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An Unsuccessful Rehabilitation: Performances of Dvořák's *Armida* in 1918–38

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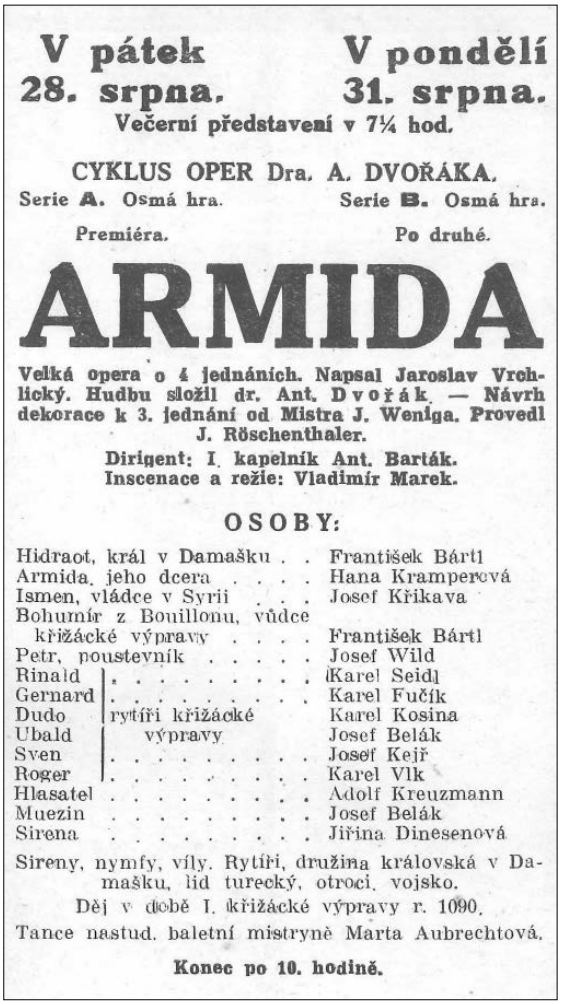
Abstract

Dvořák's last opera *Armida* to the libretto of Jaroslav Vrchlický (on the motives of *Jerusalem Delivered* by Torquato Tasso) has remained practically forgotten to this day. The negative public and critical reception of the 1904 premiere meant that *Armida* had only a brief initial run before being pulled from the National Theatre's repertoire. The myth-veiled work was abandoned until the arrival of a new political regime and a new artistic generation, which endeavoured to enter Dvořák's opera into the repertoire of Czech theatres. The most prominent of these efforts was Ostrčil's production of *Armida* at the National Theatre in 1928, but even that failed to secure a decisive victory for *Armida*. The critics questioned the quality of the libretto and the overall dramatic structure of the opera. They also discussed the style, the choice of exotic theme, and the stage design, which went against the essence of Wagnerian drama and "grand opera".

Keywords

Antonín Dvořák, Jaroslav Vrchlický, Torquato Tasso, Jerusalem Delivered, opera, Armida, reception, rehabilitation



V pátek 28. srpna. **V pondělí 31. srpna.**

Večerní představení v 7¼ hod.

CYKLUS OPER Dra. A. DVOŘÁKA.

Serie A. Osmá hra. **Serie B.** Osmá hra.

Premiéra. **Po druhé.**

ARMIDA

Velká opera o 4 jednáních. Napsal Jaroslav Vrchlický. Hudbu složil dr. Ant. Dvořák. — Návrh dekorace k 3. jednání od Mistra J. Weniga. Provedl J. Röschenthaler.

Dirigent: I. kapelník Ant. Barták.
Inscenace a režie: Vladimír Marek.

OSOBY:

Hidraot, král v Damašku . .	František Bártl
Armida, jeho dcera	Hana Kramperová
Ismen, vládce v Syrii . . .	Josef Křikava
Bohumír z Bouillonu, vůdce křižácké výpravy	František Bártl
Petr, poustevník	Josef Wild
Rinald	(Karel Seidl
Gernard	Karel Fučík
Dudo rytíři křižácké	Karel Kosina
Ubald výpravy	Josef Belák
Sven	Josef Kejř
Roger	Karel Vlk
Hlasatel	Adolf Kreuzmann
Muezin	Josef Belák
Sirena	Jiřina Dinesenová

Sireny, nymfy, víly. Rytíři, družina královská v Damašku, lid turecký, otroci, vojsko.

