

"The Bartered Bride-Prodaná nevěsta: Performance Guide with Translations and Pronunciation" by Timothy Cheek

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**Book review: Cheek, Timothy. *The Bartered Bride-
Prodaná nevěsta: Performance Guide with Translations
and Pronunciation*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press,
Inc., 2010. ISBN 978-0-810-87260-8.**

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It seemed a bold move on Scarecrow Press's part in 2001 to publish Tim Cheek's first book *Singing in Czech*. Who would buy it? Professional non-Czech singers, perhaps, suddenly finding themselves having to take on Mařenka in an original-language production of *The Bartered Bride* or Laca in *Jenůfa*, or those few music-educational institutions that believed in a professional training for their singers that went beyond the normal Italian, German, and French repertory. But this small clientele, I thought at the time, was surely too narrow to warrant the publication of such a book. My skepticism, however, seems to have been unjustified given the fact that Tim Cheek and Scarecrow Press went on to publish two volumes (so far, 2003 and 2004) of a Janáček libretto series, no less, and have now published the present volume.

However, in the interval of six years since the second of the Janáček opera librettos (*Káťa Kabanová*), a little thoughtful repositioning has taken place. The new book presents itself in its subtitle not merely as "translations and pronunciations" as in the Janáček series but a "performance guide with translations and pronunciations." In a slightly taller format, it is now 300 rather than 200 pages as in the first of the Janáček libretto books. Of these 300 pages, Part 2 ("IPA and Translations") and Chapter 5 of Part 1 ("Czech Pronunciation and Inflection") take up almost two-thirds.

Part 2 follows the successful formula that Cheek established in his first book and that went on to dominate the Janáček series. Here the libretto is set out line by line, in Czech with a version in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) above it; below is a literal translation mimicking the Czech word order followed by a translation in English word order. There are occasional footnotes that highlight particular pronunciation problems and give suggestions. Although there is a quick reminder in Chapter 5 of how the Czech alphabet and its particular diacritics work, the user is really expected to have mastered Tim Cheek's first book, with its detailed explanation of every sound that occurs in Czech, its stress system, etc. In all this, Cheek was well equipped as a guide, coming with an excellent theoretical knowledge of exactly how the sounds are made (i.e. where one should put the movable organs of speech to produce such sounds) and a well-honed practical knowledge providing all sorts of useful tips, especially for those used to singing in other languages, on how best to achieve this. His credentials are set out at length in "About the Author" (p. 301). The chief thing to note is his association with the University of Michigan, as music director of the Opera

Workshop and his vocal diction course there, his internship in 1995 at the National Theatre in Prague, and his continued coaching for productions of Czech operas in many countries. He even has a Czech wife.

This volume, as I have suggested, is broader than the two Janáček libretto ones. Since it seems to address several different types of readership, I have invented two different readers to give their comments on it.

Rosie Thackeray, soprano

Quite out of the blue I got this invitation to sing the part of Esmeralda (the circus artist) in a production at the Detroit Opera House of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*. Being a confident sort of person, and, I have to say, a bit desperate for work, my response to their anxious enquiry about my linguistic abilities was "of course I can sing it in Czech." How wonderful to find Dr. Cheek's book, which seemed to have been written especially for me. I've sung plenty of Italian operas, and a few French and German ones, but for some reason I'd not come across any Czech opera before. The first chapter gave me a good general idea of the genesis of the opera, and its various transformations over four versions into its present form. I'd not realized how complicated these things can be. Knowledge of this would equip me well with a little one-upmanship with my fellow cast, I thought. I was glad of the synopsis. I hardly bothered with Chapter 2 ("Performance History"). It went on for pages and didn't seem at all necessary for my preparation though my interest flickered for a moment when I got to the sopranos section in "Debuts" and discovered that the American soprano Mary Costa sang the lead role of Mařenka with the Los Angeles Guild Opera in 1958 before going on to create Princess Aurora in Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959. I bet she made more money with that! In "Dance in *Prodaná nevěsta*"—Dr. Cheek seems keen to retain the work's Czech title with those funny accents—I was glad to have some explanation about the various dances in the opera, the *skočná* and the *furiant* (naturally I'd heard of a polka before but hadn't realized that it was terribly Czech). But why all those pages about choreographers – eight in fact – when there were only five pages on the dances, and they didn't tell me actually how to do the *skočná* (which comes in the circus scene in which I appear)? The next chapter, "Characters (Osoby)" (another of Dr. Cheek's affectations to include this Czech word here), was really interesting. Although the section on Esmeralda was only half a page I found out about the range (and knew immediately it wouldn't cause problems for me) and discovered its main traits. But all the information about the other characters also gave me a good idea of what the rest of the cast will be like.

