státní opera praha
1888—2008

120 let budovy Státní opery Praha
years of the Prague State Opera building

Intendant: JAROSLAV VOCELKA
Opera Chief Executive: INGEBORG ŽÁDNÁ
Ballet Chief Executive: PAVEL ĎUMBALA

PRESS RELEASE

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120th Anniversary of the Prague State Opera Building

The history of the theatre building called from 1st April 1992 the Prague State Opera and overshadowed in the past - unfairly but understandably in the context of the Czech metropolis - by the National Theatre started being written in the second half of the 19th century. The Czech Lands were at that time a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Prague had a large German minority. This German community was inspired indirectly by the opening of a splendid Czech National Theatre in 1883 and began to desire a spectacular theatre haven of its own. The hundred-year-old Royal Provincial German Theatre (Königliches deutsches Landestheater), as the Nostitz Theatre in Ovocný trh ("Fruit Market" square in Prague) was then called, could no longer meet the requirements of demanding epical productions. That was the reason behind the decision to establish the German Theatre Society (Deutscher Theaterverein) with the main aim of raising funds. It took three years to draft a building plan, which was then implemented by the renowned Fellner und Helmer studio from Vienna. The spacious auditorium and also the stately Neo-Rococo decorations place this theatre building among the most beautiful ones in Europe.

The management of the New German Theatre (Neues deutsches Theater), which opened on 1st January 1888 with a performance of Wagner's opera The Mastersingers of Nuremberg, was entrusted to the hitherto director of the Theatre of the Estates, Angelo Neumann, who was tireless in seeking out new opera titles and who produced a number of world premieres. It took him a short time to raise the theatre to a high artistic standard of international significance. The directors who came after Neumann - Heinrich Teweles, Leopold Kramer, Robert Volkner and Paul Eger - managed the New German Theatre with varying success. In the 1930s, at a time of the growing threat of Nazism, the New German Theatre became one of the bastions of democracy in Prague, offering a haven to artists whose activities had become undesirable in Germany for their progressive stances or their race. Contemporary political events, declining audiences and the related financial difficulties forced the German Theatre Society to close the theatre in September 1938. The stage, which had hosted personalities like conductors Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, Felix Mottl, Arthur Nikisch, Alexander Zemlinsky, Georg Széll, Erich Kleiber, Otto Klemperer, and singers Nellie Melba, Enrico Caruso, Lilli Lehmann, Maria Jeritza, Leo Slezak, Hans Hotter and others, arrived at the end of its first important phase.

Soon after the end of the Second World War, a new opera and drama company – the Fifth of May Theatre - was set up in the building of the former New German Theatre. A season later, the drama section was abolished and an independent opera company was established under the leadership of Alois Hába and Václav Kašlík, bearing the name the Fifth of May Grand Opera. The chief conductor was Karel Ančerl and stage director Alfréd Radok. Memorable productions included Václav Kašlík's dynamic staging of The Bartered Bride, Alfréd Radok's ultramodern Tales of Hoffmann, the Czechoslovak premiere of Prokofiev's Betrothal in a Monastery (under the title Masquerade), which launched the career of world-renowned scenographer Josef Svoboda, and, finally, Alois Hába's Mother, an opera in the quarter-tone system. The lifetime of the Fifth of May Grand Opera was, however, short. In the summer of 1948 it was decided, for political and economic reasons, to attach the Fifth of May Grand Opera to the National Theatre, and from 3rd November 1949 the theatre started operating under the name the Smetana Theatre. A major stumbling block in the merger of the two Prague opera companies were the considerable associated organisational problems and the resulting artistic colossus. The repertoire introduced by the Smetana Theatre gave a large

space to contemporary Czech opera, its backbone, however, consisted of major as well as less known works of world opera literature. The advanced technical amenities of the theatre made it a suitable venue for hosting foreign ensembles and a large number of world-renowned opera stars. One of the most remarkable hostings was that of the Vienna State Opera which presented Strauss's Ariadne auf Naxos (1979) under the baton of Karl Böhm, with Edit Gruber as Zerbinetta.