Děj v době I. křižácké výpravy r. 1090.

Tance nastud. baletní mistryně Marta Aubrechtová.

Konec po 10. hodině.

Fig. 1 Theatre signboard of the Municipal Theatre in Pilsen (*Armida*, 28 and 31 August 1925). Pilsen City Archives, inv. No. 24, inv. No. man. 26599, call No. Pl 24 (Collection of Pilsen Theatre Posters).

Dvořák's operatic oeuvre is still, for the most part, received with considerable ambivalence. Apart from *Rusalka*, perhaps none of the composer's other operas could be considered standard repertoire of leading opera houses around the world, despite the fact that Antonín Dvořák himself had high ambitions of becoming a world-renowned opera composer.[1]

1 This work was financially supported by Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (DKRVO 2019–2023/23.I.a, National Museum, 00023272).

Armida, her second life and politics

The opera *Armida* is set to the libretto of the Czech poet and playwright Jaroslav Vrchlický, and it is Dvořák's final work of the genre and his very last composition of all (opus 115). It is still performed only sporadically. After its premiere at the National Theatre in Prague in 1904, it made few appearances on that stage in later years – besides several productions in regional theatres outside of Prague. The religious theme of the work (a crusade rich with Christian symbolism) caused it to be banned by the Communist regime after 1948. As the Czech musicologist Milan Kuna remembers in his memoirs *Být muzikologem*,[2] in 1958 Communist censors prevented the publication of a new edition of the opera's libretto prepared by Kuna himself.

The early 1960s saw the only foreign performance of the opera – in Bremen in 1961, with Monserat Caballe in the title role. Another production of *Armida* was staged in Liberec towards the end of the decade, in 1968, when the political situation in Czechoslovakia had slightly relaxed. But this was also short-lived. The National Theatre in Prague had not staged *Armida* at all since the Communist coup in 1948, and the totalitarian regime only allowed another production of the opera as it was faltering, two years before the Velvet Revolution – in 1987.

Tab. 1 An overview of productions of *Armida* under the various political regimes in the Czech lands[3]

Political situation in the Czech lands	Year	Location	Theatre	Conductor	Director	Stage design
Austria-Hungary	1904	Prague	National Theatre	František Picka	Robert Polák	unknown
First Czechoslovak Republic	1925	Pilsen	Municipal Theatre	Antonín Barták	Vladimír Marek	Josef Wenig and J. Röschenthaler
	1928	Prague	National Theatre	Otakar Ostrčil	Ferdinand Pujman	František Zelenka
	1935	Brno	Regional Theatre	Milan Sachs	Branko Gavella	Josef Matěj Gotlieb
	1936	Olomouc	Czech Theatre	Adolf Heller	Oldřich Stibor	Josef Gabriel

(table continued on next page)

2 KUNA, Milan. *Být muzikologem* [To Be a Musicologist]. Praha: LaMartre, 2017, pp. 43–4.

3 The table was compiled from various sources. See: VEJVODOVÁ, Veronika. "Pro dílo jest jen přáti rostoucího pochopení." K premiéře poslední Dvořákovy opery Armida ["One can wish only growing understanding for the work." On the Premiere of Dvořák's Last Opera Armida]. *Opus musicum*, 2014, Vol. 46, No. 5, pp. 21–36; VEJVODOVÁ, Veronika. "Jsem šťasten, že po tak dlouhém odpočinku opět mohu pracovati na tom, co já chci a ne, co chtějí jiní." Ke genezi Dvořákovy Armidy ["I am glad that after such a long rest I can again work on what I want and not what others want." On the Genesis of Dvořák's Armida]. *Opus musicum*, 2015, Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 36–57; VEJVODOVÁ, Veronika. Zapomenutá perla? Recepce Armidy v letech 1925–2012 [Forgotten Pearl? The Reception of Armida in 1925–2012]. *Opus Musicum*, 2015, Vol. 47, No. 5, pp. 18–35; VEJVODOVÁ, Veronika. *Dvořákova poslední opera Armida, op. 115: Geneze a recepce* [Dvořák's Last Opera Armida Op. 115: Genesis and Reception], dissertation, Department of Musicology of the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University, supervised by Geoffrey Chew, Brno 2015.

