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WAGNERISM IN THE CZECH LANDS AROUND 1900

When Czech composers have been criticized for Wagnerian traits, the reason has usually been that their music didn't seem to be very Czech. The term Wagnerism did not have an inherently negative context, but it could be viewed as the opposite of Czechness. Although the era of the Wagnerian struggles of the 1870's had apparently lost meaning by 1900, prominent composers still collided with a more or less clearly defined boundary imposed upon them by the professional critic and the public.

Richard Batka used the “Deutschböhme” personality of Gustav Mahler as a model, and honored his musicianship as a Czech-German synthesis in the Dvořák spirit. From this perspective, Fibich does not seem inherently or superficially “Czech” but simply “Bohemian.” A similar result arose from the historical confrontation of the five trends of modern national evolution in Bohemia categorized by Jiří Kořalka: Austrianism, greater Germanism, Slovanism, Bohemianism, and Czechness.¹ We are indebted to the triumph over these trends for the emergence of the Czech (or Czechoslovak) state. The ethnic-linguistic concept of “Czech-speaking Czechs” more or less corresponds to that state's principal criteria of nationalism – the political boundary of the state itself would not correspond to its ethnic boundary.² Although many Czech-speaking citizens frequently spoke German as well, the Czech language became the blueprint and clear identification of Czechs. But this concept supported the emergence of chauvanism and bourgeois patriotism, as well as efforts to establish Czech music on the basis folk song. An extreme reaction to greater Germanism arose alongside Czechness. The territorial concept of Bohemianism, supported by the aristocracy, was originally based on a bilingual urban population and citizens not limited by ethnicity. These were primarily Jews who played a distinctive part in forming “modern Czechness” from the turn of the 19th century, which resulted in transcending nationalistic

¹ Kořalka, J. *Češi v habsburské říši a v Evropě 1815–1914*. Praha; Argo, 1996.

² Brouček, S. “Národnápisná výstava československá a česká společnost,” in: *Mýtus českého národa aneb Národnápisná výstava československá 1895*, ed. Jan Pargač, compiled by Jindřich Mařan. Praha: Littera Bohemica, 1966, pp. 7–30; this quotation is taken from p. 7.

exclusivity and international cooperation. Accepting the designation of “Bohemian” was also an excellent way to combat the concept of “stateless people” (*geschichtsloses Volk*). Politically motivated Bohemianism eventually found an equivalent counterbalance to the concept of Czechs as Germans speaking a Slavic tongue in the concept “German-speaking Bohemians” for German citizens (Kořalka 1996, pp. 66, 57. 45).

One need not attempt to abstract from these matters a crystalline, pure representation of the Czech composer, without regard to whether some requirement is in opposition to another. Fulfilling contradictory requirements would not be possible in reality. However, every departure [from Czechness] gave the critic an opportunity to point out an unhappy eccentricity.

1. Czech origin, name, birthplace.

2. working in a Czech sphere or giving value to a Czech setting in his creative work.

3. mastering the Czech language and writing on Czech texts – primarily on works originally in Czech, even when the significance of Czech translations cannot be undervalued.

4. using a Czech theme from one of two principal groups – a synthesis of national history, a village theme – which could, however, conflict with the position of the critic, so that librettist and composer are caught in a deadly embrace.³

5. It is received in Czech surroundings, interpreted by Czechs, and accepted as “our own.” To gain acceptance, the composer must regularly succeed in international venues as well. Vienna and later Berlin – which was particularly sceptical about Czechs, were visualized as imaginary gates to the world.⁴ But operatic

³ See the conclusion of an anonymous article from the journal *Dalibor*: “of course, for the time being there is merely a slogan: away with lederhosen, which means away from popular subjects of the nature like which have been brought to us, beginning with Smetana’s *Prodaná Něžvesta*. Considering that the [was of the people] are the foundation of Czech music, we cannot for a moment forget that if our music is going to remain Czech. If we take a stand against [the ways of the people], we repudiate the very ground of Czech music, the ground from which it arose, upon which it lives, from which its distinctive characteristics evolved, and on which it must flourish in the future. If we take Czech music away from its foundation, it loses its colors, its personality; we would have music which would simply be lost among other music.” *Dalibor*, 4 February 1905, r. 27, č. 10–12, p. 90.

