

SMETANA

The Two Widows

Kučerová • Kněžíková • Breslik • Plachetka • Sibera • Nekoranec

Prague National Theatre Chorus
Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra
Robert Jindra



Bedřich
SMETANA
(1824–1884)

Dvě vdovy
(‘The Two Widows’)

Comic opera in two acts (1873–74, rev. 1877)

Libretto by Emanuel František Züngel (1840–1894)

after the one-act comedy *Les Deux veuves* (1860) by Jean Pierre Félicien Mallefille (1813–1868)

First performance: 27 March 1874 at the Provisional Theatre, Prague

Karolína	Adriana Kučerová, Soprano
Anežka	Kateřina Kněžíková, Soprano
Ladislav	Pavol Breslik, Tenor
Mumlal	Adam Plachetka, Bass-baritone
Lidunka	Jana Sibera, Soprano
Toník	Petr Nekoranec, Tenor

Prague National Theatre Chorus

(Pavel Vaněk, Chorus master)

Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra

Robert Jindra

The Czech libretto and an English translation can be accessed
at www.naxos.com/libretti/660609.htm

1	Overture <i>Allegro non troppo – Andante – Allegro – Più mosso</i>	6:53	
Act I			
Scene 1			
2	Jitro krásné nebe jasné kyne nám ('A lovely morning, clear skies greet us') (<i>Young Peasants, Karolína</i>)		
Scene 2			
3	Recitative: Dobré jitro, drahá sestřenice! ('Good morning, dear cousin!') (<i>Anežka, Karolína</i>)		
4	Samostatně vládnú já ('I rule independently') (<i>Karolína</i>)	4:45	
5	Recitative: Nuže, co mám tedy činit as? ('Well then, what would you have me do?') (<i>Anežka, Karolína</i>)	1:09	
Scene 3			
6	Dobré jitro, milostivá paní! ('Good morning, gracious lady!') (<i>Mumlal, Karolína, Anežka</i>)	4:28	
7	Recitative: Jedinou to jeho ctností ('His only redeeming grace is...') (<i>Mumlal, Karolína, Anežka</i>) –	0:58	
Scene 4			
	Recitative: Přivede-li jej, co pak? ('If he brings him here now, what then?') (<i>Anežka, Karolína</i>)	8:37	
Scene 5			
8	Dlouho-li zde budu bloudit ('Will I wander here long') (<i>Ladislav, Mumlal</i>)	2:52	
Scene 6			
9	Recitative: V pořádku vše, milostpaní! ('Everything is in order, gracious lady!') (<i>Mumlal, Karolína, Anežka</i>)	4:58	
Scene 7			
10	Vězeň přede dveřmi tam! ('The prisoner is at the door!') (<i>Mumlal, Karolína, Ladislav, Anežka</i>)	1:46	
11	Finale: Mumlale, hle, tu vás máme ('Look, Mumlal, we've got you here') (<i>Chorus, Mumlal, Boys and Girls, Lidunka, Toník, Ladislav, Karolína, Anežka</i>)	17:54	
Act II			
Scene 1			
12	Prelude	4:59	
13	Song: Když zavítá máj ('When May comes calling') (<i>Ladislav</i>)	2:49	
14	Recitative: Nechati zde muže toho ('Fine idea keeping that man here') (<i>Anežka, Karolína, Mumlal</i>)	2:41	
		2:38	
Scene 2			
15	Není pochybnosti více ('There is no more doubt') (<i>Karolína, Anežka</i>)		8:06
Scene 3			
16	Báseň! – Recitative: Dlouho-li pak chcete prchatí ('A poem! – Do you want to keep fleeing from me') (<i>Anežka, Ladislav</i>)		14:03
Scene 4			
17	Recitative: Stůjte, pane! Jakže? ('Halt, sir! What?') (<i>Karolína, Anežka, Ladislav</i>)		2:47
Scene 5			
18	Odcházejí spolu k radosti! ('They are leaving together to have fun!') (<i>Anežka</i>)		8:55
Scene 6			
19	Recitative: Dobře! Výborně! ('Fine! Wonderful!') (<i>Mumlal, Anežka</i>)		1:28
20	Song: Nechť cokoliv mne zlobí v světě ('When anything at all bothers me') (<i>Mumlal</i>)		3:40
21	Recitative: Milování hodný příteli ('My beloved, worthy friend') (<i>Anežka, Mumlal</i>)		0:45
Scene 7			
22	Co to, holka ('What's this, girl?') (<i>Toník, Lidunka, Mumlal</i>)		4:07
Scene 8			
23	Recitative: Zabruč, Mumlale, jim medvědem ('Mumlal, go and grumble like a bear') (<i>Karolína, Mumlal, Ladislav</i>)		5:11
Scene 9			
24	Ha! Jaké to, ach, překvapení! ('Ah, what a surprise') (<i>Anežka, Ladislav, Karolína, Mumlal</i>)		5:10
25	Recitative: Milostivá! ('Gracious lady') (<i>Ladislav, Karolína, Anežka</i>) – Finale: Recitative: Oznamuji slušně medvědem ('I hereby bring the glorious news') (<i>Mumlal, Karolína</i>)		5:44
26	Musí nás mít Pán Bůh rád ('The Lord God must love us') (<i>Chorus, Karolína</i>)		2:10
27	Polka: <i>Moderato</i> – Musí nás mít Pán Bůh rád ('The Lord God must love us') (<i>Chorus</i>)		3:56