Political situation in the Czech lands	Year	Location	Theatre	Conductor	Director	Stage design
Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia	1941	Ostrava	Czech Moravian-Silesian Theatre	Jaroslav Vogel	Miloš Wasserbauer	Jan Sládek
	1941	Prague	National Theatre	Václav Talich	Ferdinand Pujman	Jan Zrzavý
	1943	Pilsen (partly renewed performance from 1925)	Municipal Theatre	Antonín Barták	Karel Veverka	Josef Wenig
Third Czechoslovak Republic	1946	Prague (renewed performance from 1941)	National Theatre	František Škvor	Ferdinand Pujman	Jan Zrzavý
Czechoslovak Socialist Republic	1961	Bremen, Germany	Theater am Goetheplatz	George Alexander Albrecht	Oskar Walleck	Günter Schneider-Siemssen (sets) / Ronny Reiter (costumes)
	1968 (Prague Spring)	Liberec	F. X. Šalda Theatre	Jindřich Bálek	Rudolf Málek	Vratislav Habr (sets) / Anna Makovcová (costumes)
	1987	Prague	National Theatre	František Vajnar	Ladislav Štros	Vladimír Nývlt (sets) / Josef Jelínek (costumes)
Czech and Slovak Federative Republic	1991	Ostrava	State Theatre	Václav Návrat	Miloslav Nekvasil	Ondřej Nekvasil (sets) / Věra Mejtová (costumes)
Czech Republic	1994	Brno (concert performance)	National Theatre	Tibor Varga (Orchestra and Choir of Janáček Opera)	–	–
	1995	Prague (concert performance)	Rudolfinum (Dvořák Hall)	Gerd Albrecht (Czech Philharmonic, Prague Chamber Choir)	–	–
	2012	Ostrava	National Moravian-Silesian Theatre	Robert Jindra	Jiří Nekvasil	David Bazika (sets) / Simona Rybáková (costumes)

The table shows the respective years and locations when and where *Armida* was performed. No further stagings of the opera took place under Austria-Hungary after the

premiere. The new regime – the state of Czechoslovakia – allowed a new production of the opera to be prepared alongside efforts to make it a permanent repertoire piece of the National Theatre in Prague. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia paradoxically oversaw the monumental centenary celebrations of Dvořák's birth in 1941, which brought a cycle of all of Dvořák's operas, including *Armida*, to the National Theatre under the baton of the legendary conductor Václav Talich.[4] Although the production was renewed after the end of the war, no further repeats were held after the Communist coup in 1948. With a brief interlude in the form of the Liberec performance during Prague Spring in 1968, the opera was not staged until almost 40 years later in 1987 in Prague, when the political situation was already starting to thaw (in response to the Soviet perestroika), and so *Armida* could return to the National Theatre. Repeat performances continued until 1990, that is, a year after the 1989 revolution, but the work was then pulled from the repertoire. It has yet to make a reappearance at the National Theatre. The 1990s saw two concert performances of the composition in Brno and Ostrava. The most recent production in Ostrava in 2012 was regarded primarily as a programming feat and again comprised only a few repeats in the course of one season.

A luckless premiere, 1904

We need to reach deeper into history to find the roots of *Armida*'s lack of success. The opera acquired a bad reputation after its premiere in 1904. *Armida* was hampered by difficulties right from the outset. The critical reception was conflicted, despite all expectations to the contrary. After the success of *Rusalka*, Dvořák's previous opera, the National Theatre commissioned another opera from Dvořák with the intention of immediately staging it as a blockbuster hit. But these intentions failed to yield the desired results.

There are several objective reasons for that.

1) The circumstances of the rehearsals and the premiere performance itself: Difficulties appeared already during preparations. Shortly after the singers' rehearsals the chief of the National Theatre, Karel Kovařovic, fell ill and the direction was taken up by the choirmaster František Picka instead. Dvořák attended the rehearsals regularly but was dissatisfied. He quarrelled with the conductor and complained of how the rehearsals were being managed. The premiere itself was repeatedly postponed due to the illness of the tenor Bohumil Pták, who played the main character, Rinald.[5]

2) The critical response. The reception was generally negative. The stage setting was criticised, in the words of the reviewer in *Národní politika*: *"The stereotypical and primitive staging completely ruins the illusion it is meant to support. We are convinced that Vrchlický and Dvořák imagined the magical imagery of 'Armida' differently on a modern stage – imagery that the direction approaches as something troublesome, with no invention and no effort to dazzle with*

4 NOVÁ, Kateřina. Dvořákův jubilejní rok 1941 / The Dvořák Jubilee of 1941. *Musicalia*, 2014, Vol. 6, Nos. 1–2, pp. 28–8 / 39–52.

