positive state of mind of buoyancy, for whose description the term *giocososo* is the fittest.

Yet, where is the *dramma* in the music of the opera *Hubička (The Kiss)*? The answer lies in the very suggestive way in which the composer illustrates the protagonists' experiences. Thus, both of *Paloucký's* arias have a sombre, Baroque touch, highlighted by the frequent melismatic passages. As far as *Vendulka* and *Lukáš* are concerned, their exchanges denote love, affection, reproaches, bewildering decisions, mutual understanding, blended in a multicoloured yarn ball translated into music through frequent changes of tempos and intensities and equally frequent formulas of orchestral accompaniment. The best proof is scene no. 5 in the first act, which I consider to be the nucleus of the opera. Here, the two first of all restate their

love (Smetana writes soft, warm music with the agogic indication of *Andante amoroso*, in which the characters take over large sections from one another), then they duel with verbal anger (*Allegro energico*, tumultuous sonority, at first responsorial and recitatorial, then in an imitative dialogue), only to repeat their attitudes, again and again, pretty much in the same order (with naturally different music). I am convinced that both the tenderness of love and the flames paint the *dramma* in the opera. And another fragment from scene no. 5 in the first act is also part of the *dramma*. I am speaking about an aria that the librettist introduces inside the duet and in which the composer shows his genius. At the bedside of the sleeping child *Vendulka* sings a wonderful lullaby, a simple and humble musical jewel, maybe one of the most inspired genre pages in the entire musical literature.

#### 4. Conclusions

In the lines above, the succinct references to the cultural-musical ambience of the Czech historical regions in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Bedřich Smetana's opera works and to the collocation *dramma giocoso* were followed by the detailed analysis of the plot and characters, as well as by a cursory presentation of the music of the opera *Hubička (The Kiss)*. The clear argumentation and the to-the-point overview of the research have produced sure results, and everything I have stated proves that the work is a *folk opera* which can be considered at the same time a *dramma giocoso* of the Czech lyrical creation. I hope that the opportunity of "discovering" it and then of commenting upon it means the beginning of better, more profound knowledge and appreciation (of course, outside of the Czech Republic) of an opera which, without being a masterpiece, is one of the most successful works of the lyrical genre. And, who knows, maybe there will be theatres, even in Romania, which will introduce it in their repertoire...

#### 5. References

- Heartz, Daniel. 1979. "Goldoni, Don Giovanni and the *Dramma Giocoso*." *The Musical Times*, 120(1642): 993-998.
- Locke, Brian S. 2006. *Opera and Ideology in Prague*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.
- Sadie, Stanley and John Tyrrell (eds). 2001. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, volume 23. London: Macmillan Publishers Limited.
- Tyrrell, John. 1988. *Czech Opera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Warrack, John and Ewan West (eds). 2003. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.