

PER BOYE HANSEN

Artistic Director of the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera

opera

The National Theatre presents a fairy-tale opera *Schwanda the Bagpiper*

After incredible 89 years, the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera is to stage Jaromír Weinberger's fairy-tale opera *Schwanda the Bagpiper* with the subheading *The Devil Lost, He Regrets*. The work was on the programme of New York's Metropolitan Opera or London's Covent Garden in the 1930s and is currently staged at the National Theatre by director Vladimír Morávek and conductor Zbyněk Müller who have conceived the production as a family show. The project falls within the *Musica non grata* cycle that is carried out with the financial support of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in the Czech Republic.

"Schwanda the Bagpiper was written for mothers and fathers to take their kids to see how a Czech bewitches the world, grows wiser, loves and finally, shows respect and admiration for his homeland," throws some light on the upcoming production director **Vladimír Morávek**, who has also directed one of the most successful titles at the National Theatre Opera – Mozart's *Magic Flute*. *Schwanda the Bagpiper*, a blend of fantasy fairy tale and grotesque, offers audiences armloads of Morávek's imagination and specific scenic daydreaming.

Jaromír Weinberger – a child prodigy from Vinohrady, a Prague's district – achieved his greatest fame in the 1920s with *Schwanda the Bagpiper* which became his most staged work. *"The opera is said to be the most staged production in German theatres in the season of 1929-1930. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Schwanda the Bagpiper was presented on the most renowned world opera stages: at the Vienna State Opera, at the Bavarian State Opera, at the Berlin State Opera, at the London's Covent Garden and at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1931. At that time it was only the third – and the last for a considerable span of time – Czech opera staged at the Metropolitan Opera – after Smetana's Bartered Bride and Janáček's Jenůfa,"* describes **Ondřej Hučín**, the chief-dramaturge of the National Theatre Opera and State Opera, the international success of the work. The fairy-tale title, based on and adapted from the tale by J. K. Tyl was translated into seventeen languages including German, French, English as well as Danish, Swedish or Serbo-Croatian.

The first Czech version of the opera with the libretto by Miloš Karel was world premiered at the National Theatre in 1927, directed by Otakar Ostrčil. In 1928 the Czech libretto was revised by Max Brod who also translated the opera in German. It was this German translation that later went on to conquer world stages after it was, among other venues, presented at the New German Theatre in Prague (today's State Opera) in 1929. The current production is based on Brod's Czech version of the libretto dating back to 1928. *"With the prospect of staging the opera abroad and publishing the work by Viennese Universal Edition Publishing House, Max Brod rid Karel's text of everything which had an excessively sentimental tone or, judging by current tastes, was slightly nationalistic. He gave it back its earthy comicality and added a relationship twist to the plot – Babinsky, the thief has a romantic crush on Dorotka as it is generally known that Max Brod had a soft spot for erotic motifs,"* says **Ondřej Hučín**. This version was premiered also at the National Theatre

(on the premises of the Estates Theatre) in 1933 and thus, the opera makes its comeback to the country's most important opera stage after long eighty-nine years. When Nazis rose to power Jaromír Weinberger faced a similar fate as many other artists of Jewish origins. He was labelled "undesirable" and in 1938 emigrated first to France and later to the USA where he took his life in 1967.

"Weinberger's score is very elaborate, it impresses with colourful instrumentation and it lavishly bursts with diverse surprising ideas that considerably spice up the unconcealed connection to the Czech musical language. The central melody of Schwanda the Bagpiper is a folklore song In Our Yard but it features many dances: polka in a number of ways, traditional folklore dances like furiant or odzemek as well as the festive polonaise, and includes also a skilfully mastered counterpoint and a great fugue at the conclusion. The grandiosity of the music even evokes film music at times," says **Zbyněk Müller**, the conductor who has been entrusted the musical direction to describe the composer's musical handwriting.

The leading roles are presented by **Alžběta Poláčková** and **Jana Šrejma Kačírková** (as Dorotka), **Svatopluk Sem** and **Jiří Brückler** (as Schwanda), **Jaroslav Březina** and **Martin Šrejma** (as Babinsky), **Ester Pavlů** and **Kateřina Jalovcová** (as The Queen) and **František Zahradníček** and **Jiří Sulženko** (as The Devil). There are also larger-than-life animals, a flying angel and a number of child actors appearing on the stage.

The new production of *Schwanda the Bagpiper* premieres at the National Theatre historical building on October 6 and 9. The opera, sung in Czech with English subtitles, is designed both as an opera for adults and a cross-generation show for families with children, recommended for audiences 10+. *"This opera is gorgeous and, regrettably, Czechs don't know it although it counts among the most famous Czech operas that have dazzled the world. We are in a situation when we're defending something which has suffered a harm. We have been enchanted by it and now we're just letting it enchant Prague, at its most dignified and magnificent scale. The music is simply astonishing, characters are funny, witty at times, choruses absolutely fascinating. Altogether, it makes up a story of the eternal conflict of good and evil within the soul of a Czech. It's genuinely a perfect occasion to take your children to the National Theatre and have the theatre literally bewitched them as they enjoy the great experience of a Czech fairy tale,"* concludes **Vladimír Morávek**.

More information and tickets on www.musicanongrata.cz and www.narodni-divadlo.cz.

Schwanda the Bagpiper

Music: Jaromír Weinberger (1896–1967)

Libretto: Max Brod (1884–1968) adapted the originally Czech libretto by **Miloš Karel** (1891–1944)

Production information: <https://bit.ly/3UZnSVi>

Premieres: 6 and 9 October 2022 at the National Theatre

Reruns: 2022: 11 Oct, 13 Oct, 27 Nov, 4 Dec, 15 Dec, **2023:** 18 Jun, 24 Jun

Creative Team

Conductor: Zbyněk Müller
Direction and lighting design: Vladimír Morávek
Sets: Martin Chocholoušek
Costumes: Sylva Žimula Hanáková
Choreography: Lucie Mertová
Videoart: Michal Mocňák
Chorus Master: Pavel Vaněk
Dramaturgy: Ondřej Hučín

Cast

Schwanda: Jiří Brückler / Svatopluk Sem
Dorotka: Alžběta Poláčková / Jana Šrejma Kačírková
Babinsky: Martin Šrejma / Jaroslav Březina
The Queen: Ester Pavlů / Kateřina Jalovcová
The Magician, Second Soldier: Roman Janál / Martin Bárta
The Devil: Jiří Sulženko / František Zahradníček
The Devil's Famulus, Captain of the Devil's Guard: Ondřej Koplík / Dušan Růžička
The Judge: Vladimír Doležal / Dušan Růžička
The Executioner, First Soldier: Vít Šantora / Vjacseszlav Korszák

The National Theatre Chorus
The National Theatre Orchestra
The National Theatre Opera Ballet
Children from Olga Kyndlová's Ballet School

Photo gallery

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