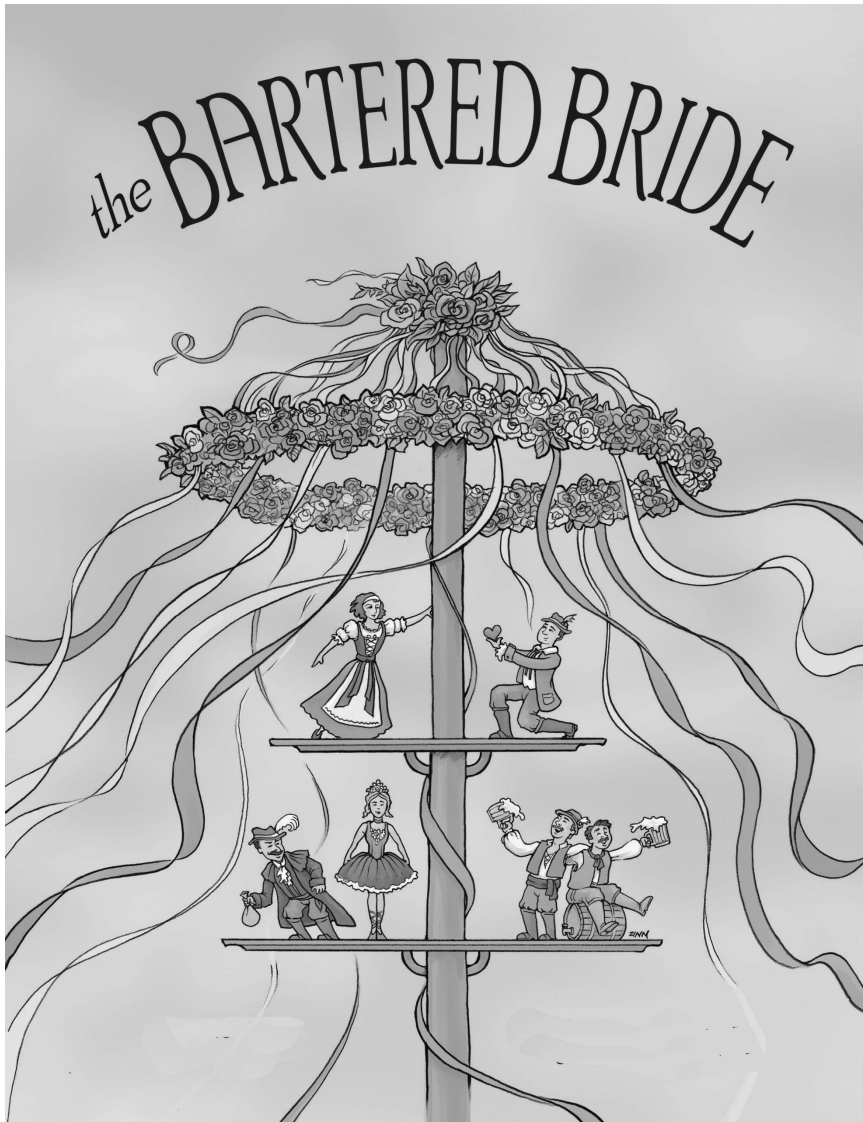


Comedy in Song



9. Local Color

November 12, 2025

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A WAVE OF NATIONALISM SWEPT THROUGH THE ARTS in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, especially in Eastern Europe. Not content with imitating Western models, creative artists began to work in ways that reflected their own country and their own style. Czech composer **Bedrich Smetana** (1824–84) was one such. His 1864 work *The Bartered Bride* put Bohemia firmly on the operatic map, just as his later cycle of tone poems, *Ma Vlast*, would immortalize the woods, rivers, and legends of his country.

The first quarter of the class will examine the different forms that local color takes in the opera. After that, we will go through scenes from a Viennese production (appropriated for the German repertoire as *Die verkaufte Braut*), one act at a time, to show how it followed some comic-opera conventions while at the same time discarding others. *rb*.

