



SMETANA

Festive Symphony

The Bartered Bride
Overture and Dances

Berlin Radio
Symphony Orchestra

Darrell Ang



Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

Festive Symphony, Op. 6 • Extracts from The Bartered Bride

Bedřich Smetana is a figure of particular importance in the development of Czech music, creating and inspiring a synthesis of native tradition and the Classical forms of music in which he had been trained. Born in 1824, the eleventh child and first son to survive infancy of a brewer who served Count Wallenstein and other members of the nobility, he showed early promise as a pianist and as a violinist, and wrote his first compositions at the age of nine. It was to Smetana's advantage that his father was a keen amateur musician, a violinist, able to encourage and teach his son. There was, however, a period of some eight years during which he had little professional musical training, while attending schools in various provincial towns. In 1838, however, he persuaded his father to allow him to study in Prague, and took the opportunity to devote himself more fully to music than to anything else. This happy state of affairs was ended when he was sent to study under a firmer regime in the town of Plzeň (Pilsen) where he lodged with an uncle.

Smetana had briefly enjoyed the rich musical life of Prague, writing music for his friends and being inspired by the playing of Liszt in 1840. The years in Pilsen allowed him considerable activity as a pianist for dances and brought contact again with a friend from his earlier life, Kateřina Kolářová, who in 1849 was to become his wife. In 1843 he left school and moved to Prague, resolved to make his living as a musician, perhaps as a virtuoso pianist. In practice he found it necessary to keep himself by teaching, while studying theory, and found a position as resident piano teacher to the family of Count Thun.

In 1848 Smetana's appointment to the Thun family had come to an end and he now planned to start a music school, at a time when national feelings were running high throughout Europe. The political events of the year found him involved in the nationalist rising, and his subsequent career was profoundly influenced by the ideas of patriotism then current. Nevertheless, even at this time, his first language remained German, the official language of the Hapsburg Empire in Bohemia.

In 1849 Smetana married and continued his career as a teacher and pianist, serving in each of these capacities the former Emperor Ferdinand V, the mentally deficient heir to the Hapsburg throne, who had abdicated in favour of the able young Franz Joseph I, carefully groomed by his mother for the succession. While the Emperor Ferdinand had proved completely incompetent, there was considerable hope for the future from Franz Joseph. In particular it was thought possible that he would have himself crowned King of Bohemia, which might allow the region a separate and equal development, a measure of freedom that Hungary was to achieve.

The *Festive Symphony*, Op. 6, was written in 1854 at a time when hopes ran particularly high. The Emperor married Elisabeth of Bavaria on 24 April, and Smetana designed his symphony as a tribute to a monarch who was expected to take this occasion to have himself crowned in Bohemia. The composer asked permission to dedicate the work to the Emperor, but received no reply. The work, in any case, in spite of its occasional use of the Imperial anthem, is not of the overtly patriotic kind that the occasion of a royal wedding might demand.

Smetana's subsequent career brought him both distinction and difficulties. For some years he taught and conducted choirs in Sweden where the *Festive Symphony* was well received in a concert in Gothenburg in 1860. The first performance of the work at the Convict-Saale in Prague in 1855 had been less satisfactory. The programme was a long one, starting with the composer playing Bach and Handel on the piano, followed by Schubert Lieder, a Beethoven trio, in which a young piano pupil of Smetana's played pieces by Schumann, Chopin and Mendelssohn, more songs and a group of polkas played by the composer. Smetana's wife in her diary found fault only with the concert's length, but added that Smetana tired towards the end, with the lamps giving out at the same time as his strength.

The establishment of the Czech Provisional Theatre in 1862 seemed to offer Smetana the opportunity he

needed, and which he seized with the composition of his first operas, *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* and *The Bartered Bride*. He was not appointed principal conductor until 1866, and then was to encounter constant critical hostility. In 1874 came the first signs of deafness, the result of a supposed venereal infection contracted earlier in life, and by October of the same year his hearing had gone completely. His last decade brought financial difficulties, but saw also the composition of that remarkable series of symphonic poems that make up *Má Vlast*. By 1882 Smetana's health had deteriorated markedly, leading to aphasia, hallucinations and final insanity from which he was relieved by death on 12 May 1884.