⁴ In the year of Fibich’s death, when Hanslick’s influence had markedly weakened, even the Viennese critics were irritated by the apathy of musical establishments toward Fibich (see *Dalibor*, 3 November 1900, r. 22, no. 41, p. 328.) An unknown but definitely Czech author closed his “Dopis z Lipska” with this uncritical reflection: “Not a trace of anything about Fibich, Bendl, Foerster, and others. If they knew about for example the oeuvre of Fibich, which at first had a promising future, they surely would have presented it; after all, they [only have] empty successes, and the guarantee of Fibich’s music provides sensational success. Let us remind the Germans that there is a Canaan of symphonic treasures in Bohemia. In addition to the sacred works of Czech masters, there is an El Dorado there of new musical ideas at a time when French production has stopped, and Russian and English production moves slowly and silently. *Dalibor*, 28 July 1900, r. 22, č. 26–27, p. 215.

works rarely entered the fundametal repertory of the international circuit – “the glorious collection.”⁵

6. The music is recognized as Czech (it sounds Czech); the composer’s own style can attain the quality of the national style.

Some writers stay at an overly conventional level when defining “Czechness,” the appearance of a Czech trait in a musical work. Their reflections end with adjectives such as songlike, restrained, gentle, energetic, healthy (see statements by Zikmund Kolečovský, Josef Leopold Zvonař). Along with folk songs, the public was enthusiastically responsive to set scenes with dance and chorus, and lyrical scenes.⁶ During the 1870s, Max Konopásek made realistic comments about the idealized Ruthenian kolomyjka which are almost comic. Michael Beckerman enumerated specific musical traits as a direct result of his search for Czechness in music: accenting the first beat, syncopation, and fluctuation between major and minor tonalities. The composer can provide important information when providing an explicit declaration about Czech music.⁷

A passing glance at the turn of the century through the musical journal *Dalibor* can clearly reveal the playing field on which the Czech artist could, or rather had to be, active. The Czechs were always challenged to collaborate: “Let us perform only Czech compositions; foreign compositions only as exceptions.” (*Dalibor*, 9 November 1901, r. 23, č. 45, p. 356.) Imports were scrupulously observed: “We hear that the management of the National Theater has ordered all of its new wind, wooden, and brass instruments from Germany. That is really not necessary now.” (*Dalibor*, 6 December 1902, r. 24, č. 48, p. 379.) Satisfaction with the composer’s work, as well as the self-confidence that led to ineffective comparisons of Fibich

⁵ A short essay about Czech music by Oskar Bie presents an extremely concentrated, stereotypical presentation of the majesty of folk song and dance, based on a German variant of the demands of such a narrow profile which almost sterilely resists the effort to widen and finally – it seems – to celebrate triumph. He wrote about *Prodaná Něžesta* as follows: “Hier ist nichts von einem falschen Pathos, das sich an der neudeutschen Schule ansteckt, hier ist Natürlichkeit, Schlichtheit, Stilreinheit und sogar eine grosse Kunst, aus dem Nationalen des Opernhafte zu bilden ...” (Bie, O. *Die Oper*, S. Fischer Verlag, Berlin 1923, p. 358.) He wrote a devastating judgement on the operas of Smetana’s followers; the last sentence may have served as a caution to nationalistic composers: “In Dvoraks und Fibichs schwärmerischen, undramatischen Opern gewinnt das allgemeine europäische Idiom die Oberhand. Dvoraks voramerikanische Opern haben nich etwas nationales Gewissen. Fibich irrte lange im Melodram umher und schrieb eine überzeigte Pelops-Trilogie in dieser Gattung. Seine Hedy (nach Byron), eine Mischung von Tristan, Walküre und französischer Räuberromantik, trieft von jener Emphase und Weichlichkeit, die die tschechische Violine sich so leicht angewöhnt. Sein ‘Fall Arkonas’, der Kampf der Heiden und Christen um unser Rügen ist musikalisch reiner und edler, aber bleich wie der Mond, geborgtes Licht. Von Tschechentum ist darin nur die Fähigkeit der Assimilation zu spüren. Der Ausländische Stoff verauslandet die Musik erst recht.” (Ibid., pp. 360–361).

⁶ Ottlová, M. and M. Pospíšil: “K otázce českosti v hudbě 19. století,” *Opus Musicum*, 1979, r. 11, č. 4, pp. 101–109.