5 VEJVODOVÁ, op. cit., 2014, pp. 21–36.

Fig. 2 The cast of *Armida* at the Czech Theatre in Olomouc for the 1935–6 season. National Museum – Theatre Department (hereafter NM-DO), call No. H6C-12350.

effects; at times we cannot but note the ludicrousness of the design. We did not think that a work by Dvořák would be staged so sloppily."[6] Critics berated the opera's style à la Richard Wagner and the low quality of the libretto. They agreed that the manner of the opera was new and unseen before in Dvořák's works – interwoven monologues and a more decisive tendency towards the music drama. With regard to dramatic effect – the narrative flow –

6 -la. Armida. *Národní politika,* Vol. 22, No. 87, 27 March 1904, pp. 8–9.

the critics differed in their assessments considerably, but most of them found the opera lengthy and unengaging. In their opinion, the poetic libretto was to blame, as it placed greater emphasis on the refinement of language and verse than on narrative flow. The orchestration was unambiguously praised, as noted by the critic in *Dalibor*: "*With regard to orchestration, Armida excels perhaps more than any of his other works in its richness of timbre and bright glitter* [...] *which is especially prominent at the beginning of the third act.*"[7]

3) The critiques probably also affected the audience turnout for the repeats. The premiere on 25 March 1904 was followed by only six repeat performances – four in April, one in May, and one in September. The attendance dropped for each performance in turn, until the opera itself was dropped from the repertoire after the September showing. According to Němeček,[8] the income from ticket sales in September was just one sixth compared to the premiere.

These circumstances embroiled Dvořák's last opera in a scandal that remains ambiguous to this day. Some witnesses from the time claim that the opera was wilfully sabotaged by the theatre.[9] Either way, the truth is that the composer himself was greatly embittered by the preparations for the staging of *Armida*, and he died soon after the premiere, on 1 May 1904.

A new production in the First Republic

The founding of the so-called First Republic, that is, independent Czechoslovakia under the leadership of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, brought new hope both to public life and to the prospects of Dvořák's forgotten opera.

The first theatre to take interest in *Armida* in the new republic was the Municipal Theatre in Pilsen. Although the institution had not enjoyed much artistic stability in the 1920s, Director Jeřábek and Head of Opera Antonín Barták launched an extraordinary project – a special "Cycle of Operas of Dr A. Dvořák". This was a major programming decision outside of the Czech capital, especially if one considers that the cycle included Dvořák's practically unperformed operas *Armida* and *Vanda* (the second performance ever for both operas) and a theatrical dance staging of *Slavonic Dances*.[10] The Pilsen

7 ČTRNÁCTÝ, Miloš. Armida. *Dalibor*, Vol. 26, No. 16/17, 3 April 1904, pp. 118–19.

8 NĚMEČEK, Jan. *Opera Národního divadla v období Karla Kovařovice 1900–1920* [The Opera of the National Theatre during the Tenure of Karel Kovařovic 1900–1920], Vol. I. Praha: Divadelní ústav 1968, p. 105.

9 This opinion was later maintained mainly by the composer's son Otakar Dvořák. See DVOŘÁK, Otakar. *Můj otec Antonín Dvořák* [My Father Antonín Dvořák]. Příbram: Knihovna Jana Drdy, 2004, pp. 84–89; DVOŘÁK, Otakar. Několik vzpomínek na vznik a premiéru Dvořákovy "Armidy". (K novému provedení na Národním divadle) [Several Memories of the Genesis and Premiere of Dvořák's "Armida". (For the New Performance at the National Theatre)]. *Venkov*, Vol. 23, No. 309, 30 December 1928, p. 7; DVOŘÁK, Otakar. Z mých vzpomínek na otce [From My Memories of My Father]. *Národní listy*, No. 120, 1 May 1929, p. 1.