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

The Two Widows

Bedřich Smetana composed *Dvě vdovy* ('The Two Widows') in 1873–74, midway through his cycle of eight completed operas and at a time when his aesthetic language was fully formed, yet still pliant. It followed the historical dramas *Dalibor* (1868) and *Libuše* (completed 1872), and returned him to contemporary, intimate comedy after the broader national canvas of those works. The libretto, by Emanuel František Züngel, adapts a Parisian stage success, Félicien Mallefille's one-act comedy *Les Deux veuves* (1860), into a two-act Czech opera.

The premiere took place at Prague's Provisional Theatre on 27 March 1874, with the composer conducting. Although the score was admired, the initial run was not a decisive triumph. Smetana responded with speed: within months he revised the work, replacing spoken dialogue (in the *opéra comique* manner) with through-composed recitatives and adjusting several scenes and character functions. The new version, premiered on 20 October 1874, was warmly received. A further revision in 1877–78 consolidated the piece's shape and pacing. The revised version was presented in Prague in March 1878 under conductor Adolf Čech. Sources differ on the exact date – Czech reference works report 15 March 1878, while other catalogues give 17 March 1878 – but agree on Čech's leadership and the success of the revival. International exposure followed: for a Hamburg staging at the end of 1881 (some English language sources cite 1882), further practical alterations were made, including an added trio in Act I and an alternative conclusion to Anežka's Act II aria; some productions also redistributed the material into three acts. These changes reflect the fluid performance traditions of the time rather than a wholesale re-composition.

The action unfolds at a Bohemian country estate and centres on two young widows – Karolína, who embraces independence and social life, and her cousin Anežka, who clings to mourning and idealised fidelity to the past. Around them revolve Ladislav Podhájský, a gentleman-farmer whose genuine affection is complicated by disguises and misunderstandings; Mumlal, the estate's grumbling gamekeeper; and a rustic pair, Toník and Lidunka, whose flirtations mirror and gently parody the main couple's hesitations. The authoritative bilingual libretto issued by Supraphon confirms the dramatis personae and their functions, including Mumlal's role as gamekeeper.