⁷ Beckerman, M. “In search of Czechness in music,” in *19th Century Music*, Summer 1986, Vol. X [no.] 1, pp. 61–73.

with Wagner; Novák and Suk with Mahler; Debussy and Hába with Schönberg,⁸ compelled the editors of *Dalibor* to react polemically when Josef Herold, Josef Hlávka, Ferdinand z Lobkovic, Ladislav Rieger and F. A. Šubert solicited funds for producing *Prodaná nevěsta* at the Paris exhibition: “We believe that the performance would be a complete success if our French friends would present *Prodaná nevěsta* because its composer is a genius, but not merely to serve the Czech cause.” Such reasoning also appears in these lines: “It also happened in Dresden, where national chauvinism had reached the height of excess. The well-known director Ernst von Schuch, to whom a Czech note is practically an affront – ... could not withstand the powerful current, and presented *Prodaná nevěsta* on the stage of the court opera.” (*Dalibor*, 14 April 1900, r. 22, č. 17–18, p. 141.) Such enthusiasm went hand in hand with the Nietzschean concept of supremacy, with isolationism, as well as patronizing, negative comments from the German side: “The Leipzig *Signal* drools over everything which is Czech, naturally, that is not enough to save Dvořák’s *Čert a Káča* ... The *Signal*’s failure is the best review and recommendation for our cause. After all, we hear from our German confrères that it signifies nothing but miserable envy.” (*Dalibor*, 20 January 1900, r. 22, č. 2, p. 15.) It would have been difficult for a Czech artist to succeed in an international venue without German support. Efforts to attain a ‘pure’ Czech repertory and interpreters met with indifference from the German side: “Since the Czechs in Prague have closed minds, it is simply impossible to ask that German artists could perform among them at all.” (*Dalibor*, 14 June 1902, r. 24, č. 25, p. 202.) Richard Batka stated the problem more publically: “Your respected paper takes the correct stance on the national position, and also turns its eyes to foreign lands with a broad perspective. It would earn merit if, from time to time, its countrymen would indicate that is not merely our fault that Czech music attains international repute slowly, step by step.” (*Dalibor*, 12 July 1902, r. 24, č. 28, p. 221.)⁹ Batka’s article received favorable comments from an author concealing his name with the initials “j.b.” – probably J. Boleška, who provided his own summary elsewhere: “...and the Prague Germans are attending the Czech theater and making as much noise there as our countrymen do who are going to the German theater. Could this activity be the basis of some sort of mutual cooperation in government?” (*Dalibor*, 7 June 1902, r. 24, č. 24, p. 189.) Boleška’s suicide seemed to be a symbolic indication of the fate such national openness and impartiality would have.

The influence of Italian and French music was not reflected by Czech composers with as much interest and with such controversy as Wagner’s works received. Wagnerism had a negative as well as a positive connotation. The term Wagnerism was inherently associated with poorly defined content as well as synonym sub-

⁸ Lébl, V., Ludvová, J. “Nová doba ‘1860–1938,’” in: Jaromír Černý, Jan Kouba, Jiří Sehnal, Zdeňka Pilková, Petr Vít, Vladimír Lébl, and Jitka Ludvová, ed. *Hudba v českých dějinách*, Praha: Horizont, 1983; this quotation is taken from p. 373.

⁹ Michael Komma later acknowledged that “Dem Werk Smetanas und Dvořáks hatten die Deutschen in Böhmen und Mähren nichts Gleichwertiges entgegenzusetzen.” Komma, K. M. *Das böhmische Musikantentum*, Kassel: Johann Philipp Hinrichthal-Verlag, 1960, p. 174.

stitution. Otakar Hostinský described Wagnerism in his article “Wagnerianismus a česká národní opera” (*Hudební listy*, 1870) with the catchword „národní hudba na pokročilém stanovisku moderního umění“ (national music in a progressive state of modern art) (Procházka 1871, p. 69).¹⁰ Vladimír Helfert took pains with terminological purity as he explained the difference “between Wagner’s principles and Wagner’s music” using Hostinský’s concepts. He linked Wagnerism with resistance to Italian and Meyerbeer’s operas, the work of Smetana, with Wagner’s writings on reform, but not with his music: “... if opera were drama, it would not consist of a folksong concert and similar events.”¹¹ However, Helfert’s effort to clarify concepts during the era of the fight against Dvořák did not correspond to the conditions in which Fibich lived. By the end of the century, the sharp boundary between Smetanian polemics and the Italian and German models for Czech national opera dissolved, and these positions approached each other so closely that they almost merged. Hynek Palla wrote about Verdi’s *Otello*: “*Otello* appeared as a mighty conjurer under whose power the ghost of Wagnerism substantially lost its terror, the more so since it was already such an unsafe national trait in musical artistry.”¹²