After that came all the hard stuff: Chapter 5 ("Czech Pronunciation and Inflection"), which was too brief for me to work out what I had to do and so I found myself acquiring Dr. Cheek's first book for a more detailed description of all these sounds that I needed to make. And not just the sounds. After 20 pages on Czech vowels and another 50 on Czech consonants there were two really useful chapters on how you put different sounds together and what difference it makes, and then one on "stress and length" (the fact that they don't always go together creates real problems). Armed with that and having got to terms with the International Phonetic Alphabet, I then returned to the *Bartered Bride* book and the text and translations in Part 2 (thank goodness I sing only in Act 3!). Having gone through this and Dr. Cheek's helpful hints on the problems of doubled consonants and how to cope when Smetana's music doesn't quite match the first-syllable stress that I've now learnt about in Czech, I feel reasonably confident to turn up for rehearsals in this Czech-language

production. What, however, I would have been really grateful for would have been a CD (as Dr. Cheek had in his first book) with someone actually reading the lines, perhaps breaking up the long words into individual syllables and pausing so I can try and say them myself. But certainly this has been a useful book for me, a lifesaver in fact.

Jim Weller, stage director

I knew this book wasn't especially directed towards me since two-thirds of it was devoted to how to pronounce Czech and that – thank God – I don't need to do. Those poor singers! But that's what we pay them for. Why did we decide to do the opera in Czech? Russell Thomson (the music director) insisted on it, saying that's what goes on these days and whatever sounds the singers manage to make the audience can follow the words in the subtitles. Although Cheek strongly advocates (p. x) singing the work in the original language (but he would, wouldn't he, given the title of his book), I have my doubts. There is quite a lot of quick repartee in the dialogue (which I gather was originally spoken) and surely that is best done in the language of the singers and the language of the audience? It seems that when Smetana wrote the opera his own Czech wasn't all that wonderful (he seems to have been brought up in German, and made lots of howlers in the setting), so is there much point singing the work in such a state? In fact I noticed that many of the footnotes in the text section provide all sorts of fixes for when this happens. But that decision is behind us, I'm afraid.

I found the introductory chapter helpful, giving me some idea of how the opera got to its present form, and how it fits into the operatic scene. I was especially grateful to know about the traditional cuts. Perhaps we'll use some of them as Russell tells me the Jeník isn't getting on with the Czech very well and may have problems in his long dialogue with Kecal. For me the only really useful chapters were on the characters and on the dances, but even that didn't tell me how exactly they were done (John Tyrrell's little dance articles in *Grove* told me rather more), but that of course can be left to the choreographer. At the end of the book, there is a long appendix that surveys editions, English translations, and recordings (CDs, LPs, DVDs, and films). According to one of Cheek's many pieces of good practical advice, I must make sure that the singers get their vocal scores in the Critical Edition, which unlike some of the other scores one can get, has plenty of space in it for the singers to write in crib translations, transliterations, etc. The survey of translations is fun when discussing the translation fashions over the years. Cheek clearly knows his way around them, but it does seem an odd feature in a book about singing the opera in Czech. I hadn't realized how many recordings there were: four English ones, ten Czech ones altogether, including 78s and a lost recording by Václav Talich allegedly made in 1940 on wax disks. It is extraordinary that there are two silent films among the five films that Cheek lists. The comments on these, and on the four DVDs seem to be well informed, and point me in the right direction for getting hold of them.

What I find missing here is some sort of account of the problems of the opera. Do I really have to do it with all those silly costumes? All the pictures (dreadfully reproduced—why did they bother?) seem to be pointing me in that direction, but surely that just turns the opera into a sort of sentimental museum piece. If you just look at the text of the opera, Jeník comes out as a male chauvinist bastard, and Mařenka a feisty feminist. Surely to speak to a modern audience one should emphasize such aspects rather than turning it into an ethnographic dream (though I gather that Czech ex-pats in the US like it this way). And what about Vašek? If we suggested that he was gay

(and therefore “shy” with women), wouldn’t that throw an interesting light on everyone’s behaviour towards him? Surely something called “a performance guide” could help me a bit more with such things, rather than a long, really boring chapter on “Performance History.” I skimmed through that and wondered why it was there. Cheek says that this chapter is for “opera buffs” (p. x), but no opera buff is going to look for this information in a book principally about pronouncing Czech. And he says nothing about all the dance buffs for which he also seems to be writing. There are choreographers here (under Debuts) and more choreographers in the dance chapter. It’s one thing to be married to a Czech dancer, as Cheek seems to be (Mrs. Cheek gets two pictures of herself in fancy dress in the illustrations), and quite another to inflict all this on an unsuspecting reader wanting guidance on how to go about directing the opera. And the account of Czech performances is unconsciously hilarious with the twenty-ninth production (heaven help us!) at the Czech National Theatre in Prague being regarded as a failure since it was put on “only eighty-two times.” If some of my productions did half as well I wouldn’t have to bother about doing this one.

As a whole I don’t think that this book is for me. It’s a funny sort of mixture, very earnest and straight-laced, served up with an enormous number of footnotes and a huge bibliography making it look like an “academic” book, but much of the information seems to be second-hand. I can see that it’s a godsend for a singer trying to prepare his or her part. Is a “performance guide” the right title? Yes, there are helpful hints about editions, how to get a hold of recordings, where the traditional cuts are, and above all how singers should go about their work, but I, as a stage director, would like to have had more help about practical stage problems, about current attitudes to doing something that seems to be such a Czech icon. And I could have certainly done without the potted history of all those singers.