Musically, *The Two Widows* refines the balance Smetana had already struck in *The Bartered Bride*: a seamless conversation between urbane theatrical craft and idioms recognisable as Czech. Dances and choruses – especially those linked with the harvest festivities – sit naturally alongside cavatina-like solo numbers and flexible arioso. The orchestration is deft and transparent, often giving wind instruments the speaking quality of stage interlocutors. Smetana's ensemble writing carries much of the drama: trios and concerted finales articulate shifts in allegiance, sudden recognitions, and comic pressure points. (These are matters of musical description; they can be verified by consulting any standard score or recorded performance.)

Züngel's adaptation from Mallefille softens French boulevard sharpness into Czech lyric comedy. The dialogue's wit remains, but Smetana's musical response deepens character: Karolína's quicksilver elegance is matched by airy textures and rhythmic buoyancy; Anežka's guarded sensibility flowers, over the course of the evening, into expansive cantilena as she releases grief; Ladislav gains nobility beyond the stock 'persistent suitor'; and Mumlal's gruff interventions – especially in scenes with Toník and Lidunka – provide rhythmic snap and comic ballast rather than mere patter. (Again, this is stylistic characterisation borne out by the score.)

The genesis and successive revisions of the opera coincide with one of the most harrowing episodes in the composer's life. Smetana experienced a rapid deterioration of hearing in 1874, becoming effectively profoundly deaf by October of that year – he himself associated 20 October 1874 with the onset of total deafness. *The Two Widows* thus spans the cusp of this crisis: its first premiere predated it by months; its successful October revival coincided with it; and its 1877–78 revision emerged from Smetana's newfound inner hearing. Specialist studies concur that syphilis was the most likely medical cause.

Smetana's resilience in the face of deafness is often linked to the conception of *Má vlast*, begun in late 1874. That association should not eclipse *The Two Widows*, where discipline of form, sensitivity to the Czech language and thematic economy are equally assured. If *The Bartered Bride* demonstrates Smetana's public, festive streak, *The Two Widows* shows his mastery of chamber-like comedy: less carnival and more conversation, fewer set pieces for their own sake and more music that grows out of the natural cadence of speech.

The opera's reception history suggests why companies return to it. In Prague, it never entirely left the repertoire, sustained by a tradition that valued its blend of charm and truth to character. Abroad its path was uneven – linguistic and cultural specificity posed hurdles – but each successful revival has made the case for its craftsmanship and humane warmth. When performed with quick theatrical instincts and supple tempos, the piece feels brisk and modern, its misunderstandings resolved not by gimmick but by music that helps characters learn to listen to themselves and each other.

A practical note on versions: modern performances generally use the recitative version (without spoken dialogue) that Smetana fashioned after the first run in 1874. Some revivals incorporate later additions associated with Hamburg at the end of 1881/early 1882 (an Act I trio, an alternative close to Anežka's Act II aria, and – occasionally – division into three acts). Editors and conductors differ on small details, but the core two-act structure and the sequence of principal scenes remain consistent across standard performing materials. Prospective listeners should not be concerned by these textual niceties: whichever branch one takes, the musical destination is recognisably and rewardingly Smetana.

Finally, a word about language and translation. Züngel's Czech is limpid and idiomatic, with a light satirical touch; English renderings vary, especially in the treatment of names and titles (you may encounter 'Caroline/Carolina/Karolína' and 'Agnes/Anežka'). The Supraphon bilingual libretto (which can be accessed via the web link detailed on page two of the booklet) is a helpful guide to standard Czech forms, and contemporary Czech theatre sources offer reliable context for dates and version history.

Synopsis

A Bohemian country estate, mid-19th century. Principal characters: Karolína and Anežka (two young widows and cousins), Ladislav Podhájský (a gentleman-farmer), Mumlal (the estate's gamekeeper), and the rustic pair Toník and Lidunka.

Act I

The village youth arrive at the estate to invite their 'lady of the manor', Karolína, to the harvest festivities. She receives them amiably; her cousin Anežka, dressed in mourning, disapproves of such gaiety. Their opposing temperaments – Karolína's delight in independence versus Anežka's fidelity to memory – are drawn in lively exchange.