Coming to terms with Wagner was not easy for Czechs, even though his music had found very fertile soil in Czech lands. Along with the rise of the national music of Russia, Wagnerism forms a great chapter in the history of Italian opera and French music of the nineteenth century. Knowledge of Wagner’s operas was necessary and unavoidable for European composers. Dvořák and Karel Bendl as well as Fibich attended the German theater in Prague. While pursuing an analysis of *Tristan and Isolde* in 1895, Janáček wrote that “... every Czech musician must know Wagner’s works ...” even though he had doubts of the Czechness of Wagnerism, which could consist of eccentric reduction of open-ended movements and periods (Janáček 2003, p. 61).¹³ It is evident even at the beginning of the Wagnerian polemics that “to designate certain sections as Wagnerian, it is sufficient to identify a rich fabric of orchestral voices, or unfolding interludes and crescendi,” abundant harmony and sudden modulation (Ottlová, Pospíšil 1979, p. 102). As a compositional approach concealed under the concept of Wagnerism, can explain the close of K. Hoffmeister’s analysis of the opera *Babička* by A. V. Horák: “Only to add that ... as far as the composition of the work is concerned, it is written in a style which is primarily declamatory along with orchestra motives and melodies, which attempts to express the situation, the heroine’s character, and even the behavior of the others – one could suspect that Mr. Horák was

¹⁰ [Procházka, L.] “Wagneriana,” *Hudební listy*, 26 April 1871, r. 2, č. 9, pp. 69–73.

¹¹ Helfert, V. “Smetanismus a Wagnerianismus,” in *Smetana*, 17 March 1911, r. 1, č. 11, pp. 167–173; 7 April 1911, r. 1, č. 12–13, pp. 188–197.

¹² Palla, H. “Verdi-uv *Otello*,” *Dalibor*, 10 March 1888, r. 10, č. 11–12, pp. 81–82, p. 81.

¹³ Janáček, L. *Literární dílo*, ed. Theodora Straková and Eva Drlíková, Řada 1 / Svazek 1–1, Editio Janáček, Brno 2003, p. 61.

adhering to the principle of his teacher, Master Fibich.”¹⁴ From an anonymous review of F. V. Krejčí’s book *Bedřich Smetana*, one can well infer the effect of the divided opinion with which B. Smetana had to struggle – the adoration of *Prodaná nevěsta* and the condemnation of *Dalibor*. Krejčí announced that the best Smetana operas were *Prodaná nevěsta*, *Hubička*, *Tajemství* and *Libuše*, taking pains with this great work to demonstrate that “one cannot speak of Wagnerism with respect to *Libuše*;” “this is not a tiresome work with unnecessary slush, inadequate, boring melodic flourishes, and shapeless, soft vagueness,…” (*Česká mysl*, 1 July 1900, r. 1 č. 4, p. 289). A different responsive stance toward so-called Wagnerism emerged in the Czech lands at the end of the nineteenth century – an unresolved, naïve collection of poorly organized opinions gleaned from Smetana, Fibich, and Dvořák. Vladimír Karbusický categorized these diverse ideas in six concepts of increasing intensity:

1. Wagner as a danger to national music; attacking Wagner’s works after hearing them (František Ladislav Rieger, Pivoda).

2. Evaluating Wagner’s works as discourse, and thus approaching him as a master of dramatic authenticity and a model for national music, primarily through selective listening (O. Hostinský).

3. Critical acceptance of Wagner, principally with respect to listening for form and structure (Smetana).

4. Wagner as a reactionary mystic, while recognizing an unambiguous superiority of Smetana over Wagner; negative listening with “selective emphasis” (František V. Krejčí).

5. Wagner as the guide to new paths, the revolutionary Romantic, the mythologized Wagner who was unfurled in German popular literature during the first half of the twentieth century, and influenced Marxist-Leninist hermeneutics; selective listening with pragmatic objectives (Zdeněk Nejedlý, Jaroslav Jiránek).

6. Hearing something idealistic and transcendental in Wagner’s music, particularly in *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*, free from nationalistic issues, for the sake of complete mastery of the work of art (Julius Zeyer).

The inconsistency of these concepts with the reality of the music itself is, for example, better explained by Janáček’s attitude toward Wagner’s *Sprechmotivik* then by the unstable, stressed Wagnerian tendencies in Fibich’s *Hippodamie*.¹⁵ The double diffraction of the “cultivation of a Wagnerian canon” led to a vaguely defined boundary between creative inspiration and forgery, consisting of “in a mere resemblance of superficial aspects.” For every Czech composer, that enduring, difficult-to-define Czechness continually receded from the artistic bankruptcy which threatened post-Wagnerian opera at the turn of the century: “Here

¹⁴ Hoffmeister, K. “Babička,” *Dalibor*, 3 March 1900, r. 22, č. 9, pp. 69–70; 17 March 1900, r. 22, č. 11–12, pp. 89–90; this quotation is taken from p. 70.

