

# LESSON PLAN: THE MOLDAU BY BEDŘICH SMETANA

Bedřich Smetana wrote a series of 6 symphonic poems called *Ma Vlast* (*My Country* or *My Fatherland*) during his later years as he became deaf, 1876. His purpose was to paint a musical picture of his beloved homeland.

The six symphonic poems are:

1. *Vyšehrad* – The High Castle (describes the Vyšehrad Castle in Prague which was the seat of the earliest Czech Kings).



Vyšehrad (Czech for “upper castle”)<sup>1</sup>

2. *Vltava* or *The Moldau* – a river that runs through Czechoslovakia (Bohemia).



The Vltava in Prague<sup>2</sup>

3. *Sarka* (A Female Warrior) – the Legend of the Maiden’s War.
4. *Z Ceskych Luhu a Haju* – Bohemia’s woods and fields.
5. *Tabor* (Hammering) – The city of Tabor was where the Hussite wars took place.
6. *Blanik* (A Mountain) – A large army of knights slept in this mountain.

The most popular of the 6 poems and most widely performed is *The Moldau* (*Vltava* in Czechoslovakian). There was constant unrest between the Catholics and Protestants and boundaries were changed in that area. It was in the mid 1800's that Bohemia became part of the Austrian Kingdom and German was taught in schools. Czechoslovakians learned German, including Smetana. Therefore the music was given the German name for the river, *Die Moldau*. However, the Czech language once again became the national language when the Czech Republic was established.

The music paints a picture of the river as it travels through the country. Smetana describes the course of the Vltava in the music as follows:

- It Starts from two small springs: the Cold Vltava and Warm Vltava.
- Both streams unify into a single current.
- The course of the Vltava through woods and meadows.
- Through a landscape where a country wedding is celebrated.
- The round dance of the mermaids or nymphs in the night's moonshine. On the nearby rocks loom proud castles, palaces and ruins.
- The Vltava swirls into the St. John's Rapids.
- Then it widens and flows toward Prague, past the Vyšehrad (Upper Castle, See image on page 13).
- Then majestically vanishes into the distance, ending at the Labe river (or the Elbe river, in German).



Nová Pec - "Heart of the Vltava"<sup>3</sup>

Smetana used a Rondo form with seven continuous sections with the main theme recurring throughout. (Use the following times and descriptions to follow along with the music.)

- 0:00 | Two flutes begin representing the two swirling springs at the head of the Moldau. The clarinets join in just before the famous main theme is introduced.
- 1:00 | The main theme is played by the violins over top of the swirling wind instruments. The theme comes from a Swedish folk song. (Repeated 3x)
- 2:52 | Forest Hunt - The river flows through a forest where the horns herald in the “hunt” theme.
- 3:50 | Peasant Wedding – A folk-like theme represents a wedding celebration and dancing as the river passes by.
- 5:20 | Moonlight: Dance of the Water Nymphs – The music has a nocturnal sound as the river flows through the night.
- 7:56 | The main theme is heard briefly
- 5:50 | The Rapids – A powerful and lively melody as the river splashes through rapids and perhaps a thunderstorm.
- 10:00 | Main theme returns
- 10:30 | The grandeur of the castle – The theme from first piece of the set of six symphonic poems as the river passes by a castle (the Vyšehrad Castle). The river’s grand entrance into Prague with the main theme in grandioso fashion. It flows quietly out of sight with the exception of two loud chords at the end.

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## VIDEO LINKS

As you listen to the recording, visualize what the music is portraying. Can you “see” what Smetana wanted to share with the listener?

**Smetana - Vltava (The Moldau):** (<https://youtu.be/34oeAxETdbc> - 12 minutes) This video has beautiful photos of the river as it travels through the country.

