

Janáček

Max Brod



[Janáček] is one of the most misunderstood artists of our time, for two reasons (aside from the fact that he lives in quiet Brno, far from central Prague):

Firstly, he is not an extremist – and our epoch is like an over-the-hill soprano; she still has the high notes but no middle register left. I make so bold as to say that true genius ranges within the middle register. It is founded too much in its own consistency to be constantly anxious about its prominence. The works of the greatest geniuses are marked by a peculiar trait I would like to risk calling “lacklustre,” knowing full well that it is not completely appropriate: lacklustre, as opposed to the works by semi-geniuses and talents polished to a high lustre and brilliance. You will always recognise the work of a true genius in that it does not approach you directly, but rather quietly passes by you and then, in passing, touches you, grabs you by the heart within its own private world. It seems to pass by you, ignore you, while it unsettles you and dashes you, without discussion or argument – you must obey and kneel.

Secondly: another of Janáček’s traits is a hindrance to himself: his own theory. That must not be taken literally – but whenever did the world let the chance go by to trip up a great man with his own words? Janáček has spent a very

great amount of time studying the melody latent within a word, a sentence, giving his observations priority. Is he therefore a mere realist, who puts his works together from the mosaic pieces he has gleaned from life?

With only a few exceptions, Czech music criticism does not do justice to Janáček; often, it pays homage to an abstract, bookish academicism which is in stark, strange contrast to real, full-blooded, true Czech music.

But Janáček is not a realist; a mere glance at the score of *Jenůfa* is sufficient to see that the essential elements of the music, the long melodic phrasing and the strictly formal architectonics could never have been chipped off and stuck together from overheard speech-song. But he was indeed open to new material for his music – from his eternal love of Nature and its music, of the inflections of language and folksong, the voices of animals and the forest.

Processing that material was then creative, impulsive and stylising work – and those rich sources of material which influenced Janáček differentiate him from most other moderns, who either cannot be rid of the notion of Beethovenian phrasing and rehash the old nuggets over and over, like ruminants, or – if they rebel against that old convention, simply lose their footing – unnaturally, convulsively, inevitably.

Janáček is novel, and yet not unnatural. Nature has told him secrets unrevealed to others so far. Naturalness safeguards him from conspicuous “lustrous” extremism and thus of course from that sensation which temporarily elicits everything that is merely cunning and turned upside-down. Some of Janáček’s contemporaries will keep on confusing his naturalness with “naturalism” (i.e. mechanically copying Nature) for a little while – the same thing happened with Mussorgsky.



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Max Brod

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