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BENDA'S "THE VILLAGE MARKET" AS A PRECURSOR OF "FIDELIO"

*Reflections on a marginal note
by Vladimír Helfert*

Hitherto no particular attention has been paid by European musicologists to the stylistic link between the works of Ludwig van Beethoven and the style of the emigré Czech musician, Jiří Antonín Benda (1722 to 1795), creator of the scenic musical drama. Up to the present time, research has either dealt with the general problematics of this relationship, or has indicated the common theoretical and aesthetical outlook of the two masters.¹ Nevertheless, we believe today that the problem of the mutual stylistic relationship of Benda and Beethoven is one of great importance, and that a comparison of the works of the two composers may throw at least some light on the roots from which the style of Viennese classicism developed. This comparison is of especial importance for explaining some of the typical features of what has been called the personal style of Beethoven.

Beethoven became acquainted with the works of Benda in his youth. He was attracted by Benda's compositions — along with the work of the Mannheim School — already during his Bonn days, mainly because he found much creative inspiration for the "inner dramatic quality" of his works — and later, too, the "appassionata style" which he acquired in the middle ("heroic") period of his development.

I have already dealt in one of my studies² with the aesthetic theoretical basis of the works of Benda and Beethoven, and I intend to proceed with this theme in the present paper, hoping that I shall be success-

¹ Cf. Ludwig Schieder mair, *Der junge Beethoven*, Leipzig, 1925; Vladimír Helfert, *Průkopnický význam české hudby v 18. století* (The Pioneering Significance of Czech Music in the 18th Century) in the Collection *Co daly naše země Evropě a lidstvu* (What Our Lands Gave to Europe and Mankind), Prague, 1939, p. 216—221, ed. Vilém Mathesius; Jan Raček, *Beethoven — růst hrdiny bojovníka* (Beethoven — the Growth of a Heroic Fighter), Prague, 1956; the same, *Beethoven a české země* (Beethoven and the Czech Lands), Prague, 1964; Rudolf Pečman, *Slovanské prvky v díle Ludvíka van Beethovena* (Slavonic Elements in the work of L. van Beethoven), thesis, typescript, Brno 1954; the same, inter alia especially in the study *Ästhetisch-theoretische Ausgangspunkte und stilistische Verwandtschaft im Schaffen von Jiří Benda und Ludwig van Beethoven (Versuch um eine Komparation)*, in: *Journal of Studies of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Brno*, Vol. XVI, 1967, musicological series (H), no. 2, p. 43—53 (on the occasion of the Sixtieth Birthday of Prof. Bohumír Štědroň).

² Cf. Rudolf Pečman, *Ästhetisch-theoretische Ausgangspunkte...* (see n. 1).

ful in developing and documenting some remarkable ideas of Vladimír Helfert, published in his work "The Pioneering Significance of Czech Music in the 18th Century."³ As early as thirty years ago Helfert already pointed out that Benda had anticipated in his own individual way the musical language of Beethoven. In 1939 Vladimír Helfert wrote:

"V singspielu *Der Dorfjahrmarkt* (Jiřího Bendy) se najdou arie, jejichž dramatické napětí je předzvěstí některých arií z *Beethovenova Fidelia*. Skutečně lze tohoto českého emigrantského skladatele a přívržence Voltairova a Rousseauova, jenž v sobě spojoval muzikantskou bezprostřednost s hloubavostí a se schopností samostatně promýšlet estetické a filosofické problémy, považovat v nejednom směru za hudebního předchůdce Beethovenova klasicismu. V Bendově klavírním koncertu g moll z doby kolem 1778, tedy z doby, kdy Beethovenovi bylo 8 let, najdou se tóny hudební kontemplace, které by zcela dobře slušely Beethovenovi z doby kolem r. 1800."⁴

Vladimír Helfert never developed this thought further in any independent exhaustive study, in spite of the fact that he dealt in great detail with the legacy of Benda as composer. Helfert's compendious work on Jiří Benda,⁵ unfortunately left unfinished, failed to comprize a comparison of Benda's compositional style with the musical language of his successors, particularly with those that worked in Vienna, although it could be assumed that Vladimír Helfert would have undoubtedly dealt with this question had it not been for his tragic death.⁶ Helfert was remarkably well qualified to deal with the subject of the present study, as can be seen from his marginal notes in the German edition of Benda's comic opera "*Der Dorfjahrmarkt*", which was published in 1930 under the title "*Der Jahrmarkt*" by the German musicologist T. W. Werner.⁷ Helfert