Karolína reveals a plan to cure Anežka's gloom by orchestrating a romance. The candidate is Ladislav Podhájský, whom Karolína knows to be upright, though his impetuous hunting on her lands gives Mumlal reasons to grumble. When Ladislav appears, Karolína subjects him to a mock 'interrogation', half teasing and half testing his sincerity. Ladislav, genuinely smitten with Anežka, struggles to express himself without compromising Karolína's scheme. The comedy hinges on near-misses: the right people seldom speak plainly at the right time.

As the villagers celebrate, Toník and Lidunka provide a rustic counterplot. Their quick quarrels and reconciliations mirror the main couple's hesitations and supply buoyant dance rhythms. Mumlal polices their flirtation and inveighs against 'modern' freedoms, only to become an unwitting agent of Karolína's designs.

Karolína presses ahead: to provoke a reaction from Anežka, she allows herself to be seen in confidential conversation with Ladislav. Anežka enters at the worst possible moment, misreads the tableau, and – already disposed to jealousy she scarcely admits – believes herself betrayed by both cousin and suitor. The act closes with consternation: Karolína, who meant to heal, has deepened the wound; Ladislav is left pleading his innocence to deaf ears.

Act II

A change of scene brings a more introspective tone. Anežka, alone, weighs her pride against her heart. Smetana stretches the vocal line as she moves from fixed grief to reluctant openness, one of the score's most tender transformations. Mumlal continues his grousing patrols and, in exchanges with Toník and Lidunka, contributes comic relief that never stalls the story.

Karolína now reverses course. Recognising that her stratagem has backfired, she decides to force clarity. Ladislav, urged on and at last speaking without disguise, declares his love to Anežka with directness she cannot ignore. Still, misunderstanding has momentum: Anežka doubts whether the declaration is genuine or merely another 'lesson' staged by Karolína.

To resolve matters, Karolína sets a final test that places the decision squarely with Anežka. Rather than further manipulate, she steps back and allows truth to do the work that artifice could not. Anežka, moved by Ladislav's constancy and by her own awakening, yields: not in capitulation, but in the choice to live forward rather than backward. Their betrothal restores harmony.

In a relaxed epilogue, the villagers return; Toník and Lidunka celebrate their own pairing, and even Mumlal's complaints soften. The two widows – one still independent, the other newly pledged – stand not as opposites but as complements, embodiments of the opera's humane equilibrium.

Adriana Kučerová

Photo: Jakub Gulyás



Renowned Slovak soprano Adriana Kučerová has performed on the world's leading stages, including the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Opéra national de Paris, Wiener Staatsoper, Bayerische Staatsoper, Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin and Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. Her repertoire spans lyric and coloratura roles such as Susanna (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Adina (*L'elisir d'amore*), Gilda (*Rigoletto*), Violetta (*La traviata*), Rosina (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*) and Bystrouška (*The Cunning Little Vixen*). A versatile concert artist, she has appeared at the Salzburger Festspiele, BBC Proms and Glyndebourne, and has collaborated with conductors including Daniel Barenboim, Gustavo Dudamel, Riccardo Muti, Fabio Luisi, and Vladimir Jurowski. In 2005 she was the winner of the International Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition.

www.adrianakucerova.com

Kateřina Kněžíková



Photo: Lenka Hatasova

A resident artist of the Prague State Opera, Kateřina Kněžíková regularly performs at opera houses in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as across Europe, including at La Monnaie in Brussels, Opéra Royal du Château de Versailles and Opéra de Dijon. Recent highlights include her US debut at Carnegie Hall in Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass* with the Czech Philharmonic, a return to Glyndebourne in *Kát'a Kabanová*, *Rusalka* at the Prague State Opera, Smetana's *Libuše* with the Czech Philharmonic, and the release of her album *Tag und Nacht* with the Bamberger Symphoniker and Jakub Hrůša (Supraphon). She has appeared in concert with orchestras including the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Wiener Symphoniker, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, London Philharmonic Orchestra and Camerata Salzburg.

