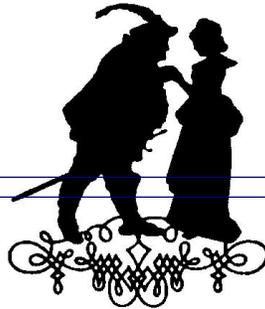


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## Boston Midsummer Opera's *The Bartered Bride* In the Spirit of Mozart

Sitting in Boston University's Tsai Performance Center on the evening of July 23, 2014, hearing the dashing "Mozartian" overture, one could easily have expected that a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* would soon follow. But no, the ensuing opera was Bedřich Smetana's ever-tuneful Czech masterpiece *The Bartered Bride*, and the opening flurry of *vivacissimo* sixteenth notes in the strings captured instantly the irresistible flare of Boston Midsummer Opera's presentation. From the very first notes of the whirling theme, music director and conductor Susan Davenny Wyner, leading a reduced twenty-one-piece ensemble, led us to expect exactly what we got – a captivating and idiomatic performance full of zest and energy.

With the curtain up, the sparse but colorful set by Stephen Dobay and the vivid period costumes by Elisabetta Polito set the scene. Two clusters of brightly hued miniature cottages strung at either side of the stage indicated the Bohemian pastoral setting. A

single spire silhouetted in the back captured the feel of Prague itself, "the city of a thousand spires," once one of the most beautiful capitols of Europe, with its famous Belvedere, the Powdered Towers, the Palaces, the Church of St. Nicholas, and high above, the majestic Cathedral of St. Vitus. Artfully and simply, the set instantly caught the essence of Smetana's Bohemia.



The Set and Cast of Midsummer Opera's *The Bartered Bride* Photo: Chris McKenzie

Epitomizing the spirit of this Czech national opera, the opening chorus celebrated the joy of life and a bright new day with brio. One was reminded that this opera was the first music to be heard on the free radio after Prague's liberation from the Nazi occupation. Listening to the spirited ensemble, one couldn't help but be swept up into this always-uplifting piece. Throughout the night, with no surtitles to help, both chorus and soloists for the most part projected the text clearly in a new English translation by American poet J. D. McClatchy. The frequent phrase repetition helped, as did the sensitive conducting, enabling the heavy Czech accents to come through despite the English translation.

One was reminded too why the label "the Czech Mozart" had held for Smetana ever since another Bohemian, Gustav Mahler, who adored Smetana's music, had conducted the Met's premiere in 1909. Admirably, the Boston Midsummer Opera production played to the more semi-serious pastoral aspects of the work, à la *The Marriage of Figaro* rather than to the more boisterous *opera buffa* aspects of, for example, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. The central characters in this episode from country life are a young woman, Mařenka (a soprano), and a young man, Jeník (a tenor), who want to marry. Mařenka's parents, however, have other plans for her – a totally unsuitable (but rich) alternative match, Jeník's half brother, Vašek (another tenor). In this production, the three were an especially humanized trio.

Like Susanna and Figaro, Mařenka and Jeník spend much of the opera battling those elements interfering with their plans to marry. From the outset, with the duet of steadfastness that becomes a central motive in the opera, the attractive soprano Nicole Percifield artfully captured the subtleties of her character with expressive and nuanced phrasing; the warm voice of tenor Eric Barry was a perfect complement. As for Vašek, the stammering, tongue-tied would-be suitor, tenor Ethan Bremner reminded me of Jon Vickers at the Met in its 1978 production. Like Vickers, he did not overplay the *buffa* aspects of this role, but brought a Grimes-like poignancy and vulnerability to this naïve misfit. His subtle integration of the stammer into his critical duet with Mařenka skillfully caught the sadness of his predicament.



Nicole Percifield as Mařenka and Eric Barry as Jeník  
Photo: Chris McKenzie

Indeed, some of the most successful elements of the opera (apart from its sheer tunefulness) are the vivid characterizations; in many ways the bumbling marriage-broker Kecal is the best of them all. This was especially so with stentorian bass Jason Budd who took this part. Just as his Falstaff stole the show in the previous year's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, so did his larger than life Kecal, who was not just buffo bluster, but very much in the vein of another monumental bass in the 1978 Met production, Martti Talvela, a ponderous and all-business marriage broker. Many in Boston will recall Sarah Caldwell's 1973 English language production in which the two Czech performers playing Kecal and Jeník lapsed into their native tongue for the pivotal duet in which Jeník tricks Kecal into a contract that will get him both the girl he loves and a large sum of money. No need for that here; the vivid scene was yet another gem of the evening, thanks in large part to the engaging Mr. Budd.

Some may also recall that the Opera Company of Boston production was, for all its entertainment, a rather over-stuffed affair, with among other things an enormously expanded circus in Act III (and other additions such as a preface including a film review of Czechoslovakia's recent unhappy history.) No such clutter here, proving once again that less is usually more. Students from the Central Mass Dance Academy handled the circus acrobatics and other antics nicely, and the various ethnic dances, if not ringing with authenticity, were at least endearingly human. All this played well to this ensemble-centered opera, whose entire cast indeed helped maintain the integrity of a work that is not only an appealing confection of good tunes, but, in the words of Czech scholar John Tyrrell, "a penetrating psychological study."

Towards the end of his life, as most people know, Smetana laid the foundation stone of the Prague National Theatre and pronounced the words "in Music is the life of the Czechs." The delightful midsummer production in



The Prague National Theatre

Boston of this sparking, slightly sentimental but deeply felt opera, happily reminds us that Smetana left a work not just for his native land, but also for all of us. He really did pick up where Mozart left off, whose *Figaro* had taken Prague by storm years earlier. Thanks to Boston Midsummer Opera for reminding us and recapturing the spirit of both.



*By the grace of God and with His help, I shall one day be a Liszt in technique and a Mozart in composition.*

~ Bedřich Smetana