³ Cf. Vladimír Helfert, *Průkopnický význam . . .* (see n. 1). The English translation by Jessie Kocmanová was published under the title *The Pioneering Significance of Czech Music in the 18th Century* by Rudolf Pečman in the collected volume of the Festival *Musica antiqua* (2nd Brno International Musical Festival), Brno 1967, p. 10–15. Ibid. (p. 16–21), for the German version translated by Pavel Petr: *Die bahnbrecherische Bedeutung der tschechischen Musik im 18. Jahrhundert*.

⁴ "*The Singspiel* (Benda's) *Der Dorfjahrmarkt* contains arias whose dramatic tension anticipates some of the arias of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. This Czech emigré composer, follower of Voltaire and Rousseau, who combined the immediacy of a practising musician with profound thought and the capacity for working out aesthetic and philosophical problems independently, can in more than one direction be considered the musical predecessor of the classicism of Beethoven. In Benda's Piano Concerto in G Minor of about 1778, that is to say of the time when Beethoven was eight years old, there can be found notes of musical contemplation which would be perfectly fitting for the Beethoven of about 1800." (English translation above mentioned, p. 13.)

⁵ Vladimír Helfert wrote an important work on Benda: *Jiří Benda*, Brno, Vol. I, 1929, Vol. II, 1934.

⁶ Helfert died on May 18th, 1945 in Prague, of the consequences of his lengthy detention in German concentration camps.

⁷ Georg Benda, *Der Jahrmarkt*. Eine komische Oper. Herausgegeben v. Th. W. Werner. DDT, Bd. LXIV, Breitkopf u. Härtel, Leipzig, 1930. See the copy in the library of the present Department of Musicology of UJEP (formerly the Seminar for Musical Studies of the Masaryk University), sg. N-795, inv. no. 2205, which contains the pencilled notes of V. Helfert regarding the libretto and the interpretation of the work of Benda's quoted.

studied this work of Benda's also from the aspect of interpretation and libretto.

Let us now make a modest attempt to carry Helfert's idee to its conclusion, without laying any claim to exhaustive treatment in dealing with the problem.

Jiří Benda composed his comic opera "Der Dorfjahrmarkt"⁸ to the text of Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter (part of the text originated with J. J. Engel). It is a known fact that some of the numbers in Gotter's play were set to music also by J. A. Hiller. Thanks to Seyler Company, Gotter's play was presented with music by Benda in Gotha on February 10th, 1775. Theatrical companies such as Schröder's, Grossmann's, etc., spread the work over the whole German countryside. However, in Vienna and Austria, and in fact in all other German-speaking theatres beyond the frontiers of Germany itself, this opera of Benda's remained unknown.

The history of the origin of the opera under discussion is a rather complicated one. As a basis for his libretto Gotter made use of Engel's play "Der dankbare Sohn", although the members of Seyler Company protested.⁹ We can also find in the libretto elements from Goethe ("Jahrmarkt-fest aus Plundersweilen") and from some of the contemporary plays of Weisse. However, Gotter's libretto is not a complicated one; it is distinguished by its feeling for the realistic genre depiction of the aristocratic, military and bourgeois society of the 18th century. A series of typical folk figures play a vivid central part (the Landlord, the mother of Luke, the saucy market-women Lenchen), and the background of the country market is perfectly achieved.¹⁰

⁸ We employ the more accepted title, "Der Dorfjahrmarkt".

⁹ For the history of the work in greater detail see Zdeňka Pílková, *Dramatická tvorba Jiřího Bendy* (The Dramatic Work of J. Benda), Prague, 1960, p. 34-38.

