

May 5, 2022 – Stanisław Moniuszko's *Halka*

On this week's *Thursday Night Opera House*, we'll play for the first time a recording of "Poland's national opera," Moniuszko's *Halka*. Set to a libretto by Włodzimierz Wolski, based on his poem of the same name. The first performance of the two-act version was in a concert performance in the Lithuanian city of Vilnius on January 1, 1848. The staged premiere took place in the same city on February 28, 1854. A four-act version was performed in Warsaw on January 1, 1858.

At an engagement party, guests raise their cups in honor of the wealthy young landowner Janusz (baritone **Andrzej Hiolski**) and Zofia (mezzo-soprano **Ryszarda Racewicz**), the daughter of an even wealthier landowner. Outside the party, Halka (soprano **Barbara Zagórzanka**), a simple peasant woman from one of the villages in Janusz's estate, wails plaintively for her lost love, distracting the partygoers. The kind-hearted Zofia asks Janusz to talk to Halka, hoping he'll comfort her. It turns out that Janusz once promised to marry Halka but then disappeared. Away from the guests, he cradles and kisses her, and arranges to meet her in the evening. Halka believes in the sincerity of Janusz's feelings and is happy that she's found a young master who's unafraid of falling in love with a peasant. She's approached by Jontek (tenor **Wiesław Ochman**), who's been in love with her for years and accompanied her on her trip to the town, where he watched her fatal attraction to Janusz with bitterness. He tries to make Halka understand that she's dealing with an impostor. She becomes furious, her screams and cries drawing the attention of the guests. In front of them all, Janusz denies ever knowing her and orders both visitors to leave.

In the countryside, peasants rest after a long week of hard work. Suddenly, they see Jontek bringing Halka home, dishevelled and crazed. Halka's discovered she's pregnant from Janusz and tells her story as if in a hypnotic trance: she sees herself as a dove whose wings of innocence have been broken by his infidelity. Jontek has mixed feelings about Halka. He still loves her but is horrified at how naïve she's been. Janusz and Zofia arrive and head to the village church for their wedding. Halka is heartbroken to see that Janusz is going through with the marriage. She's lost their baby and feels completely alone. In a fit of rage, she decides to burn down the church. Realizing that she can't bring herself to kill Janusz, she changes her mind and, in despair, throws herself into the river.

Robert Satanowski conducts the Orchestra and Chorus of the Wielki Theatre in this 1986 "live" CPO recording, CD number 999032.