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KAREL JAROMIR ERBEN'S MYSTICAL BALLAD "THE WEDDING SHIRTS" IN ANTONIN DVOŘÁK'S ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION

Naumova Olena¹

1. Doctor of Philosophy (Theory and History of Culture),
Associate Professor of the Department of World Music History
Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music, UKRAINE
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4551-0891

Czech musical culture has given the world many enduring artistic values, with traditions of original folk art and professional composition. Its flourishing in the XIX century, due to the rise of the national liberation movement, was clearly manifested not only in folk art, but also in the outstanding masterpieces of Czech composers who stood on the level of European achievements and strove to reveal the national uniqueness of Czech music. One such composer was Antonín Dvořák.

Dvořák's art is closely merged and absolutely consolidated with the world musical process. This completeness and comprehensiveness is characteristic of all genres of his work, including choral music.

Work on cantatas and oratorios began as early as the 1870s. Among the composer's most famous compositions is the cantata for mixed choir and orchestra "Hymn" ("Dědicové Bílé hory"), op. 30 (text by Vítězslav Hálek, 1872), "Stabat mater" for soloists, chorus and orchestra, op. 58 (1876–1877), oratorio for soloists, chorus and orchestra "St. Ludmila", op. 71 (text by Jaroslav Vrchlický, 1885–1886), "Psalm 149" for chorus and orchestra, op. 79 (1879), "Requiem" for soloists, chorus and orchestra, op. 89 (1890), cantata for soprano and bass solo, mixed choir and orchestra "Te Deum", op. 103 (1892).

In 1883 Antonín Dvořák receives a commission from England for a vocal and symphonic composition that could be performed at the Birmingham Festival. The choice of the literary basis is left to the composer himself. Dvořák initially has in mind subjects from Czech history, such as an oratorio about Jan Hus or St. Wenceslas, but he eventually turns his eye to a different kind of story, a fantastical one. Dvořák focuses on a piece by Karel Jaromír Erben.

Karel Jaromír Erben (November 7, 1811, Miletín, district Jičín – November 21, 1870, Prague) was a prominent Czech writer, translator, folklorist and historian. He translated into Czech “Primary Chronicle” and “The Tale of Igor's Campaign”. Erben was educated at the University of Prague. He worked in the archives of the Prague National Museum, and later was archivist of Prague. He gained national fame with his collection of ballads, “Kytice z pověstí národních” (“The Bouquet of Folk Legends”) published in 1853. Erben's ballads, based on Czech folk legends and beliefs, were immediately beloved by Czechs. The Bouquet, along with the poem “Máj” by Karel Hynek Mácha, is now considered one of the pinnacles of Czech poetry of the XIX century.

The composer was well acquainted with the work of K. J. Erben, and in 1871 he wrote two songs to Erben's poems (“Rosemary” and “Orphan”), but his attention was already drawn to the ballad “The Wedding Shirts” (“Svatební košile”). This poetic composition had everything that could fascinate Dvořák – a subtle stylization of folk poetry, a fairy-tale fantasy plot and a deep spiritual and moral meaning.

The cantata “The Wedding Shirts” was completed in 1884 and first performed in 1885 at the Birmingham Festival, where critics recognized it as “the most original and most significant composition that has been performed at Birmingham festivals to date”. In England, the cantata was performed under a different title, “The Ghost Bride.”

“The Wedding Shirts” is one of Erben's scariest and most famous ballads. The immediate source for the poem was a legend recorded by the poet in his hometown of Miletín. Erben was also well aware of a number of folk ballads with vampiric content, which he included in the collection Czech Folk Songs.