¹⁰ For the sake of information we give the plot of the opera as given on the sleeve of the Supraphon record, no. 1 12 0450 (Stereo); the recording is conducted by Hans v. Benda and performed by: Hans Joachim Rotzsch (*Luke*), Renate Krahrmer (*Bärbchen*), Renate Hoff (*Eva, Lenchen*), Jan Hlavsa (*The Colonel*), Günther Leib (*Fickfack*); the Czech Choir, Prague (Choir Master Josef Veselka), the Prague Chamber Orchestra. Recorded without the spoken text. — The plot is as follows.

The events take place in a village near Leipzig on the day of the market. Crowds of people are walking about among the stalls, including the lord of the manor, the Colonel. He, however, pays no attention to the bustle, having lost himself in the recollection of the happy days of his childhood, which he spent in the village (no. 2). The market woman Lenchen can be heard calling out from her stall in praise of her goods (no. 3). Two plighted lovers — Bärbchen and Luke — stop at her stall; the future bride chooses a wedding hat for her bridegroom (no. 4). Shortly after Bärbchen suddenly encounters the Colonel face to face in the midst of the bustling market. The latter is interested in the charming girl and he enquires in his kindly way as to her future. Bärbchen complains that the parents of Luke and herself cannot come to an agreement about the date of the wedding. She fears that she and Luke may be faced meanwhile with disaster similar to that of two other village lovers, buried by a fall of stone in the quarry on the very day before their wedding (no. 5). She also complains of the Colonel's cousin — the Lieutenant, who is pressing his unwelcome attentions on her. The Colonel advises her not to be afraid and to treat the Lieutenant as she would anyone else who insulted her. Bärbchen soon finds an opportunity, when the Lieutenant again appears and tries to win her with gifts. Bärbchen indignantly refuses and makes fun of him. He is not to be put off and steals a kiss, for which Bärbchen returns

Benda's opera "The Village Market" has been preserved in two versions. The first (one-act) version contained fourteen numbers without the overture. Later Benda divided the work into two acts, increased the number items and of singers and completed the composition of the overture, which has been preserved in three versions, entirely different from each other. All three versions are composed in the form of a "sinfonia" in three parts and musically are not immediately connected with the thematic material of the opera.¹¹ In the vocal numbers we encounter a great variety of expression along with elements of tone-painting, with a complex articulation within the structure of the work. The listener will hear a number of the forms common in the operas and Singspieler of the 18th century, from the simple songs of the market-woman Lenchen with their folk-music atmosphere, to the lullaby, romance, and arietta and down to the "great scene", the duet, tercetta, ensemble and chorus. It is clear from the wealth of alternation of all the various forms that Benda was not concerned here with achieving a simple Singspiel, but with a more elaborate composition, in which he was seeking a more serious expression and form. The dramatic character and the inner tension within the structure also testify to this.

And it is just these more profound features in Benda's expression which form the link that leads to Beethoven. In carrying out any comparison we must keep in mind that we do not have here a case of contemporaries, but of two composers belonging to entirely different generations, and fairly far removed from each other in age (Benda was 48 years older

a sound slap, but he kisses her again to the indignation of Luke who arrives at that moment. Luke is furious, rates the Lieutenant, and proclaims that he never wants to see Bärbchen again as long as he lives (no. 6). The Lieutenant is delighted at the lovers' quarrel and orders Corporal Fickfack to find a clever way of recruiting Luke for the army. In this way he hopes to rid himself of his rival in order to gain Bärbchen more easily. Fickfack boasts that such a task is an easy matter for him (no. 7) and goes to the inn where the unhappy Luke has meanwhile taken refuge. He worms the whole sad tale out of Luke and gives such a turn to the conversation that Luke himself has the idea of joining the army, while Fickfack sings the praises of the soldier's life and glory (no. 8). Although Fickfack apparently seeks to make Luke change his mind, suddenly he shakes hands on it, gives him an advance on pay and the cap of an army recruit. Luke is dazed by the idea of his new life. At the same time, however, he keeps thinking of Bärbchen (no. 9). He toasts his decision with Fickfack and the market woman Lenchen, who has come up to him (no. 10). The news soon spreads through the village and the terrified Bärbchen runs into the inn (no. 11); all at once Luke sobers up and realizes what he has done (no. 12). However, it is too late, and even Bärbchen's pleading, and her father's intervention after she has hurried breathless to tell him the news, are of no avail (no. 13). Fickfack insists that the recruiting sergeants should take Luke into the army at once (no. 14). Luke's mother begs Fickfack in vain for mercy (no. 15). Fickfack's assistants intervene, drive the crowd away and seize Luke, who has meanwhile tried to escape. Bärbchen seeks her last hope at the manor house. And the lord of the manor solves everything like a real *deus ex machine*. He punishes the Lieutenant and Fickfack, cancels their decision to recruit Luke, and along with the parents of Luke and Bärbchen decides on the spot when the wedding is to be — that very day. And so Bärbchen's grateful thanks belong to him (no. 16) as does the concluding tercet of praise (no. 17).