10 ŠPELDA, Antonín. *Dr. Antonín Dvořák a Plzeň* [Dr Antonín Dvořák and Pilsen]. Vol. 7, Prameny a příspěvky k dějinám města Plzně, Plzeň: Grafické závody Pour a spol., 1941, pp. 122, 127.

premiere of *Armida* took place on Friday 28 August 1925 and was conducted by the theatre's Chief Conductor, Antonín Barták.[11]

The review in *Český deník* stated that Dvořák had suppressed his nationality and folk character to journey into exotic lands. But "*despite numerous excursions to the Orient*", his music remained *"Slavic – and Dvořákesque"*.[12] The reviewer was sufficiently cautious in his evaluation when he noted that Dvořák is merely trying to be a playwright in *Armida*: *"If even this last stage work of Dvořák's did not convince that he was wronged by those who claim he was no dramatist, he gave at least a dignified effort at being one."*[13] The review highlighted the lyrical passages and the melodically rich third act as the most valuable moments; the orchestration proves Dvořák's superior mastery in the discipline. The stage setting was termed rich and effective. The performance of both musicians and soloists was praised, though with one caveat: *"But miracles cannot occur where not all means suffice. The performing soloists exerted themselves to the full and exhausted all their skill to give Dvořák's last opera the best possible performance, and the same can be said of the choir and orchestra. But it cannot be said that the work exactly 'went down well' with the operatic ensemble."*[14] The article concluded by stating that *Armida* would never achieve the popularity of *The Jacobin* or *Rusalka*.

A renewed Prague premiere, 1928

The new staging of the work at the National Theatre in Prague is credited to the conductor Otakar Ostrčil, on the tenth anniversary of the new republic; it was part of a magnanimous project commemorating the 25th anniversary of Antonín Dvořák's death – a grandiose cycle of all the composer's operas (similar to the cycle that was performed in Pilsen three years earlier). At the time, the music to the opera was completely unknown as there was no recording, nor any sheet music. It was not until 1929 that a selection of separate arias with piano accompaniment was published. And so some called this performance the actual premiere of the work, which remained obscured by numerous myths and scandals from the time of the 1904 performance[15].

Prague critics were more positive on this occasion, and they did their best to support Dvořák's work as much as they could, though they remained critical of the libretto. The style of the opera was described by the reviewer in *České slovo* as *"a lyrical Wagnerian drama"*[16]. The work was expected to enter the permanent operatic repertoire of the

11 ŠPELDA, op. cit., p. 158.

12 [St.]: Cyklus Dvořákových oper v Plzni. Armida [Cycle of Dvořák's Operas in Pilsen. Armida]. *Český deník*, No. 237, 30 August 1925, p. 8.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 The importance of the new staging of the opera was highlighted by the fact that its opening performance was broadcast by radio. See H. Boetinger's letter to Otakar Šourek from 22 January 1929, housed at NM-MAD, acq. No. 88/98.

16 L. K. Armida. *České slovo*, Praha, 31 December 1928.

Fig. 3 Stage concept by František Zelenka for Act III of *Armida* at the National Theatre in Prague, 1928. NM-DO, inv. No. H6D/977-984.

National Theatre – and yet it only survived on the stage for eight years and was pulled from the repertoire in 1935.

The direction may have been to blame in this case as well. The well-known modernist director Ferdinand Pujman headed the production, and he invited the artist František Zelenka to collaborate. Their interpretation was completely minimalist. It is no wonder that both critics and audiences may have been disappointed. They had no doubt expected a lavishly set, rich, colourful, and realistic staging. The critic in *Večerní Praha* wrote: *"Act III resembled rather the artfully arranged display of a shop with evening gowns and fancy dresses or a scene from some circus pantomime than an enchanted castle nestled within an oasis on the edge of the desert."*[17]

17 ČVANČARA, Karel. Dvořákova Armida po 25 letech [Dvořák's Armida after 25 Years]. *Večerní Praha*, 31 December 1928.