\*\*\*Be sure to always preview the video clips prior to showing them to the students. You know your students and what will be too long and what will keep their attention.\*\*\*

# VOCABULARY

**Bohemia:** A region in the West Czech Republic, formerly a kingdom in Central Europe.

**Chamber Music:** Music suitable for performance in a room (chamber) or small hall.

**Choral:** Music written for a choir usual of a religious nature.

**Chorus:** A group of singers consisting of 4 or more parts, not necessarily religious; also the refrain or repeated ending of a song.

**Czech Republic:** A republic in Central Europe. Its includes Bohemia, Moravia and part of Silesia. It was formerly a part of Czechoslovakia, now independent since 1993.

**Folk Tune:** A people's song, specific to a region, nation, nationality; cowboy song, a spiritual, mining song, etc.

**Grandioso:** Italian for large, grand, full.

**Gymnasium:** Educational or sporting institution; a type of secondary school preparation for higher education.

**Moldau:** German name for a river that flows through the Czech Republic, a symphonic poem written by Bedřich Smetana.

**Nymphs:** A mythological spirit of nature imagined as a beautiful maiden of the sea, river, woods, trees, etc. A graceful young woman, a maiden.

**Opera:** A play or drama where the vocal and orchestral music is essential. All script is sung. Originating in Italy.

**Orchestral:** Music for the orchestra or resembling the vastness of an orchestra.

**Prague:** The capital and largest city of the Czech Republic, the 14<sup>th</sup> largest city in the European Union. Historical capital of Bohemia. It is situated on the banks of the Vltava River.

**Rondo:** An instrumental piece where one theme is repeated by alternating with other themes: A B A C A.

**Symphonic Poem:** A musical work for the symphony that paints a picture through music, follows a story line or poem.

**Vltava:** Czechoslovakian for Moldau.

**Vocal:** For voice, one or more .

**Vyšehrad Castle:** Czech for upper castle, a historic castle located in Prague, built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, on a hill overlooking the Vltava River.



# BEDŘICH SMETANA IN DEPTH



Smetana in 1848<sup>4</sup>



Smetana circa 1878<sup>5</sup>

Bedřich Smetana was born on March 2, 1824 in a small town, Litomyšl, east of Prague. His father, František, became fairly wealthy supplying clothing and provisions to the French Army during the Napoleonic Wars. František also had a natural gift for music and played in a string quartet. Bedřich was introduced to music by his father and gave his first public performance at age six.

Under the Habsburg rule, German was taught in schools and spoken in Bohemia rather than Czechoslovakian. However, most people learned Czechoslovakian later in life. This influenced Bedřich because he named his musical works in German. Bedřich attended elementary school and then went on to the Gymnasium (higher education). After listening to a series of piano recitals by Liszt, he decided he wanted to play like Liszt and compose like Mozart. Bedřich's father did not think music was a career so he sent Bedřich to live with an uncle. He finished his schooling in Plzeň (Pilsen). He often entertained in town at many parties where he was in great demand. He studied at the Prague Music Institute when he was 19 and from there accepted an appointment as a music teacher to the family of a nobleman.

In 1848 there was political unrest in Europe and Smetana became involved in the revolt along with a good friend. His friend was imprisoned but Bedřich escaped. He was able to start a music school with hopes of acquiring some financial support from Liszt, whom he had developed a friendship. Though Liszt was unable to give any financial support, he came regularly to perform at the school's concerts. It was at this time that Smetana married a childhood acquaintance, Kateřina Kolářová. They had four daughters: one died of tuberculosis, a year after another one died of scarlet fever and his fourth daughter died shortly after that. After the baby's death, his wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis and died a few years later leaving him with their only living daughter.

Smetana wrote many works that were received well – even popular at the time, but most did not withstand the test of time. He wrote several operas but only one is still performed today, *The Bartered Bride*. Much of his music was considered political and rebellious, making it difficult to have it performed. If it was performed, there was only one performance or a few at best.