¹¹ Cf. P i l k o v á, op. cit., p. 36—37.

that Beethoven). In this case Benda played the part of the creative artist who prepared the way for a man of genius.

I have stressed in a previous study on Benda and Beethoven¹² that direct parallels cannot be drawn between the musical language of the two masters. However, the expression of Benda frequently contains the germ of what the much younger Beethoven so richly developed. Let us now examine the way in which Benda anticipated the expression of Beethoven's "Fidelio".

By way of introduction we may say that both "The village Market" and "Fidelio" are a type of *Singspiel*, conceived by both of the masters in a quite individual way. Farcical features are subdued in favour of a light-hearted, profoundly human humour. In Beethoven the comic features in fact vanish, even although they remain latently present in the figures of Marzellina and Jaquin and bubble-up in the expansion of the dramatic character of Leonora. It can be said that in "Fidelio" we can justifiably speak only of a *Singspiel* skeleton, an entirely external form of the *Singspiel*, which just provides a framework for the opera, while the theme and action already speak with the tongues of the *Sturm und Drang* generation and of the French Revolutionary opera.

Benda is akin to Beethoven in his character drawing. Where we would expect it least, there appears in Benda a sharply dramatic note which outlines in thickly-laid colour the fundamental traits of personality of the stage characters. Corporal Fickfack, who is in fact the great-grandson of the scurrilous "capitano" of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, loses in Benda his true *Singspiel*, i. e. farcical character, and acquires features which at times have a demonic tinge. Benda in fact here incorporated the original conception of the "capitano", which embodied the protest of the Italian people against the military rule of the Spanish. At the same time he also indirectly anticipated Don Pizarro. Musically Fickfack is most strikingly characterized in aria no. 14, "Was für Gesperre",¹³ which already has something of the tone of the great and dramatically imposing scenes of Don Pizarro. Technically Benda makes here great use of the dynamic of gradual crescendo, which in combination with the lively triolo movement produces a disturbing dramatic effect:



¹² Cf. n. 2.

¹³ DDT LXIV, p. 109.

was für Ge-plär - - re, welch

Teu - fels - zeug, welch

Teu - fels - zeug! blitz

This aria, which is not without a certain critical point aimed against the oppressing classes, is distinguished by great leaps of intervals, characterizing the moral instability of Corporal Fickfack; the plan of modulation is simple, and yet a tension is achieved here which is akin, we might say, to that of Beethoven. I think it is no exaggeration to state that as a type Fickfack is close to Pizarro, since in the light-hearted score of Benda he represents a character full of cunning, hypocritical, coarse in thought and action, of a low moral nature. At random we may compare the above-quoted aria of Fickfack with the aria of Don Pizarro, "Ha! welch ein Augenblick" (Act I, no. 8), which although composed for a different stage context yet in expression and interval structure of the melody provides echoes of Benda's Fickfack, however unconscious these may be.

The striking emphasis which Benda laid on this character of the evil-intentioned corporal can be further documented by the fact that it is precisely the arias of Fickfack which are almost entirely lacking in farcicality, to the advantage of a deeper and more effective dramatic

characterization, which had in fact already forsaken the Singspiel music drama of the Hiller kind. Thus for example the extensive three-part aria of Fickfack, "Anfangs wird das Herzen dir pochen"¹⁴

Allegro

Fickfack

Anfangs wird das Herzen dir po-chen: tik tak tak, tik tak

V. I., II.

Bassi

Cor I

Cor II

Tr. in D

Fickfack

tak, less es pochen, less es pochen, junges Blut, less es

V. I., II.

Bassi

contains a lengthy overture, not otherwise usual in Benda's Singspiel. By means of the little fanfare motives as well as by the tone-painting technique the composer suggests a military background, which musically recalls the scene between Don Pizarro and the guard, as well as the march rhythms in Beethoven's "Fidelio".