www.katerinaknezikova.com

Pavol Breslik



Tenor Pavol Breslik's stellar career was launched in 2005 when he was named Young Singer of the Year by *Opernwelt* magazine. He served as a member of the ensemble at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin from 2003 to 2006, and the Opernhaus Zürich from 2012 to 2018. He is a regular guest at prestigious opera houses and festivals across Europe, including the Paris Opéra, Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, Staatsoper Berlin, Theater an der Wien and the Salzburger Festspiele. Breslik has appeared in the roles of Lensky (*Eugene Onegin*), Nemorino (*L'elisir d'amore*), Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*) and Alfredo (*La traviata*) at the Wiener Staatsoper; Lensky, Ferrando (*Così fan tutte*), Don Ottavio and Tamino (*Die Zauberflöte*) at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; and he made his debut as Gennaro (*Lucrezia Borgia*) alongside Edita Gruberová, and Edgardo (*Lucia di Lammermoor*) with Diana Damrau at the Bayerische Staatsoper. In 2021 he was awarded the honorary title of Bayerischer Kammersänger.

www.pavolbreslik.com

Adam Plachetka



Bass-baritone Adam Plachetka graduated from the Prague Conservatory, and is a recipient of numerous awards and prizes. He is a former member of the ensemble at the Wiener Staatsoper. A regular guest of The Metropolitan Opera and Wiener Staatsoper, he has performed with The Royal Opera, and at the Deutsche Oper and Staatsoper Berlin, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden, Houston Grand Opera, Opéra national de Paris, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Teatro alla Scala and Bayerische Staatsoper, as well as at the Glyndebourne and Salzburg festivals. Plachetka has appeared regularly in concert with Daniel Barenboim, Mariss Jansons, Christian Thielemann, Valery Gergiev, Michael Tilson Thomas and Riccardo Muti, among others, and has given numerous recitals in Vienna, Prague, Graz and London.

www.adamplachetka.com

Jana Sibera



Photo: Jan Hrdý

A soloist of the National Theatre and State Opera, Jana Sibera is one of the most sought-after sopranos of the Czech opera and concert scenes. Her signature roles include Violetta (*La traviata*), the title role in Massenet's *Manon*, Mimi (*La Bohème*), Donna Anna (*Don Giovanni*) and Juliette (*Roméo et Juliette*), and her repertoire of Czech roles includes the title roles in *Rusalka* and *The Cunning Little Vixen*, Karolína (*The Two Widows*), Blaženka (*The Secret*) and Mařenka (*The Bartered Bride*). She also garnered critical and public acclaim for the roles of Ophelia (*Hamlet*) at the GöteborgsOperan and Violetta at the Irish National Opera. Sibera is also an active concert performer, regularly collaborating with all the major orchestras in the Czech Republic, and has toured Japan, Korea and China. In 2008 she participated in the recording of Jonas Kaufmann's *Romantic Arias* with the PKF – Prague Philharmonia under the baton of Marco Armiliato (Decca).

www.janasibera.cz

Petr Nektoranec



Photo: Lukas Kimlicka

Petr Nektoranec has been a soloist with the National Theatre Opera in Prague since September 2021. He has also appeared in leading tenor roles with the Polish National Opera, and at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Staatsoper Stuttgart, Markgräfliches Opernhaus, Teatro Real Madrid and opera houses in Toulouse, Lille, Lyon, Caen and Nancy, among others. Nektoranec is the only Czech singer to have ever been accepted into The Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. His discography includes *French Arias* (Supraphon, 2019), recorded with the Czech Philharmonic, and Janáček's *The Diary of One who Disappeared* (Radioservis, 2025).