The *Festive Symphony* has suffered through the circumstances of its composition. Three of the four movements make use of the Imperial anthem, a thematic element that could hardly prove acceptable to those imbued with the spirit of Czech nationalism. Smetana himself in 1863 began the custom of playing only the *Scherzo*, the movement that lacks Hapsburg connotations, and this practice was to continue as the Austrian hymn acquired even less pleasing political associations.

The *Festive Symphony*, which Smetana revised in 1881, is his only formal symphony. In E major, its first movement is in Classical form, the opening fanfares providing rhythmic material for what follows. The Imperial anthem appears briefly and very softly in the woodwind before the recapitulation, but a full statement of the

anthem is reserved for the final pages of the score. The C major *Largo maestoso*, opening with a passage in E major that recalls the anthem, which later appears more fully in the movement, leads to an A major *Scherzo* and D minor *Trio*. The *Finale* provides a lively movement culminating in a mood suited to the title and occasion of the work.

On 30 May 1866, four months or so after the first performance of *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, the new opera *The Bartered Bride* was staged, without dances in its first version. It was revised in 1869, when, among other additions, the *Polka* of Act II was included. Further revision followed, with the final version staged at the small Prague Provisional Theatre in September 1870. *The Bartered Bride* of the title, Mařenka, is to marry the son of Tobias Micha, who turns out to be the simpleton Vašek. She already has a handsome lover, Jeník, who barter her away with the marriage broker, agreeing, for a consideration, that Mařenka should marry only a son of Micha. All complications are finally resolved when it turns out that Jeník, always aware of his own true identity, is Micha's long lost son. Vašek, meanwhile, has found his own delight in the circus dancer Esmeralda, and a role for himself playing the part of a performing bear in the circus. The opera opens with a sparkling *Overture*. The *Polka* and the *Furiant*, in the final version of the opera, provide dances for the villagers, while the so-called *Dance of the Comedians* introduces the travelling circus of Act III.

Keith Anderson

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Darrell Ang



Besançon International Young Conductors' Competition, leading to the music directorship of the Orchestre Symphonique de Bretagne (2012–15) and – as recipient of the Allianz Cultural Foundation Young Conductors' Award – was invited to take on residencies with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Philharmonia Orchestra, where he was mentored by Lorin Maazel and Esa-Pekka Salonen.

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Bedřich Smetana's *Festive Symphony* was composed in 1854 when hopes for Emperor Franz Joseph becoming King of Bohemia were high. The splendid sounds of Smetana's only formal symphony pre-echo later masterpieces such as *Má Vlast*, but his use of the Austrian Imperial anthem became unacceptable in the subsequent spirit of Czech nationalism, resulting in the work's neglect. With its sparkling overture and lively rural dances, *The Bartered Bride* secured Smetana's international reputation and, as the only Czech opera of its day to enter the standard repertoire, it became a beacon for the nation's 19th century musical renaissance.



Bedřich
SMETANA
(1824–1884)



Festive Symphony in E major, Op. 6

42:55

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|----------|---|--------------|
| 1 | I. Allegro vivace | 11:00 |
| 2 | II. Largo maestoso | 10:36 |
| 3 | III. Scherzo: Allegro vivo | 8:47 |
| 4 | IV. Finale: Allegro non troppo ma energico | 12:20 |

Prodaná nevesta (The Bartered Bride) (excerpts)

20:55

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| 5 | Overture | 7:06 |
| 6 | Act I: Finale: Polka | 5:01 |
| 7 | Act II: Furiant | 2:05 |
| 8 | Act III: Dance of the Comedians | 6:33 |

Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra
(Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin)

ein Ensemble der

Darrell Ang



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