

Class 9: Local Color

A. Czeching In

1. Class title 1 (the circus at Garsington)
2. Section title A (posters and book cover)

The Bartered Bride was written by **Bedrich Smetana** (1824–84) in 1864. It was a relatively early example of the wave of **nationalism** that swept through European arts in the later part of the century. Music had too long been dominated by composers from Germany, Italy, and France. Weren't Slavs and Russians, Hungarians and Finns allowed a place at the table? And if they wrote, should it not be their own music, rather than an imitation of something farther West? Indeed yes! So I want to spend the first part of this class discussing what is meant by **local color**, in music or on the opera stage. Let's start with a piece of orchestral music from the opera; it is heard as the curtain goes up. What is local about it?

3. Audio sample, with landscape

What did you hear? It is clearly folk music, isn't it? You get a rhythmic accompaniment over a drone bass, and then a simple tune. Folk dance is one of the most obvious way of giving music a local color; Smetana's cycle of tone poems *Ma Vlast* (My Country) is full of them, and there are at least four dance numbers in *The Bartered Bride*, let alone the use of dance rhythm under many of the vocal items.

4. *Bartered Bride* CD cover (soundtrack of film)

Actually, the music you just heard comes at the end of a prelude almost two minutes long. It begins with a hint of dance, but then shifts to orchestral scene painting. You will hear the river and bird song, you can sense the landscape, you feel that this is a special day. One of the three productions I have is a Czech film from 1982. I won't be showing much of it, but the camera can do things a stage director cannot, and as this takes us from the opera house in Prague and along the Moldau to a village fair, I think you will find more examples of local color than you can count.

5. *The Bartered Bride* film, opening

The couple you saw at the end are the young lovers, **Jenik** and **Marjenka**; I'll get onto their story in a moment. But first, two other treatments of that opening. The video I shall mostly be showing today is a stage production from Vienna, sung in German. The director **Otto Schenk** was one of the great exponents of old-school naturalism. He can't zoom in like the film can, but aims instead to establish a rural community waking up on a feast day. Even the dancing, when it comes, seems to involve the group naturalistically, rather than a troupe of trained dancers in matching costumes.

6. *Die verkaufte Braut*, opening

7. Garsington Opera

But does this mean you always have to go back to Slovakia in the 1860s? Not necessarily. Here is the same scene in a recent English production at **Garsington Opera** in Oxfordshire. The director, Paul Curran, sets it in an English village in the mid-1950s. There is to be some kind of dance, presided over by the Curate. Curran sets this up in silence, before the overture, but I'll cut to just before the music begins. The Curate, clearly a classical-music nut, has just bought it on LP. Every detail is right, from the way he blows the dust off to the design on the LP cover itself. I'll have to stop before the overture ends, but I'll give you enough to get the idea. There is not a hint of Czech folklore, yet for me it works perfectly. If it works for you, tell me why.

8. *The Bartered Bride* (Garsington), opening and most of overture

9. Natalya Romaniw and Brenden Gunnell as Marjenka and Jenik

What did you think? For me, the great insight was that you only have to take the audience outside their everyday place and time, and establish a **coherent yet vibrant community**. I don't think I have ever seen such attention paid to the character of every individual in the chorus, each expanding on the period and milieu. The characters whom you may briefly have seen arguing are of course Marjenka and Jenik. Arguing or not, they do love each other, as we will see in the arias and duet that follow the opening chorus. For this, however, and all the rest of my clips, I will return to the Vienna production with the Czech-born soprano **Lucia Popp**—well into her prime, but still magnificent—as Marie (as she is called in German) and **Siegfried Jerusalem** as Hans/Jenik. I am only playing a couple of snatches of the long scene, because I am not so much telling the story as zeroing in on another aspect of local color—but the one is rather harder to identify. All the same, let me ask you if you hear anything folklike in this.

10. *Die verkaufte Braut*, Marie's first aria (opening)

Any ideas? Two things strike me. One is the relatively simple phrases in which this is constructed, at least at the beginning and end. The other is that very particular cadence, going down a minor third before returning to the tonic. I think of it as something you find in Eastern European music, but not in the West. And each phrase has a gently rocking echo. Smetana develops this rocking quality in the middle section of the duet that follows this. It is every bit as much of a fingerprint as the folk dances, and totally different from the kind of opera you associate with the Italians.

11. *Die verkaufte Braut*, Marie/Hans duet (middle section)

B. The Broker Broken

12. Section title B (Kezal/Hans duet in Munich)

For the rest of the class, I will focus on the story of the opera, which is also a comic *tour-de-force*. And to do so, I have to introduce the third leading character, the marriage-broker **Kecal**. He is another element of local color since, as far as I know, marriage brokers were more a feature of Eastern European cultures than in the West. The man in the clip is **Günther Groissböck** in an updated production from Munich; I will put the whole clip plus a trailer of the production on the website because I love his sleazy energy, but I will continue to use the Vienna production, where he is played by **Karl Ridderbusch**.