We can find a similarity in melody between the aria on the entry of the Colonel, "Hier steh ich vom Gefühl durchdrungen"¹⁵ and that of Florestan in the Second Act of "Fidelio", "Gott, welch Dunkel hier!"¹⁶ The general trend of the two arias is different, and the characters also are of a different nature and appear in entirely opposite situations. The Colonel, "under an ancient tree" recalls "the blissful years of his child-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁶ Piano arrangement by F. Brissler and Hans Rogorsch (Breitkopf u. Härtel, V. A. 2038), p. 119.

hood" and sees only the vanity of age, Florestan in prison reflects on his past life, while a recollection of the angelic love of Leonora flashes through his mind. It is of interest that the immediate motive of recollection (Colonel: "Erinnerungen an meines Lebens ersten Traum"; Florestan: "Süßer Trost in meinem Herzen") arises out of the melodic core, which offers a striking similarity in both composers:

Hier steh ich vom Ge - - fühl durch -
drungen, ge - - grüßt, ge - grüßt seid mir Er - in - - ne - rungen

Süßer Trost in meinem Her - zen, meine Pflicht hab ich ge - - tan,
sü - ßer, sü ßer Trost in meinem Her zen, meine Pflicht, ja, meine Pflicht hab ich getan.

It would of course be wrong if we were to contemplate a literal comparison of the two composers. In spite of similarities, in spite of a comparable philosophical and aesthetic foundation, and in spite of the fact that the two composers are of a Rindrey type,¹⁷ we cannot avoid recognizing on the one hand the qualitatively greater values of the music of Beethoven, and on the other the fact that the two composers are considerably distant from each other in their generation. In fact all our comparisons have a purely generalizing significance and do not so much trace the parallels in the *loci communes* as rather the comparable manner in which the two composers expressed themselves in music, a manner which arises from the fact that they intimately belong to the same type of composer and thinker and share a similar aesthetic outlook.

But let us endeavour to substantiate our thesis by means of a few comparisons.

With the character of Luke, too, who allows himself to be duped by the artful Fickfack, there also appear certain melodious features of a Beethovenesque character. The lyrical treatment of the musical expression, the articulation of the melodic ideas, the function of the accompaniment and the particular expressive atmosphere of, for example, aria no. 9, "Ach, ich liebte sie so zärtlich",¹⁸

Ach, ich lieb - - te sie so zärtlich,

p

¹⁷ Cf. Rudolf Pečman, *Ästhetisch-theoretische Ausgangspunkte ...* (cf. n. 1).

¹⁸ DDT XLIV, p. 81, n., quoted as no. 14 in the record sleeve cited (cf. n. 10).

is already in expression close to the song of Florestan in the Second Act of "Fidelio" (the prison scene).¹⁹ Beethovenesque, too, is the basic key of Luke's aria (E flat Major), while Benda's manner of decorative figuration in the semi-quavers already anticipates the instrumental style of Beethoven.

Still further melodic associations could certainly be found, but we shall draw attention to only a few of them for the sake of illustration. In the motive of Eva



we can already hear the voice of Rocco, who sings humbly of the King's birthday, when all the prisoners were permitted to walk on the village green:



Is not the similarity here more than mere chance?

However, Benda has something in common with Beethoven also as regards his personal approach to what is termed "dramatization", above all in the duets. Let us just recall the inner intensification of the dialogue of Pizarro and Rocco.²⁰ Two entirely different worlds encounter here each other, while the dramatic tension is provided by the conflict in the melody. The one character is a melodic negation of the other, between the two there predominates a logical and dialectical relationship of mutual hostility, although the underling Rocco cannot express it and wraps himself in a veil of humility, in order to conceal his own entirely opposite opinions. This results in a scene which is profoundly effective on the stage, immediately and completely seizing the attention of the audience.