¹⁵ Karbusický, V. “Zum ‘Wagnerismus’ in der tschechischen Musikkultur,” in: *Musik des Ostens* 11 (hrsg. Von Hubert Unverricht), Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1989, pp. 241–250.

in Bohemia, Wagnerism is well understood by our composers; they accept the undeniably correct opinions of the Master of Bayreuth, but do not forget their origin.”¹⁶

The inclination toward Wagner and the “infection” of the Wagnerian model of other schemas may have grouped Czech composers with composers such as Felix Draeseke, Engelbert Humperdinck, Wilhelm Kienzl, and Karl Goldmark – already classified, according to Artur Seidl, into the group “between Schumann and Wagner,” “the Wagner school,” or as “pseudo-Wagnerites,” thirsting for experiment and fashion. (*Dalibor*, 7 May 1902, r. 24, č. 24, p. 188) Fibich was also able to equal what was considered to be Meyerbeer’s achievement: “That would be the worst possible stance the eyes of Wagnerians.”¹⁷ It is entirely plausible that A. Dvořák had an interest in Meyerbeerism with a Wagnerian slant.¹⁸ By the end of the century, Wagnerism had become widespread and had lost its sharp definition. The principal compositional works to the 1890s did not bear this designation. Despite their striking stylistic metamorphoses, they were merely described in reformulated language with the use of adjectives with reversed meaning, as vaguely as possible. This uncertain silence satisfied those who had not changed their opinions, as well as those who did not welcome the rehabilitation of Wagnerism or reopening problems from the 1870’s (see, for example, F. Pivodá). In particular, when O. Hostinský’s preconceived concepts of R. Wagner unilaterally stressed the declamation of the Czech word and support of opera in spoken dramaturgy, Pivoda’s opinions were understood to be conservative foolishness. His justifiable plea for Italian and French opera was changed to a superficial explanation about imitating national folk songs.

¹⁶ Knittl, K. “Bouře,” *Dalibor*, 9 March 1895, r. 17, č. 13, p. 95. Knittl pointed out the negative statements of those who were “more papal than the pope himself,” at the exaggerated success of Humperdinck’s opera [*Perníková chaloupka – Hänsel und Gretel?*] and “the cult of Italian verismo,” that were reactions to “the work of the pure-blooded Wagnerians of jaded pathos, without economy of artistic means, replete with extremely gaudy orchestral colors, supported with angular harmony and melody.” *Ibid.* Fibich became the great hope of the Czech milieu, because – along with the internationally recognized symphony of A. Dvořák – his operas could find a place in the foreign repertory. See, for example the list of recommendations in *Deutsches Volkblatt* suggesting that Germans should present his opera *Bouře*. *Dalibor*, 16 March 1895, r. 17, č. 14–15, p. 106.

¹⁷ Pospíšil, M. “Nejedlého kritika Dvořáka – operního skladatele,” *Opus musicum* 2000, r. 32, č. 6, pp. 13–20; this quotation is taken from p. 15.

¹⁸ Černý, M. K. “Richard Wagners ‘Erbe’ in der tschechischen Musik nach Bedřich Smetana, in: *Colloquium Richard Wagner – Nationalkulturen – Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Brno: Petr Macek, 1995; Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 1996, pp. 102–108. Vysloužil, J. “Dvořák and Wagner, in: *Lohengrin, Programmest II* (Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele 1989, hrsg. Von Wolfgang Wagner, Matthias Theodor Vogt, Peter Emmerich, Barbara Christ), pp. 48–61.

RESUMÉ

Recepce teoretického i hudebně dramatického díla Richarda Wagnera probíhala v českých zemích intenzivně a bez přerušení od padesátých let do konce „dlouhého“ 19. století, a i když se zájem hudební vědy soustředil zejména na smetanovské boje sedmdesátých let, nepřestalo téma „Wagner“ dráždit ani hudební provoz kolem roku 1900. Skrze kritiky a polemiky hudebního časopisu Dalibor je nastíněna situace fin de siècle, která nejasně a přitom nekompromisně hodnotila skladby z hlediska tzv. českosti a wagnerianismu a která zasáhla zejména tvorbu Antonína Dvořáka a Zdeňka Fibicha.