Smetana married Barbora (Bettina) Ferdinandiová in 1869 and had two more daughters but his relationship deteriorated mainly over money matters. There was also the problem with his health. He had severe headaches and found that he was losing his hearing. Not able to see success in any treatment, he continued to lose his hearing. He and his wife never divorced, but lived unhappily together. They took their two daughters and moved to the home of his eldest daughter where he continued to compose. It was then that he finished writing his symphonic poem *Ma Vlast*.



Bedřich Smetana Among his Friends, 1865; oil painting by František Dvořák<sup>6</sup>

As he aged he gained recognition and title of the “Father of Czech Music.” His opera, *The Bartered Bride* had its 100<sup>th</sup> performance. A gala concert and banquet was planned for his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday but he was too ill to attend. He wrote to a friend that he feared that he was going mad. Two months later he was placed in a mental asylum in Prague where he died a month later.



Smetana’s gravestone at the Vyšehrad cemetery, Prague. The date format is “cc d/m yy”<sup>7</sup>



Bedřich Smetana's musical works consisted of:

- 9 Operas
- 18 Orchestral Works
- 5 Chamber Music
- 6 Organ Preludes
- 100 Piano Works
- 19 Choral Pieces
- 7 Vocal Works

To see a comprehensive list of all of Smetana's compositions you can visit:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_compositions\\_by\\_Bedřich\\_Smetana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_compositions_by_Bedřich_Smetana).

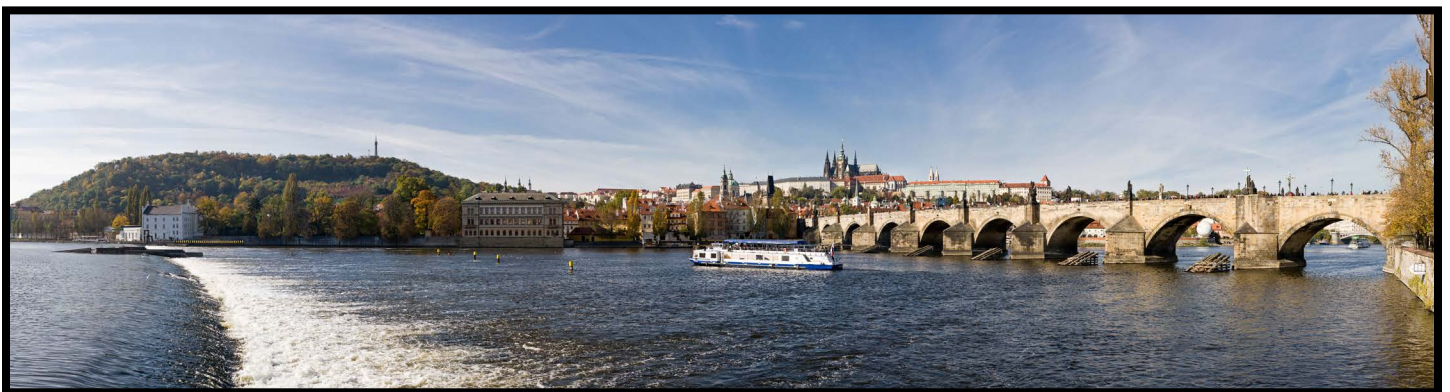
In honor of Smetana's life and work, a memorial, the Bedřich Smetana Museum, was founded in 1926 in Prague. It was moved in 1976, as part of the Czech Museum of Music, to the banks of the Vltava (Moldau) river.



The Bedřich Smetana monument in front of the Bedřich Smetana Museum in Prague<sup>8</sup>