The road to the Prague State Opera started in 1990, in reaction to the growing criticism of the absurd association of the Smetana and National Theatres. The Smetana Theatre opera company was separated from the National Theatre on 1st April 1992, acquiring the status of an independent theatre with Karel Drgáč as its appointed director. The theatre was given a new name – the Prague State Opera. Karel Drgáč had all currently performed classical opera titles reproduced in their original languages and all new productions performed exclusively in their original languages. He was highly acclaimed for his methodical care of the legacy of the 20th century (Alexander Zemlinsky, Hans Krása, Pavel Haas, Gottfried von Einem). During the premiere of Verdi's Un Ballo in maschera on 21st February 1993 running subtitles were used for the first time in the Czech Republic . On 1st April 1995, Eva Randová, a singer of international renown, was appointed director of the Prague State Opera. During her term the famous philharmonic concerts, so popular during the era of the New German Theatre, were revived. The new titles she produced included Turandot, The Magic Flute, Káťa Kabanová, Boris Godunov, Jenůfa, The Turk in Italy, La Gioconda, Lohengrin, Eugene Onegin, Faust et Marguerite and Don Carlos. The most significant events were the concert performance of Pavel Haas's opera The Charlatan, of which a live recording was made by DECCA, and a concert performance of Wagner's Valkyrie.

In 1998 the leadership of the Prague State Opera passed into the hands of scenographer Daniel Dvořák (director) and stage director Jiří Nekvasil (artistic head). Their choice of first large title to be staged – Boito's opera Nerone, never performed before in the country, was typical of the declared dramaturgical line of the new leadership - besides preserving the classical legacy, their objective was to discover neglected works and, especially, introduce new operas in world premieres (Bubu of Montparnasse by E. F. Burian, The Physicists by Swiss composer Andreas Pflüger and Circus Terra by the Norwegian composer Trygve Madsen) or in Czech and Prague premieres (The Fall of the House of Usher by Philip Glass, Benjamin Britten's Turn of the Screw, Bohuslav Martinů's first opera The Soldier and the Dancer directed by David Pountney). The revival of the works of Alexander von Zemlinsky continued with the Prague State Opera production of his opera Once upon a Time, and the tradition of pre-war German opera was brought back with Arnold Schönberg's Expectation, played on 6th June 2000, 76 years to the day of its world premiere in the New German Theatre. Another world premiere in 2000 was the winner of the international New Opera for Prague competition – the work Phaedra by Emil Viklický. The aim of the "French project" was to introduce three French operas from three centuries (Robert le diable by Giacomo Meyerbeer, Ariadne and Bluebeard by Paul Dukas, Joseph Merrick dit Elephant Man by Laurent Petitgirard). The last project before the departure of Daniel Dvořák, who left to take up the post of director of the National Theatre in Prague, was a thematic cycle dedicated to Shakespeare in opera and opening with the rarely performed work Hamlet by Ambroise Thomas.

Starting from the 2002/2003 season, the hitherto administrative director Jaroslav Vocelka was appointed director of the Prague State Opera by the Minister of Culture Pavel Dostál. As administrative director he had managed to increase the self-sufficiency of the opera house and to rationalise its operations, his merits included raising audience and actor support and complementing stage technology. As director, he continued to oversee the reconstruction of the building. He was the first in Prague to introduce the model of independent ballet chief executive (next to the existing opera chief executive), common in

large world theatres. The current head of opera is Ingeborg Žádná, and of ballet Pavel Ďumbala. Typical for the Vocelka era are classically staged productions (represented by the romantically wistful Rusalka of director Zdeněk Troška with Eva Urbanová singing the leading role for the first time in her career), modern productions of classical titles (Tchaikovsky's Queen of Spades directed by Roman Hovenbitzer or La traviata directed by Arnaud Bernard) as well as world premieres of Czech operas (La Roulette by Zdeněk Merta, Oráč a Smrt (The Tiller and Death) by Emil Viklický). The opera dramaturges discovered forgotten or locally unknown works – Leoncavallo's La Bohéme, Treemonisha by American ragtime king Scott Joplin (a Czech premiere), Eugene d´Albert's Tiefland on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of its world premiere in the New German Theatre (15th November 1903), Bernstein's Candide (2006), Francis Poulenc's Les mamelles de Tirésias (Czech premiere in 2007).

On 1st January 2003 the Ballet of the Prague State Opera became the second company of the Prague State Opera. Within five years the ballet ensemble succeeded in developing a repertoire of varied genres, spreading from the unconventional Asian-theatre inspired choreography of Bronislav Roznos's Time of Pain to the classically inspired Swan Lake with repeated guest performances by English National Ballet stars Daria Klimentová and Dmitri Gruzdyev. Like Daniel Dvořák, Jaroslav Vocelka, too, has continued the tradition of benefit concerts in support of various charities. An extraordinary event was the performance of legendary Spanish singer Montserrat Caballé (on 17th October 1993) at a benefit concert for towns and villages destroyed by floods.