Brno and Olomouc performances in the 1930s

After Ostrčil's attempt to rehabilitate the opera at the National Theatre, the Regional Theatre in Brno launched a new production under the direction of Milan Sachs in 1935. However, the project was short-lived – the opening performance, which was planned on 12 January,[18] was delayed till 16 January, and the production was closed on 28 November that same year.[19] A total of nine performances were staged, which was later assessed by Stanislav Krtička as *"a satisfactory number for those times with a just claim to be included in the repertoire in periods of less than 10 years."*[20]

The Brno production was immediately followed by another in Olomouc. This time, the critics were less forgiving of both the work and the libretto: *"If we listen to Armida, we understand why this brilliant music was never fully successful on our scenes. It lacks immediate and profound dramatic effect. The libretto's author Vrchlický had never been successful in the field of drama..."*[21] or *"... but how awkward the underlying text alongside the beautiful music."*[22] The music, orchestration, and melodic structure of *Armida* were again praised: *"It cannot be denied that in the arias we hear the maestro of melody, motivic work, and original instrumentation that we fully succumb to the magic they weave."*[23]

Critical reception

So the question is, were the criticisms of the premiere and the later stagings of the work in the 1920s justified? Let us take a closer look at each of the aspects mentioned by the critics.

The exotic theme

The exotic subject matter stemmed from the popular epic of the Italian poet Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered*. The Czech poet and author of the libretto Jaroslav Vrchlický

18 *Divadelní list Národního divadla v Brně*, Vol. 10, No. 12, 5 January 1935, pp. 259–60.

19 *Armida. Národní divadlo Brno. Repertoár od roku 1884* [Armida. National Theatre in Brno. Repertoire from 1884] [online]. Accessed on: 20 August 2015. Available from: <http://www.ndbrno.cz/modules/theaterarchive/?h=inscenation>.

20 KRTIČKA, Stanislav. *Brněnská hudební epocha. Opera a symfonie Národního a Zemského divadla v Brně. Kronika dějů 1919–1941. Sv. 2* [The Brno Musical Epoch. The Operas and Symphonies of the National and Regional Theatre in Brno. Chronicle of Events in 1919–41. Vol. 2], Brno: Stanislav Krtička, 1954, p. 540.

21 ik: Dvořákova Armida v olomoucké opeře [Dvořák's Armida at the Olomouc Opera]. *Moravský deník*, 2 April 1936.

22 V. S. Antonín Dvořák: Armida v Českém divadle v Olomouci [Antonín Dvořák: Armida at the Czech Theatre in Olomouc]. *Našinec,* 3 April 1936.

23 Ibid.

Fig. 4 Costume design by František Zelenka for Rinald in Act IV of *Armida* at the National Theatre in Prague, 1928. NM-DO, inv. No. H6D/21.825-21.851.

prepared the libretto after having translated the epic into Czech. The libretto was only loosely based on the motives of the poem. It is the love story of Armida and Rinald on the backdrop of the clash of two worlds – the Islamic one, which is depicted as an exotic fairy-tale world of magic, and Christianity. In the story, Armida herself is a witch (as in

the original epic). Another magician – the wizard Ismen, Armida's unsuccessful suitor – is a villainous, fairy-tale figure.

The critics mentioned the exotic theme in contrast to Czech and Slavic culture. Dvořák's previous operas were based on fairy tales – *The Devil and Kate* was from a Czech tale, the libretto to *Rusalka* was based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen but was appropriated and imbued with a Czech character. According to the reviewer in *České slovo* later in 1941, the exotic framework of the narrative damaged Dvořák's music drama: *"But the frame of the exotic plot and its affected contrasts could not combine with Dvořák's expression to any form of seamless unity, and despite all its mastery of dramatic expression and characterisation, firm structural form, and gradated vocal and instrumental sound, it remains an inherently imbalanced work."*[24]

The operatic and musical style

The reviewers were right to point to the new style of Dvořák's *Armida*. In its musical dramatic structure, *Armida* truly diverges from all his previous operas. The libretto can be said to be written in just such a spirit – a story of tragic love set in a semi-fairy-tale world on the backdrop of the clash of two irreconcilable cultures (Vrchlický wrote the libretto according to the wishes of Karel Kovařovic, who had commissioned it, and created a veritably Wagnerian text in 1888, in line with his own tastes, of course).[25] Dvořák came across the libretto completely by chance at a much later date, in 1902. In terms of operatic style, *Armida* certainly differs greatly from its predecessor, *Rusalka*. Although the latter is also partly built on leitmotifs, they are imbued with Dvořák's own style. In *Armida*, the composer endeavoured to create a densely woven Wagnerian drama. It seems that he was influenced by the spirit of the libretto, which had been specifically written in that way.[26] Nonetheless, Dvořák struggled with Vrchlický's poetic libretto from the outset. The sources show that Dvořák attempted to persuade the poet to make numerous changes to the text, but the latter was not willing to alter his work to any significant extent. Dvořák's greatest difficulty was the length of the libretto – he wanted to reduce the four acts to three, but the poet refused to comply.[27]

