

BEDŘICH SMETANA
(1824–1884)

The Devil's Wall

A comic-romantic opera in three acts from 1882

Act One

The steward of Rožmberk Castle, Michálek, greets the knight Jarek. Jarek, acting on behalf of his lord, Vok Vítkovic of Růže, had approached a wealthy widow with a marriage proposal, but she declined the offer. Jarek swears that he himself will not marry until his lord does. Rarach, who's wearing monk's robes, and the hermit Beneš accuse each other of thwarting Vok's marriage in order to gain his wealth. Michálek's daughter, Katuška, is looking forward to Jarek's return. Jarek later assures her of his faithfulness. Rarach mockingly blesses the young couple's union and reproaches Jarek for having perjured himself. Lord Vok arrives and finds out about the failure of the courtship. Michálek keeps convincing him to marry. At that very moment, Rarach, still wearing hermit's robes, whispers to Vok that he should show interest in Michálek's daughter Katuška. However, Katuška has already pledged her heart to Jarek, and Vok decides to plan the lovers' wedding. Yet Jarek is hesitant. Michálek reveals Jarek's oath and begs Vok to find a bride and thus save his daughter. Once again, the omnipresent Rarach intervenes and is willing to release Jarek from his oath in exchange for the position of abbot in Vok's new monastery. Just then, a strange messenger arrives, bringing the will of the deceased Lady of Šauenburk to Vok. Vok is devastated, and his nephew Závíš witnesses his uncle's heartfelt confession that the Lady of Šauenburk was the only woman he ever loved. After she married another man, Vok founded a monastery dedicated to her memory, lived in painful seclusion, and dwelt only on beautiful memories. Now, his former love entrusts him with the protection of her daughter, Hedvika. Vok immediately sends Závíš to fetch her. Rarach, once again, accuses Beneš of the sin of thwarting Vok's courtship and reveals his diabolical form.

Act Two

Rarach, disguised as a shepherd, greets Jarek in his hut. Jarek has left the castle and prays that he may keep his pledge of allegiance to Vok because he yearns for Katuška too much. He falls asleep, and Rarach rejoices that soon, Jarek will fall victim to his diabolical schemes – he conjures up an image of Katuška and then brings it to Rožmberk. At the castle, Michálek still struggles with the idea that he has missed the chance to become Vok's father-in-law. Everything was spoiled by the romantic whim of his daughter. Katuška begs Rarach, who has once again taken the form of Beneš, to convince Vok to get married. He promises it to her and again gives his blessing to the young lovers. Závíš announces Hedvika's arrival and describes how beautiful she is to everyone. Vok accepts her as a daughter, but meeting her brings back memories of her mother. He falls deeply in love with the girl but restrains

his feelings and welcomes her into his home in a fatherly manner. Beneš reminds Vok of his pledge to bequeath his fortune to the monastery. However, that would make the marriage of Jarek and Katuška impossible. Beneš and Rarach ask Vok for the abbey and suggest that he betroth himself to the Church instead of a woman, enter the monastery, and thus release Jarek from his oath. Vok seemingly agrees to the suggestion. He loves Hedvika but is unsure of her love. He summons his people and announces his decision: he will enter the monastery as its first monk, and with a glance at Hedvika, he adds that his decision can only be reversed if a woman who sincerely loves him comes to him in the evening and betroths herself to him.

Act Three

Záviš says goodbye to his uncle outside the monastery. Tormented by doubts and jealousy, Vok is suspicious that Záviš and Hedvika are in love. However, Záviš vigorously refutes the idea. Katuška and Jarek bring Hedvika to the monastery. Yet Vok cannot bring himself to confess his love for her. They go on to the monastery, and Záviš notices Hedvika's grief. He decides to go to Vok and persuade him to marry Hedvika. He is prevented from doing so by Michálek, they draw swords, but Beneš intervenes to end the dispute. Beneš confesses his sins to Michálek: he had thwarted Vok's courtship because he wanted to become an abbot himself, as he believed that he would thus acquire the entire fortune of the house of Rožmberk. Michálek forgives him, and Beneš asks him to bring Hedvika to Vok. However, Michálek decides to bring his daughter as a bride instead. Rarach appears in the form of a shepherd. Beneš uses the sign of the cross to repel him. Rarach's power is weakened after Beneš's absolution, so he calls his followers to take revenge. The village girls come to the monastery, hoping to become Vok's bride. Their lads catch up with them and compel them to return home. Rarach summons his helpers during a storm and commands them to build a dam across the Vltava so that the waters of the river will flood the monastery. Hedvika arrives, determined to save Vok, relying on the power of her ardent love despite the obstacle of a devil's wall across the Vltava. With the sign of the cross, Beneš drives away the infernal powers, the wall collapses, and the storm abates. Then, a messenger arrives with the news that the king has appointed lord Vok the governor of his lands. Vok accepts the rank and asks Hedvika if she would be willing to accompany him as his wife to a distant foreign land. Hedvika agrees, and everyone celebrates lord Vok.