During the fifteen years of its existence the stage of the Prague State Opera has hosted a large number of prominent artists: the singers Gail Gilmore, Anja Silja, Heikki Siukola, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Vladimír Matorin, Thomas Sunnegardh, Eva Urbanová, Ľubica Vargicová, Michèle Crider and Vladimír Chernov; stage directors John Dew, David Pountney, Herbert Adler, Dominik Neuner, Pier Luigi Pizzi and Arnaud Bernard; conductors Albert Rosen, Martin Turnovský, Nikša Bareza, Hilary Griffiths, Hans Wallat, János Kulka, Bohumil Gregor and Ondrej Lenárd, and costume designer Jan Skalický. Thirteen operas had their world premieres here (53 altogether over the 120 years), eight had Czech premieres (190 in the 120 years) and there were three Prague premieres (23 since 1888). The international prestige of the Prague State Opera is supported and promoted by foreign tours. The most common destination is Japan which, in 2007, the opera ensemble visited for the eighth time. During the last three years the Prague State Opera performed at opera festivals in Macerata (Italy), in Bydhoszcz (Poland), in Miskolc (Hungary), and Regensburg and Mannheim (Germany). Other prestigious venues attended by the Prague State Opera have been repeated performances at the Salzburg Festival House and the Haus für Mozart. The Prague State Opera is planning a fourth visit to Salzburg in the autumn of 2008 with Puccini's Turandot.

Starting from the 2007/08 season the chief conductor of the Prague State Opera is Guillaume Tourniaire who during the last two seasons has prepared performances of Bernstein's Candide and Poulenc's Les mamelles de Tirésias and La Voix Humaine. In September 2007 he presented, in the Prague State Opera, the complete incidental music to Henrik Ibsen's drama Peer Gynt by Edvard Grieg and is currently preparing the modern premiere in February 2008 of Camille Saint-Saënse's opera Hélène, whose score was found recently in the theatre archives in Monte Carlo after having been lost for more than a 100 years. The concert performance of the opera Hélène, whose theme is the doomed love of Helen of Troy for Paris, will be complemented by Persian Melodies, a song cycle for soloists, choir and orchestra with lyrics by Armanda Renaud. This modern premiere will take place on 8th December 2008 when it will become one of the highlights of the celebrations of the 120th Anniversary of the Prague State Opera Building.

The celebrations will start on Saturday 5th January 2008 with a special Open Day, a reception on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition of unique period photographs of the building and a gala performance of Antonín Dvořák's Rusalka with Adriana Kohútková

and Tomáš Černý in the leading roles, and under the baton of Ondrej Lenárd. Another highlight will be the premiere, on 29th May 2008, of Richard Wagner's opera The Flying Dutchman presented by British stage director Stephen Taylor as a part of the International Prague Spring Music Festival. We are preparing a number of gala performances, lectures, competitions and we shall introduce famous guest artists - foremost among them the already mentioned English National Ballet soloists Daria Klimentová and Dmitri Gruzdyev.

THE HISTORY OF THE THEATRE IN DATES

1886–1887
Construction of the New German Theatre (Neues deutsches Theater)

5. 1. 1888
Start of operations of the New German Theatre with the gala performance of Richard Wagner's opera *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*

1888–1938
New German Theatre (Neues deutsches Theater)
Directors:

Angelo Neumann	1888–1910
Heinrich Teweles	1911–1918
Leopold Kramer	1918–1927
Robert Volkner	1927–1932
Paul Eger	1932–1938

September 1938
The German Theatre Society (Deutscher Theaterverein) ends the operations of the New German Theatre and starts negotiations on the sale of the building to the Czechoslovak State.
After the occupation of Czechoslovakia the fate of the theatre is in the hands of the Böhmen und Mähren protectorate authorities.

1939–1945
German opera (Deutsches Opernhaus)
The theatre building without a permanent ensemble is used for occasional guest performances, political meetings, operetta in 1942-43, and in 1944 as an interim stage for the Duisburg opera company.

1945–1946
Fifth of May Theatre
Director: Alois Hába

1946–1948
Fifth of May Grand Opera
Director: Alois Hába

August 1948
Merged with the National Theatre in Prague under the name Fifth of May Theatre (until 19. 11. 1949)

1949–1992
The Smetana Theatre as a component of the National Theatre (total reconstruction of the building from 1967 to 1973)

1. 4. 1992 – until the present
Prague State Opera
Directors:

Karel Drgáč	1992–1995
Eva Randová	1995–1998
Daniel Dvořák	1998–2002
Jaroslav Vocelka	2002–until the present

CELEBRATIONS OF THE 120TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PRAGUE STATE OPERA BUILDING

1888 – 2008

START OF CELEBRATION S– Saturday 5th January 2008

Special Open Day 10 a.m. to 3.30 p.m.

