

## **PRAMEN (THE FONT)**

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The libretto of the opera *Pramen (The Font)* is taken from the verse drama *The Tomb*, written in 1921 by the Czech poet Jiří Wolker. Although Wolker's plot is drawn from a medieval catholic legend about a miraculous fountain hidden in a tomb, the poet uses this archaic setting to reflect very contemporary concerns: the tragic events of the First World War, and his own worsening illness (he would die of tuberculosis in 1924 at the age of 24). In addition to Wolker's text, the libretto is complemented by two biblical texts, taken from the Book of Isaiah and the Gospel According to John.

Sacrificing one's happiness for the sake of other people is the main theme of the opera. In this act it is possible to perceive a parallel with the Christian idea of redemption. The work is a dramatic presentation of humanity's quest for meaning, in which each character represents a typical human attitude towards the truth. It also evokes the tragedy of war, which irrevocably changes relationships between people.

The libretto employs the symbol of the fountain, and the language of thirst, on several different levels. Thirst does not represent just a physical need but also thirst for salvation and redemption or thirst for family happiness. The font does not symbolize just water but it is also a symbol of life, light and truth.

There are six soloists in the opera, Peter (a doctor), Eva (Peter's wife), the Mother Superior, the Blind Girl, the General and the Undertaker. Peter, who feels an obligation to help others even at the cost of his own happiness, is the main character of the opera. In contrast to him there is the insensitive and hypocritical Mother Superior who is pleased by the people's misfortune because she had not been respected in society before misfortune affected the people. Her self-conceit does not allow her to wish them anything but punishment. The Blind Girl is a symbol of hope. She is convinced of the goodness of God and his will to help people. The General is the embodiment of selfishness and pride. He is only interested in his own personal benefit even at the expense of others. The Undertaker is an indecisive and faint-hearted character. Nevertheless, he is crucial for the people's salvation. Family love and warmth of feeling are embodied in Peter's wife Eva who endeavors to protect her husband and ensure family happiness.

The opera consists of one act, divided into six scenes. It takes place in wartime, in a monastery complex situated in a besieged town. The short prelude is followed by the entry of the Mother Superior. She rebukes the thirsty people who beg the God for mercy. According to her divine rescue is not possible because the people have sinned too much. Then the Blind Girl appears on the scene and contradicts the Mother's Superior statement. She describes her encounter with the God, whom she says will come to help people. The first scene ends with the Mother's Superior reappearance. She resolutely contradicts the Blind Girl's words.

The second scene begins with the appearance of the General. He has returned victorious from the war, but suffers from terrible thirst which he wants to slake at any price. The dying Undertaker, who knows the secret where the life-giving fount is hidden comes to the scene. The General and the People ask him to reveal the secret of the font, but the Mother Superior pressures him to refuse: he has sworn not to tell anybody about the place. But as soon as the greedy General uses violence, the Undertaker reveals that the fount is hidden in the tomb and dies strangled by the General. However, there is a curse written on the tomb which forbids its being uncovered: "I lived and I died. Traveler, halt and be aware that you will die too. Do not touch my ashes or you will die cursed by the God". The General ignores the inscription with contempt as well as Doctor's words and when he wants to uncover the tomb, he falls dead to the floor. The third scene opens with a monologue by Peter, who reflects upon the meaning of general's death and his own determination to help people. Later Peter's wife Eva enters and a dialog between her and Peter follows. Eva tries vainly to persuade Peter to go back home with her and give up his task to help others. The situation is further complicated by the fact that she carries Peter's child. Peter is torn and hesitating but voices of a procession from outside remind him of his task. Now he is completely decided to uncover the tomb despite the warning inscription on it. However, Eva is quicker and uncovers the tomb herself in effort to protect Peter. Tragically, the tombstone knocks her down and kills the child. Eva leaves the scene distraught, blaming Peter for what happened. In the fourth scene, Peter reflects on his desperate situation. He meditates about the rightness of his action and finally manages to find the strength to complete the task he has begun (he is encouraged by a voice coming from behind the scene). Before Peter manages to enter the tomb, a group of people led by the Mother Superior runs to the scene. The Mother asks heatedly who uncovered the tomb and the fifth scene opens. Although the tomb is uncovered, water does not spring from it and people remain thirsty. Nobody dares go down and bring water because of the Mother's Superior intimidation. At last, Peter comes forward and declares his determination to act. The Mother Superior comments his action with the following words: "You, a doctor, against the God?" Peter answers her as follows: "I do not act against the God but against a dead word. If God was ever in these letters, he has left them long ago..." Peter enters the tomb and the Mother Superior curses him. After a while a spring of light symbolizing water bursts forth from the tomb and people are caught by triumphant euphoria, completely ignoring the Mother Superior. Peter is acclaimed a god by people and the Mother Superior denounced as the devil. The sixth scene is a monologue by Eva. Her voice is prophetic and wise: she has already understood the significance of her husband's acting. Her words relate to eternal life cycle, which will remain uninterrupted.

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