Benda also employs the principle of dialectical tension in the duet of Eva and Fickfack, „Fort mit ihm, Marsch!“,²¹ where the sweet melody of Eva is placed in an effective counterpoint to the ribald leaps of the melody of Fickfack, based on the principle of the "Raketenmotiven" of the Mannheim type. In this new approach to the function of the duet in musical dramatic composition Benda was for his own day novel and entirely original. He was ahead of his time, for he extended the duet — and the ensembles and choruses as well — by further possibilities of dramatic expression. Not even the love duet escapes this "inner dramatization" of Benda's; an example is the duet of Luke and Bärchen "Glaubest du mit Schmeicheleien",²² which in fact takes the place of the all too static Singspiel love duet, and has a similar dramatic significance as the duet of

¹⁹ Piano arrangement, esp. p. 122.

²⁰ „Jetzt, Alter, jetzt hat es Eile!“. Piano arrangement, p. 65, n.

²¹ DDT, p. 114.

²² Ibid., p. 52.

Eva and Fickfack. It is however even more effective, since Luke and Bärbchen as characters are very close to each other, their discord arises from the momentary development of the dramatic situation and not because they are diametrically opposed characters.²³

Thus we see that for his time Jiří Benda was a progressive figure in the theatre. He is not concerned with a mere indication of the characters, but rather with a rendering of the dramatic situation, given by the development of the action on the stage or by the comic nature of the situation. These are already new features, leading towards the opera of early Romanticism, which was also anticipated by Ludwig van Beethoven. It can therefore be said that Jiří Benda is the type of dramatic composer who felt himself to be particularly modern for his own time. Those similar means of expression appearing both with Benda and with Beethoven, demonstrate the similarity of their outlook on the composition of musical drama. It is not without interest that both Benda and Beethoven recognized the vitality of the Singspiel form; each of them of course breathed new life into the form in his own way, a non-traditional way. What connects the two masters is after all their quite unconventional development of this originally not very serious form. The Singspiel was turned here into a form of real art, which marked in fact the birth of the early Romantic German opera. Both Benda and Beethoven contributed in a striking way to the latter's codification.

Translated by Jessie Kocmanová

BENDŮV VESNICKÝ TRH JAKO PŘEDZVĚST FIDELIA

(Zamyšlení nad jednou marginálií Vladimíra Helferta)

Autor navazuje především na své vlastní studie, které publikoval o vztahu Jiřího A. Bendy a L. v. Beethovena, a rozvádí myšlenku prof. dr. Vladimíra Helferta o latentní přítomnosti tzv. beethovenovských prvků v díle J. Bendy, konkrétně v jeho singspielu Vesnický trh (Der Dorfjahrmarkt), který byl proveden 10. 2. 1775 péčí Seylerovy společnosti v Gotě. Benda je Beethovenovi blízký především v charakteristice postav (Fickfack — Pizarro, Lukáš — Florestan aj.). Benda představuje ve své době zjev progresivní především z hlediska ryze jevištního. Nejde mu o pouhou charakteristiku postav, ale o vystižení dramatické situace, dané vývojem jevištního děje, resp. situační komikou. To jsou už rysy nové, které směřují již k opeře raně romantické a které anticipuje ve Fideliovi též L. v. Beethoven. Benda je typ hudebního dramatika, který cítil ve své době moderně. Obdobné výrazové prostředky, vyskytující se jak u Bendy, tak u Beethovena, svědčí také u obdobném názoru na hudebnědramatickou tvorbu. Není bez zajímavosti, že jak Benda, tak Beethoven uznávali životnost formy singspielu; každý z nich ovšem oživil tuto formu po svém, netradičně. Oba mistry spojuje zcela nekonvenční rozvinutí této původně málo závažné formy. Ze singspielu se stal vážný umělecký útvar, který stál vlastně u zrodu raněromantické německé opery. Jak Benda, tak Beethoven výrazně přispěli k její kodifikaci.

²³ A certain parallel can be found, too, in Smetana's „Bartered Bride“, in point of fact in the libretto motive of the lovers' quarrel.