Another important factor to consider was Dvořák's desire in the final years of his life to be acknowledged as a world-leading operatic composer (he wrote three operas after returning from America – *The Devil and Kate*, *Rusalka*, and *Armida*. As he himself said in an interview for the Viennese *Reichswehr* before the premiere of *Armida* at the National Theatre in 1904: *"In the past five years I have written nothing but operas. I would like, if the Lord God gives me health, to devote all my strengths to operatic composition. Not from some vain*

24 H. D. Armida. *České slovo (*Praha), 25 November 1941. Cutting housed at NM-MAD, item No. VI – 233/66e, f.

25 ŠOUREK, Otakar. Karel Kovařovic a Vrchlického Armida [Karel Kovařovic and Vrchlický's Armida]. *Smetana: Hudební věstník Unie českých hudebníků z povolání*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 15 June 1943, p. 54.

26 See V. V. Zelený's letter to J. Vrchlický, housed at LA PNP, J. Vrchlický Literary Estate, item No. 3640.

27 VEJVODOVÁ, op. cit., 2015, "Jsem šťasten...", op. cit., pp. 36–57.

desire for fame but because I consider the opera to be the most suitable form for the nation as well. This is music that is listened to by the broad public, and frequently, whereas if I compose a symphony, I would perhaps have to wait a long time before it was performed at home. [...] They see me as a symphonist, although I have shown a major tendency towards works of drama for many years."[28]

The overture to the opera provides an overview of the leitmotifs. Through them, the overture tells the story of the whole opera. The dating of the composition shows that Dvořák composed the overture as the very last part.

Some critics also drew attention to the significant role of the orchestra and termed *Armida* a symphonic opera or symphonic drama.[29]

The stage setting

The stage setting, which was lambasted as insufficient by the critics, may have played a negative role in the opera's overall reception. Dvořák composed *Armida* with an emphasis on stage effects, which abound throughout the opera. Armida's spells, when she conjures up an entire palace with the wave of a hand, would be hard to accomplish even today (unless cinematic methods were used). The setting demands magic, fantastical gardens, and sumptuous palaces, and also necessitates ceremonious marches, choral "mood music", and slow, protracted lyrical performances. Present-day productions pose a much more complicated question, but at the time of its premiere and the first productions in the 1920s, stark, minimalist or sloppy set design and direction could greatly impact the overall impression of the work.

Unjustly forgotten masterpiece?

In closing, one question remains unanswered: Is *Armida* a masterpiece that was buried by circumstance, or a rightly forgotten opera with clearly identifiable deficiencies. Personally, I see the main problem of the work in the libretto, in its (poetic) language, the length and overall dramatic structure of the work. From the musical perspective, *Armida* is the fruit of Dvořák's late creative genius. In the past, the dramatic aspect of the opera was ameliorated by abbreviating the score – Václav Talich made some amendments as early as 1941, the authors of the 1961 production in Bremen shortened the opera considerably, and the same goes for the newest staging of the opera in Ostrava in 2012. There is no doubt that *Armida* is still waiting for its rehabilitation, especially on the international

28 Bei Meister Dvorzak. *Die Reichswehr. Militärisches und politisches Organ*, Vol. 17, No. 3612, 1 March 1904, p. 7. The Czech translation in DÖGE, Klaus. *Antonín Dvořák. Život, dílo, dokumenty* [Life, Work, Documents]. Vyšehrad: Praha, 2013, pp. 251–3.

29 J. H. Hudební objev posledního Dvořáka [Musical Discovery of the Last Dvořák]. *Národní střed* (Praha), 25 November 1941. Cutting housed at NM-MAD, item No. VI – 233/66Ch.

scene. Let us hope that, some day, we will see it staged at one of the world's major opera houses with the direction and set design it deserves.

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