

BEDŘICH SMETANA
(1824–1884)

Dalibor

An opera in three acts from 1867

Act One

Everyone in the castle courtyard is eagerly awaiting the trial of the knight Dalibor. Jitka, Dalibor's ward, is determined to free her protector with the help of her loyal companions, as she suspects that prison awaits him. The judges led by King Vladislav accuse Dalibor of attacking Ploškovice Castle and murdering the Burgrave. The Burgrave's sister and plaintiff Milada describes the bloody robbery, blames Dalibor for it and asks the court for a just punishment. The overpowered and captured culprit defends himself by saying he avenged the death of his friend and fellow fighter against injustice Zdeněk. In a dispute with the Litoměřice town council, Zdeněk had been captured and killed. Since the people of Ploškovice stood on the side of their enemies, they had to be punished for Zdeněk's death. Dalibor also promises to avenge himself on the people of Litoměřice, even if the king himself should prevent it. For this threat, he is sentenced to life imprisonment by the judges. He is not afraid of it; he just invokes the memory of his friend Zdeněk.

Milada's anger at Dalibor's testimony fades; she suddenly understands the knight's action in a different light, forgives him, and her hatred turns into strong affection. But her pleas for mercy from the King and the Judge are in vain. Their answer is merciless and unequivocal.

Jitka watches Milada's inner transformation from her hiding place, and as soon as they are both alone, she confides in her that everything is being prepared for Dalibor's release.

Act Two

Dalibor's armor-bearers sing about their cheerful military life in a pub, and one of Dalibor's companions, Vítek, tells Jitka that they are all going to help the knight escape from prison. He overhears Jitka's story about Milada, who, disguised as a wandering singer, sneaks among the castle guards to get into the castle, finds the imprisoned Dalibor and gives a signal to his would-be liberators.

Despite the warnings of Commander Budivoj, the Beneš the jailer keeps the young singer to help him with his hard service and to brighten his lonely days by singing. Little does Beneš know that Milada is only waiting for the right moment to find Dalibor. With Beneš's consent and his old violin, Milada finally descends into the prison.

Dalibor's vision of his fallen friend vanishes when he sees an unknown young man hand him the desired instrument. When Milada finds Dalibor, she reveals herself,

begs him for forgiveness and tells him the purpose of her mission. The thought of freedom and the knowledge of her love fills the knight with enthusiasm and the strength to fight on. He sees Zdeněk's legacy in Milada's arrival and her feelings.

Act Three

Budivoj draws the king's attention to Dalibor's followers, who aim to set free their master from prison. The old jailer is interrogated, as his assistant—Milada in disguise—rewarded him for his betrayal. She left Beneš with a purse full of money for his silence and disappeared. The judges, fearing a rebellion, appeal to the king and demand Dalibor's immediate execution. King Vladislav, impressed by the knight's courage and determination from the first, ponders the difficult fate of a ruler who is responsible for the life and death of his subjects at critical moments. Under pressure from the judges, Vladislav confirms Dalibor's sentence. He will be executed by the sword, but with all the honor accorded his knightly status.

Dalibor has already broken through the bars of his cell, eagerly awaiting freedom and great deeds ahead. Just as he is about to give the signal to his loyal band by playing the violin, a string breaks on the instrument and Budivoj and the guards burst into the dungeon. He is surprised to find that Dalibor is standing there, freed from his shackles, determined to escape. With an unfortunate message, Budivoj deprives Dalibor of all his hopes, but he is relieved that Milada, in disguise, has escaped from the castle. Dalibor proudly accepts his fate.

Amidst the oppressive tension, Dalibor's companions wait in vain for the agreed sign under the castle. The death knell rings and monks sing in the distance. Realizing that Dalibor's escape had been discovered, Milada leads the rebels in arms. She is wounded in a battle and dies in Dalibor's arms. The royal army defeats the rebels. Dalibor fights with Budivoj and dies by his hand.