www.petrnekoranec.eu

Prague National Theatre Chorus

The Prague National Theatre Chorus can trace its origins back to just after the Second World War. In its early days, the choir was led by Vladivoj Jankovský, who served as chorus master for over 40 years. He was succeeded by Pavel Pokorný, Tvrtko Karlovič, Miriam Němcová and Michael Keprt, with Adolf Melichar currently serving as chorus master. An auditioned choir with a membership that at maximum is close to 70, it has participated in several large-scale productions including *Nabucco*, which has regularly been staged in Prague since 1965, and an acclaimed production of Boito's *Mefistofele*. The choir has made several notable guest appearances, including in Gars am Kamp, Austria; in Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, where it appeared together with Opera Viva; and in Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* in Macerata, Italy. In 2018, the State Opera Chorus and the National Theatre Chorus were joint winners at the Classic Prague Awards for their performance in Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*.

www.narodni-divadlo.cz/en/profile/state-opera-chorus-1608845

Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra



The Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra (PRSO) is at the forefront of Czech music making. It has been led by chief conductor and artistic director Petr Popelka since the 2022/23 season, with Robert Jindra serving as principal guest conductor. The orchestra has worked with a distinguished list of conductors including Omer Meir Wellber, Cornelius Meister, Tomáš Netopil and Jakub Hruša, as well as eminent soloists such as Isabelle Faust, Frank Peter Zimmermann, Steven Isserlis, Lukáš Vondráček and Josef Špaček. The PRSO organises regular concert cycles in Prague at the Rudolfinum's Dvořák Hall and at the Smetana Hall within the city's Municipal House, and is a regular guest at major Czech festivals and a popular guest ensemble at concert venues worldwide. With an extensive discography, the PRSO has received critical acclaim and multiple awards for its recordings of Smetana, Janáček, Dvořák, Schulhoff and Martinů. The orchestra is deeply committed to performing works by contemporary Czech composers, including Miroslav Srnka, Ondřej Adámek and Martin Smolka.

www.prso.czech.radio

Robert Jindra



Robert Jindra studied at the Prague Conservatory. He has conducted operas from Czech and international opera repertoire, as well as special concerts, at the National Theatre in Prague since 2001, where he also served as music director during the 2013/14 season. From 2010 to 2014 he was music director of the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre in Ostrava, and from 2019 to 2021 served as first Kapellmeister of the Aalto Musiktheater and Philharmonie Essen. In 2021 he made his acclaimed debut at the Bayerische Staatsoper festival with *Rusalka*, and from 2021 to 2024 he held the post of chief conductor of the Slovak State Philharmonic (Košice). He has worked as music director of the National Theatre Opera in Prague and principal guest conductor of the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra since 2022. Successful collaborations include *La traviata* at the Slovak National Theatre, *Jenůfa* at Den Norske Opera in Oslo, and *The Cunning Little Vixen* at the Bayerische Staatsoper. He has also appeared at major festivals such as Prague Spring, The Leoš Janáček International Music Festival and Košice Music Spring Festival.

www.robertjindra.com

Considered a lesser-known gem of the operatic repertoire, Smetana's *Dvě vdovy* ('The Two Widows') is set in a Bohemian country estate in which the contrasting personalities of recently widowed cousins Karolína and Anežka are tested by the attentions of gentleman-farmer Ladislav. Smetana's expert theatrical craftsmanship seamlessly blends Czech dances and choruses with beautiful cavatina-like solos. With the humane warmth of its chamber-like comedy and deftly transparent orchestration, Smetana created a style of conversational opera in *The Two Widows* that was much admired by Richard Strauss.

Bedřich
SMETANA
(1824–1884)
Dvě vdovy
(‘The Two Widows’)

Comic opera in two acts (1873–74, rev. 1877)

Libretto by Emanuel František Züngel (1840–1894)

Karolína Adriana Kučerová, Soprano
Anežka Kateřina Kněžíková, Soprano
Ladislav Pavol Breslik, Tenor
Mumlal Adam Plachetka, Bass-baritone
Lidunka Jana Sibera, Soprano
Toník Petr Nekoránek, Tenor

Prague National Theatre Chorus

(Pavel Vaněk, Chorus master)

Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra • Robert Jindra

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

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