A. Czeching In

Local color in Smetana's opera takes several forms. Most obviously, in a story reflecting the village culture of his own people. Then the use of folk dances such as the Polka and Furiant, not only as episodes in themselves, but often underlying vocal numbers with a characteristic rhythm. Finally and least obviously, certain melodic or harmonic inflections that may or may not derive from folk music, but are totally fingerprints of the composer's style.

Smetana: *Prodana Nevesta*, opening (film 1981)

Smetana: *The Bartered Bride*, overture (Garsington Opera, 2019; Paul Curran, director)

Smetana: *Die verkaufte Braut*, Opening (Vienna 1982, see below)

Smetana: *Die verkaufte Braut*, Act I, Marjenka/Jenik scene, excerpts (Vienna 1982, see below)

B. The Broker Broken

The story of the opera, and the “Bartered” bit of the title, centers around the tradition of using a professional matchmaker to arrange suitable marriages for the daughters of one family and sons of another. At the beginning of the opera, Marjenka has been promised by her parents to a young man from a distant village. Much of the plot is about how her boyfriend Jenik tricks the marriage broker by appearing to sign away his claims to her, but really to secure their own marriage.

All substantial clips from here on out will be taken from the 1982 German-language production from Vienna listed below; scenes *not* played in class are shown in grey. All the character names have slightly different German equivalents, but I use the Czech versions here for consistency, though giving both variants in the cast list whenever the difference is greater than a matter of orthography.

Smetana: *Die verkaufte Braut*, Vienna 1982 (Otto Schenk, *director*; Adam Fischer, *conductor*; Lucia Popp, *Marjenka/Marie*; Siegfried Jerusalem, *Jenik/Hans*; Karl Ridderbusch, *Kecal*; Heinz Zednik, *Vasek/Wenzel*; Gertude Jahn and Alfred Sramek, *Marjenka’s parents*; Czeslawa Slania and Walter Fink, *Vasek’s parents*)

ACT ONE opens on a feast day. All are happy except for Marjenka, who has learned that her promised bridegroom will soon arrive. She sings of her love to Jenik, a young man driven from his home in another village. Marjenka’s parents arrive with the broker Kecal, to finalize arrangements. Marjenka’s father is content with the deal, but her mother insists that she be given the right of refusal. Marjenka enters and confesses her love for Jenik, but Kecal assures the parents that he will find a way around this petty difficulty. The principals leave and the act ends with a Polka.

ACT TWO begins with a chorus and another dance. Vasek, the promised bridegroom, arrives; he is a timid young man with a stammer. Without revealing her own name, Marjenka tells him that the woman he is to marry is a harridan, but hints that there is another girl in the village

who would make him a perfect wife. Kecal takes Jenik aside and tries to persuade him that marriage is a gamble not worth the taking. When this fails, he dangles the prospect of a rich bride he could arrange for him in another village. Jenik refuses, but then changes his mind. He will sell off his rights to Marjenka provided only that she marry “Micha’s son.” When Kecal draws up the documents for Jenik to sign in public, the villagers turn on him in horror.

ACT THREE opens with the arrival of a traveling circus. Vasek is drawn to the tightrope walker Esmeralda, and when news arrives that the man playing the bear is helplessly drunk, he allows her to persuade him to take on the role. Vasek’s parents, Micha and Hata, arrive and meet Kruschina and Ludmilla, Marjenka’s folks. Marjenka demands proof that Jenik has indeed sold his rights to her, and her grief when Kecal shows her leads to two slow ensembles that are the emotional heart of the score. Left alone, she sings a big dramatic aria, leading to a confrontation with Jenik. But when Vasek’s parents arrive and identify Jenik as Micha’s son also, the point of his deception becomes clear. All is now set for Marjenka and Jenik to marry, and the arrival of Vasek in the bear suit triggers the reconciliations and general rejoicing.

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