

Two Smetana biographies in English

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RECENZE • BESPRECHUNGEN

TWO SMETANA BIOGRAPHIES IN ENGLISH

Brian Large: *Smetana*. London 1970, Duckworth, 473 pp

John Clapham: *Smetana*. London 1972, Dent (The Master Musician Series), 161 pp.

When in 1924 Ernst Rychnovsky published his German biography of Smetana, he took stock of the present state of Czech research on the founder of the new era of Czech music and summarized the result in a sentence which, unfortunately, still holds good today:

So unglaublich es bei der bekannten Agilität der Tschechen, sich zielbewußt für ihre Größen (auch zweiter Ordnung) einzusetzen, klingen mag — die Tschechen selbst haben bis zum heutigen Tage keine vollständige Biographie, die strengeren wissenschaftlichen Anforderungen entspricht. — E. Rychnovsky: *Smetana* (Stuttgart, 1924), 7. Already at that time Zdeněk Nejedlý had published the first volume of his vast Smetana monography and his smaller two-volume Smetana biography had been announced in the 'Zlatoroh' series. Both works remained unfinished and up to the present day no Czech has been found willing to attempt an overall treatment of one of the most importance figure of Czech cultural life in the last century.

All the more remarkable then is the publikation of two monographs on Smetana in England within such a short space of time. Both John Clapham and Brian Large have for some time taken a systematic interest in Czech music: the former, with his Dvořák biography (London, 1966; Faber & Faber) and an important Smetana study, 'The Smetana-Pivoda Controversy' (*Music & Letters*, III [1971], 353-64); the latter with his doctoral thesis on Martinů and a book, *Bohuslav Martinů*, due to appear in England in the autumn, and a projected study of the history of Czech opera. Both authors are united in their attempt to get to know and understand in its widest ramifications the cultural and political conditions of public life in 19th-century Bohemia by their great absorbtion in the figure of Smetana. Each, however, approaches him from a slightly different point of view. Large draws above all on the extensive Smetana correspondence, on the composer's hitherto unpublished diaries and on the memoirs of Smetana's contemporaries, as well as those of his first wife Kateřina. His whole conception is built upon the analysis of his works and an attempt broadly to relate the music of Smetana to that of his predecessors and contemporaries. Some of Large's hypotheses venture too far (e. g. drawing an analogy between the libretto and crowd scenes in Smetana's *The Brandenburghers in Bohemia* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, pp. 148, 153); occasionally the author acknowledges this himself by formulating his conjectures as questions in parentheses (the baron in Cimarosa's opera *Il matrimonio segreto* as a prototype of Kecal, p. 175). Other analogies, however, give evidence of the writer's broad understanding of the tangled complex of relations in European music and help the English reader, to whom Smetana's music is hitherto not too well known, to 'place' the Czech master and to understand his works better. While acknowledging Smetana's orientation towards Weimar, Bayreuth and the German neo-Romantic movement, Large continually emphasizes those aspects in which Smetana differs from his German models, those elements in his music peculiar to himself and their evolution. He relates Smetana's compositions, documented with a wealth of music examples, organically to events of this life, which appear all the more convincing since they are based on the authentic written records of Smetana himself. The author's figure of the composer grows out of contempo-

rary photographs and portraits: Smetana as a delightful youth moving among Pízeň society, taking a leading place among the families of the rich Göteborg merchants, as a welcome guest of Liszt, living through the deep shock of the deaths of his daughter and his beloved Kateřina, and even in his great love for Betty, which however changes gradually, together with his encroaching illness into the tragedy of the final years of the artist's life. In conclusion Large rounds off his text with ten appendices, notably a detailed table of the 32 Album Leaves (Appendix B), the summary comparison of the five versions of *The Bartered Bride* (C) and the three versions of *The Two Widows* (E), the printing of the couplet for Esmeralda and the principal comedian (D) and the list of works arranged chronologically (G) and by genre (H) including fragmentary and lost works. The synopses of all of Smetana's opera will no doubt be useful for the English reader; the Czech reader, however, will be disturbed by the number of printing errors in the Czech texts ('Jak pramín, nezka, je hodna bohátá') and Czech names, which will cause foreigners considerable difficulty in locating some of the places and people mentioned (Kopidlno = Kopidlno; Rodniče = Roudnice; A. Pozděny = Pozděna; Liduše = Ludiše; J. B. Knott = Kott). One is also struck by some of the inaccuracies in Large's account of Czech legends and historical events: 'Říp is also believed to have been ... the legendary home of Přemysl, who is said to have been ploughing two kilometres below the summit when he received the summons from Libuše', p. 265 (according to legend, Říp is associated only with Čech, the common ancestor of the Czechs; Přemysl's Stadice is about 40 miles – 60 km away from Říp and has never been linked with Říp before); 'Lipany, the field where Czechs slaughtered Czechs in civil war during the battle of Bilá Hora (1620)', p. 265 – (the battle of Lipany took place in 1434, at the time of the Hussite Wars).

John Clapham's much slimmer book is supported by a sound historical background and is based on a wide knowledge of Czech literature on Smetana, which the author painstakingly cites. Clapham has also had to take into account the function of the edition in which his book appears, the 'Master Musician Series' (general editor: Sir Jack Westrup), which seeks to offer the general musical public biographies of important figures in the history of music (among others in the series there are volumes on Bach, Elgar, Mahler, Purcell, Vaughan Williams, of the Czechs apart from Smetana also Dvořák). With a view to this wider readership, the authors has opened his work with a chapter summarizing on eight pages – this in a very skeletal form – the history of Czech music, limited basically to a mention of the most important events of Czech history from the oldest times and a list of important Czech composers. Smetana's biography, to which with a view to this wider readership, the author has opened his work with a chapter and political history of 19th-century Bohemia. In compressed form the author covers Smetana's life in some detail, though devotes substantially less space to the music than Large. This is at once evident from a cursory examination of the number of music examples in each book, or from reading the short chapters on chamber music or the four pages devoted to Smetana's songs and vocal music. Clapham's compressed, rather more sober evaluation places the composer, honourably, among the greatest creative musicians, a fact which he underlines with Liszt's striking remark: 'He was indeed a genius.' In places the work suffers from a certain lack of proportion; side by side, for instance, with very brief passages on the music the author launches into detailed historical excursions (on the struggle for the crown and on Norway's conversion to Christianity at the end of the 10th century) or into special problems (e. g. the genesis of the Vltava motif – where admittedly he reveals a new aspect). The book is completed by appendices standard to the series, giving an interesting and useful calendar of the key events of Smetana's life juxtaposed against basic dates of music history of the 19th century, a short list of works and brief facts about people mentioned in the text. His easy familiarity with folk music research, careful translations and accurate presentation of the Czech texts are appealing traits of Clapham's work. -an

MUSIKALISCHES TAFELKONFEKT

Josef Ulsamer – Klaus Stahmer: *Musikalisches Tafelkonfekt*. Stürtz-Verlag Würzburg 1973, 95 Seiten + Schallplatte „Musikalisches Tafelkonfekt“ (ST, 45), Calig-Verlag München.

Das mit Notenbeispielen und prachtvollen ikonographischen Materialien ausgestattete Buch zweier Autoren, von denen der erste als Leiter des Ulsamer-Collegiums „kleine