To start the celebrations of the 120th anniversary of the opening of its building, the Prague State Opera has prepared a special Open Day on Saturday 5th January from 10 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. Visitors will be given an expert account of the history in Czech and English and a guided tour of the building including backstage facilities.

Opening of the exhibition of historical postcards of the theatre building at 5.30 p.m.
"GREETINGS FROM PRAGUE"

The objective of the establishment of a splendid theatre haven dedicated to the large Prague German minority was to resolve the accumulated operational and technical problems of the hundred-years old and no longer convenient Royal German Provincial Theatre (the Theatre of the Estates) in Ovocný trh ("Fruit Market" square in Prague). The decision to build a new temple to Thalia was influenced, amongst other things, by the recently opened Czech National Theatre. The Prague Germans competed with architect Zítek's building located on a narrow plot on the Vltava embankment with their new building designed by famous Viennese architects Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer and located on a more suitable site, which had been made available by the demolition of the wooden New Town Theatre located not far from the Franz Joseph Railway Station. People still distinguish the two largest Prague theatres according to their location as either the one "near the Vltava" and the one "near the railway station". The building in Neo-Renaissance style with six Corinthian columns and a spectacular Orphean tympanon on the frontispiece, concealing inside a splendid Neo-Rococo auditorium for almost 2,000 viewers, displaying a refined architectonic expression, proportionately balanced, and disposing of technical parameters that were extraordinary in its time, placed the theatre firmly into the European context. As such, it provided, from the very beginning, an inspiration to painters, graphic artists and photographers and became a frequent theme of postcards, a historical selection of which is the unifying theme of the exhibition held on the occasion of the 120th Anniversary of the Prague State Opera Building. The exhibition is complemented by modern photographs of the theatre from the funds of the Prague State Opera documentation centre.

Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904): RUSALKA 7 p.m.
Gala performance
Conductor: **Ondrej Lenárd**
Stage director: **Zdeněk Troška**
Lead roles: **Adriana Kohútková** (Rusalka) & **Tomáš Černý** (The Prince)

GALA PERFORMANCES ON THE OCCASION OF THE 120TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BUILDING

22. 1. 2008

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893): SWAN LAKE

Choreography: Lev Ivanov, Marius Petipa, Pavel Ďumbala, Hana Vláčilová
Lead roles: **Daria Klimentová** & **Dmitri Gruzdyev**

27. 1. 2008

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791): COSÌ FAN TUTTE

Conductor: Jiří Štrunc; Stage director: Otto Ševčík

31. 1. 2008

Leonard Bernstein (1918 – 1990): CANDIDE

Conductor: Guillaume Tourniaire; Stage director: Michal & Šimon Caban

8. 2. 2008

Giuseppe Verdi (1813 – 1901): AIDA (200th repeat)

Conductor: Richard Hein; Stage director: Petar Selem

6. 3. 2008

Ruggiero Leoncavallo (1857 – 1919): LA BOHÈME

Conductor: **Hilary Griffiths;** Stage director: **Roman Hovenbitzer**

15. 5. 2008

Edvard Hagerup Grieg (1843 – 1907): PEER GYNT

Conductor: **Guillaume Tourniaire**
The performance is a part of the International Prague Spring Festival.

PREMIERES

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 – 1921)

NUIT PERSANE & HÉLÈNE

On the occasion of the 120th Anniversary of the Prague State Opera Building

Conductor: **Guillaume Tourniaire**

Orchestra, choir and soloists of the Prague State Opera

Premiere of modern production: 13. , 14. & 19. 2. 2008

Ruggiero Leoncavallo (1857 – 1919)

LA BOHÈME

Conductor: **Guillaume Tourniaire**

Stage director: **Roman Hovenbitzer**

Set and costume designer: **Pavel Bílek**

Choirmaster: **Tvrtko Karlovič**

Renewed premiere: 6. 3. 2008

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA (ballet)

Music: **Petr Malásek**

Libretto, choreography and stage direction: **Libor Vaculík**

Set designer: **Martin Černý**

Costume designer: **Ľudmila Várossová**

Premiere: 10. 4. 2008

Richard Wagner (1813 – 1883)

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

On the occasion of the 120th Anniversary of the Prague State Opera Building

Conductor: **Guillaume Tourniaire**

Stage director: **Stephen Taylor**

Set designer: **Laurent Peduzzi**

Costume designer: **Nathalie Prats**

Light effects: **Christian Pinaud**

Choirmaster: **Tvrtko Karlovič**

Premiere: 29. 5. 2008

The performance is a part of the International Prague Spring Festival

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