13. Groissböck/Ridderbusch

Most of the first act of the opera, after the love duet, consists of a scene between Kecal and Marjenka's parents, in which he arranges the deal by which Marjenka will marry the son of Micha, a rich landowner in a neighboring village. Marjenka's father is keen on the arrangement; her mother is not so sure. The young man himself does not appear, for reasons which will be clear after the break. It is a long scene, but I'll pick it up when Marjenka herself enters, and the trio turns into a quartet. Much of this is in the *opera buffa* mode, but note the middle section, which is a reprise of the rocking music of the love duet. If this were an Italian opera, the end of the quartet would be immediately followed by a finale, where the chorus would come in, but the principals would continue the scene singing over them. But Smetana has a short recitative, then everybody clears the stage to make way for the main attraction, the famous **Polka**, which hardly has any singing at all. In this act at least, folk dance is far more than background or local color: it is the principal destination of the journey.

14. End of Act I

15. Class title 2 (the Polka scene at Garsington)

Act Two

16. The Other Bridegroom (Vasek in Finland)

Time now to meet the other bridegroom: **Vasek** in Czech, Wenzel in German. This picture from a stripped-down production in Finland captures the character perfectly. You can see why Kecal didn't want to produce him: the man is a total mama's boy, and a near-idiot. He enters with a stuttering aria that used to be thought very funny, but as a former stutterer myself, I find it in poor taste. Anyway, here it is, sung by **Heinz Zednik** in the Vienna production.

17. Wenzel's aria

Near-idiot though he may be, Marjenka still has to deal with him. So without telling him her own name, she convinces him that that Marjenka he is supposed to marry is a real harridan, but hints that there is a much more lovable girl who has her eye on him. After watching two viery different seduction duets in *Così* last week, we can add another one—only here the woman is seducing the man to ensure that she *doesn't* have to marry him!

18. Marjenka/Vasek duet

19. Günther Groissböck as Kecal in Munich

Now at last we come to the “Bartered” bit of the title. The scene you saw fleetingly on my title video came near the end of a long duet in which the marriage-broker **Kecal** (**Günther Groissböck** here, Karl **Ridderbusch** in Vienna) tries to convince Jenik/Jenik to give up Marjenka. After trying to persauade him that marriage is a big bet that usually ends up unhappily, he then advertizes an alternate candidate: a woman who is rolling in money. Here is the last part of the duet in the production we have been following. This part at least is totally in the *opera buffa* mode, and might have been written by Donizetti.

20. Kecal/Jenik duet, cabaletta

21. — still from the above

As you have heard, Jenik refuses all Kecal's offers. But he comes to think again. Vasek, as we know, is the son of the prosperous farmer Micha. Jenik agrees to take the money and give up Marjenka, but on one condition: *that she marry only Micha's son*. Kecal goes off, delighted. Jenik has an aria that I will not play. Then we are in the Act Two finale, in which Jenik signs the contract in front of everybody. Marjenka, is not onstage, but in sharp distinction to Italian practice, neither are many of the other principals. Most of the singing here is for the **Chorus**, who turn on Jenik and drive him out.

22. Act II finale

Act Three

23. The circus scene at Garsington

The third act opens with the arrival of a **traveling circus**. More color—not exactly local color, but lots of it. The Vienna production is relatively tame, so let me show you the last couple of minutes of it at Garsington, where they pull out all the stops. The music, the *March of the Comedians*, is another Smetana show-stopper.

24. Circus scene at Garsington (last 1:50)

25. Vasek/Vasek and Esmeralda in Leipzig

While I think *The Bartered Bride* is well-constructed overall, one thing I like less is that the story of **Vasek** ends rather perfunctorily, without any memorable music, so I'll simply describe it. He is blown away by

the circus, seeing it as a world of freedom where no one will criticize him as a freak. He falls for **Esmeralda**, the tightrope dancer, and she returns his affections. And when somebody rushes in to say that the man playing the **bear** is too drunk to appear, Vasek is persuaded to take the role.

26. Lucia Popp (1939–93)

If Smetana is a little casual in the way he treats Vasek, it is just the opposite with **Marjenka**. She bursts in demanding to see proof that Jenik has sold her off, and Kecal shows her the document. The orchestra plays a reminiscence of the love duet, and we are suddenly in an utterly different mood, with a depth of feeling we have not heard before. The arrival of Vasek returns us to the comic mode once more, but it does not last long. Marjenka asks to be left alone, and before leaving, all the others join in a **Sextet**, which is surely the most beautiful number in the score. Note, incidentally, that the rocking two-note phrase from the love duet runs all through this number too.

27. Quintet and Sextet

28. — still from the above

Once she is left alone, Marjenka will sing an aria of Wagnerian proportions, not only in length (seven minutes) but also in the richness of its orchestration. I must admit that it makes me question whether a comic opera can support such a thing. But Smetana will not hit the serious pedal again. The rest of the finale ties everything up, with the revelation that Jenik really *is* the son of Micha, so that he has got Kecal to pay him so that Marjenka will marry *him*! Kecal leaves in defeat: **the broker broken**, as I said. And the arrival of Vasek as the bear brings everything to a fast conclusion. All the best music is over; I will play as much of the rest as time allows.

29. Act III finale

30. Class title 3 (Not entirely comic)