The composition is based on a Czech legend on the popular folklore motif of “dating a dead bridegroom”, known since the time of the Elder Edda and especially widespread in the legends of Northern and Central Europe. Legends and folk songs, in which it is told how the deceased, having risen from the coffin, came for the girl he loved in life, are known in many nations. The Serbs sing a song about how the deceased Jovan came on horseback to fetch his sister Jelica. A Slovak legend tells how a girl called her dead sweetheart to her by boiling a dead head in porridge, which at the same time says in a human voice: “Come, come, come, come, come!”. A Scottish folk-song sings of how the dead William came for his sweet Margaret; and an old English song tells how a young man, killed in battle, took his beloved sister, named Gwennoliake, with him to the other world.

The theme was developed by the Romantic poets, and the first in a whole series of similar compositions is the undisputed masterpiece of the Romantic era, “Lenore” by the German poet Gottfried August Bürger (1773). The Polish classicist Adam Mickiewicz has a poem on a similar theme, “Ucieczka.” But Erben and

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Mickiewicz emphasized that they were not inspired by the famous “Lenore”, but wrote ballads based on folk legends that they themselves recorded – in Erben's homeland in Miletín and Lithuanian Poles, respectively.

In 1925 in Czechoslovakia, based on the ballad of K. J. Erben, a “horror movie” was made (which has not survived to this day), in 1978 – an 11-minute “horror cartoon” “Svatební košile” (directed and written by Josef Kabrt, starring Blanka Bohdanová, Jirí Holý). In 2000, the mystical story of Erben became one of the parts of the movie “Bouquet” (“Kytice”) and the role of the groom was played by one of the most famous contemporary Czech actors Karel Roden. Interestingly, the relevance of this plot does not subside until today. In 2020, a new adaptation of K. J. Erben's ballad appeared, authored by the famous Czech screenwriter and director Martin Kukučka. The roles were played by František Němec, Magdaléna Borová and others.

The title of the ballad “The Wedding Shirts” is connected with an old Czech custom: before the wedding, a girl gives her groom a shirt she sewed herself. The heroine longs for the groom, who has gone to a foreign land and has not given any news about himself for three years. Unable to show any more humility, the girl in her prayer to the Mother of God begs either to return her fiancé or to send her a quick death. Her prayer is answered: her beloved returns and takes her away with him, but instead of joy, the girl is horrified by the frantic night race. When her lover brings her to the cemetery, she realizes that her fiancé is dead – and that she is destined for punishment: “I have sinned in my prayers!” exclaims the unfortunate woman, crying out to Our Lady. Repenting of her sin, the heroine is forgiven – and this saves her from death. Only the wedding shirts she took with her are torn in the morning and scattered over all the graves in the cemetery...

Dvořák chose the genre of the dramatic cantata for chorus and soloists with orchestra for such a plot – a dark one, but with a cathartic, luminous denouement. The image of the girl is embodied by the soprano, the dead groom – by the tenor. The narrator's words are distributed between the bass soloist and the chorus, and only at the climax, when the girl takes refuge in the chapel and the dead groom orders the dead man lying there to rise and open the door, does direct speech appear in the bass part and even in the chorus, thus the composer emphasizes the dramatic tension of the moment.

The epic beginning is concentrated in the bass part and the choral episodes, while the arias of the girl and her dialogues with the groom are lyrical. The only leitmotif in the cantata is connected with the image of the heroine. The girl's feelings are revealed with great subtlety in the recitatives, and the vocal part sensitively follows the slightest psychological nuances. In the arias, the intonations of Czech song folklore are organically combined with elements of vocal virtuosity

that appear at the most tense moments, emphasizing the heroine's excitement.

The interpretation of conductor Zbyněk Müller, who presented his version of the cantata at the Liberec Opera House (Divadlo F. X. Šaldy, Liberec), the role of the chorus and orchestra is particularly emphasized. The vivid images of the characters were created by well-known soloists in Europe: Jana Sibera as the Girl, Peter Berger as the Dead Man and Jiří Rajniš as the Narrator. The cantata was performed with great success on October 12, 2024, as a sign of remembrance and adoration of the work of the great classic of national music – Antonín Dvořák, the 120th anniversary of whose death is widely celebrated in the Czech Republic.