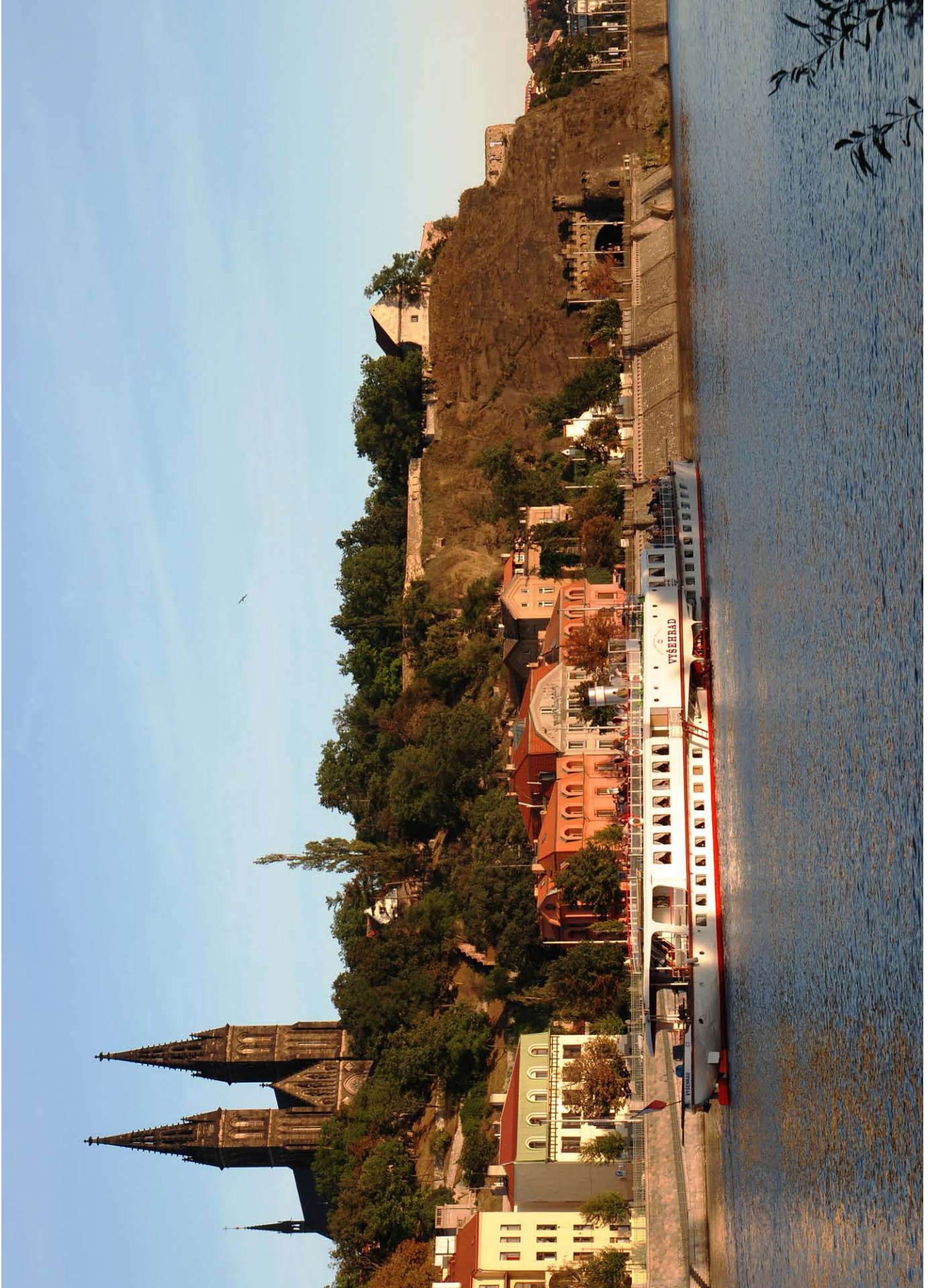


The Bedřich Smetana Museum on the banks of the Vltava, Prague<sup>9</sup>



The Vltava as it flows under the Charles Bridge in Prague<sup>10</sup>





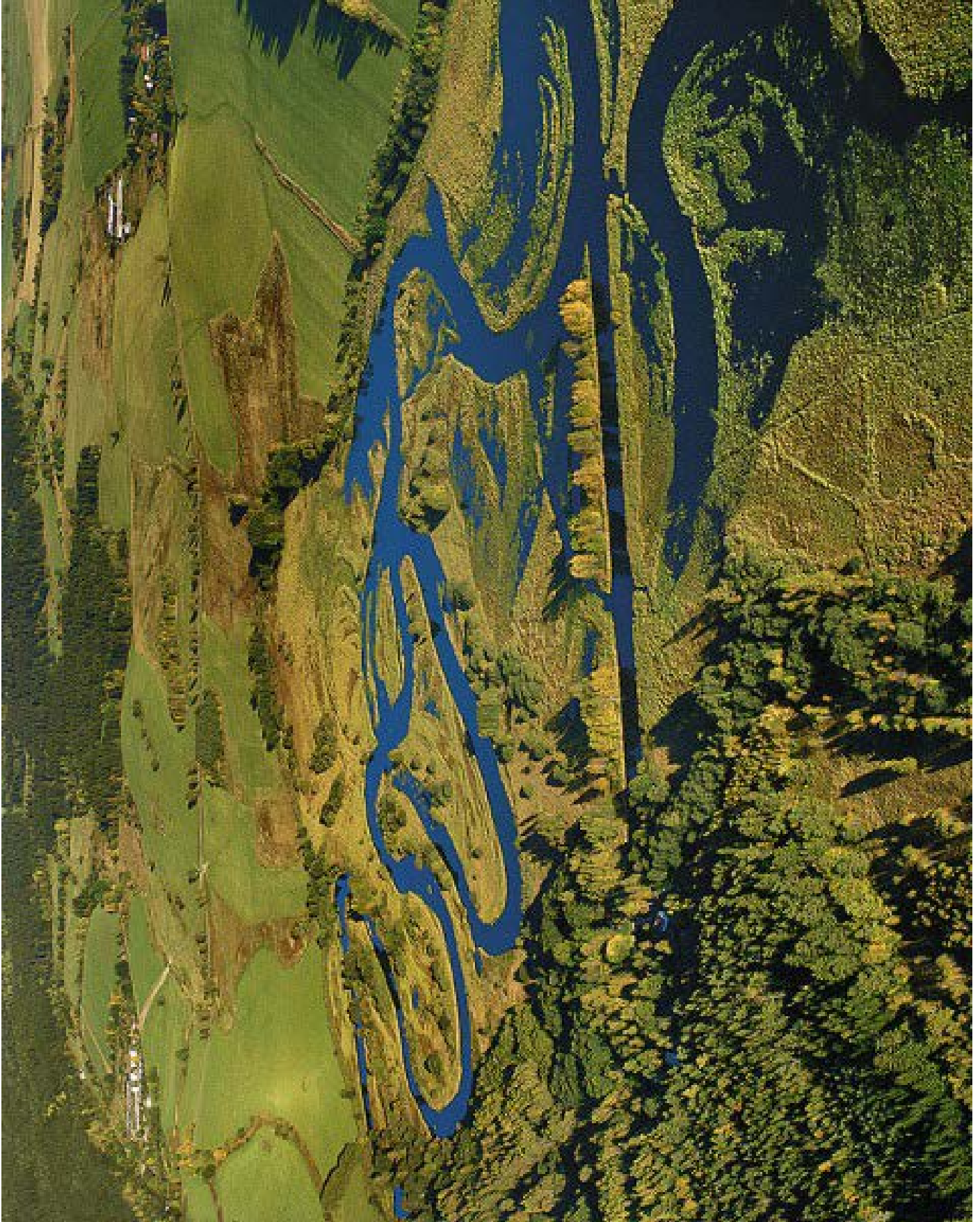
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Smetana in 1848<sup>4</sup>  
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Smetana circa 1878<sup>5</sup>  
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Bedřich Smetana Among his Friends, 1865; oil painting by František Dvořák<sup>6</sup>



B. SMETANA

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Smetana's gravestone at the Vyšehrad cemetery, Prague. The date format is "cc d/m yy"<sup>77</sup>





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