

Remembering Leo Janáček

Max Brod



Max Brod (1884–1968) wrote this obituary of Leo Janáček in 1928. It is a moving document testifying to a great friendship; Brod stood by Janáček both as an artist and a person alike.

Janáček is dead. The great composer was 74, yet he was at the height of his creative powers; he had just finished the string quartet “Intimate Letters” and the opera *From the House of the Dead* (for which he had written the libretto based on Dostoyevsky’s novel).

He was astonishingly prolific in those very last years, and his health was good; acquaintances had recently seen him in Brno, striding about, cheery and sturdy in a white summer suit. The illness which seized him in Hochwald (Hukvaldy), his home town, must have struck him suddenly and insidiously. His vitality, his lust for life – which had recently increased (with all the gentleness of his soul, he was always a full-blooded man) yielded up a remark he made a short while ago which shook me. I was showing him some suggestions for alterations to his *Markopoulos Case*; in my opinion, the

heroine should say, “Now I have felt Death – and it was not at all terrible.” Janáček snapped at me in disgust, “Impossible – I can’t compose that. Death – and not at all terrible?” After much roundabout talk, we agreed on this: “And it was not so terrible.”

The Master’s enormous productivity began late; this was due to his difficult youth, the unparalleled inhibitions which stood in the way of his budding artistic worth. *Sárka*, his first opera, was never performed because Zeyer, the book’s author, refused to give his authorisation. Janáček’s second opera *Jenůfa*, that incomparably great effort of the most passionate and gracious melody – a true, uncontrived, direct and thoroughly unconventional melody – was a rarity for which opera houses should have clamoured; but Janáček had to wait until he was 62 before it was performed at Czechoslovakia’s principal opera venue, Prague’s National Theatre.

Until then, he had lived in Brno, his work to practically no avail other than the first performance there of *Jenůfa* 12 years earlier. Only his pieces for male chorus, composed using a completely novel technique, to words by Bezruč, caused somewhat of a sensation; these choruses are still a sensation awaiting discovery today in German-speaking countries. Janáček’s worldwide fame emerged from Berlin, when Schillings inaugurated a memorable production of *Jenůfa*, conducted by Kleiber.

By Janáček’s 70th birthday, which followed that triumphant performance abroad, the many critical opinions within the country were either to the contrary or completely absent. Their views had soured Janáček’s life for decades and turned recognition by a small circle into a bitter struggle. The first German-language performance of *Jenůfa* in Vienna (during the war) had little profound effect, several years before the victory in Berlin; but from there, *Jenůfa* became a repertory opera in 50 large and mid-sized theatres – it even played in New York, and there was a Janáček festival in London (without opera), international music festivals programmed his music and preparations are now being made to play one of his last orchestra pieces, the *Sinfonietta*, on its second global journey after Klemperer’s breakthrough success with Janáček’s music in Berlin.

I met Janáček a few months after I had published a jubilant report in the *Weltbühne* (at that time still called *Schaubühne*) on the Czech performance in Prague of *Jenůfa* (mentioning him for the first time in the German press). The handsome elderly man arrived at my flat in the early morning. I had never seen him before; his features – noble, mild, strong, distinguished – affected me deeply. He said: “Now that you’ve made me famous abroad, you’ll have to translate my work, too.”

We became friends, and not just in artistic matters; working together with Janáček, shaping the text with that diehard composer was not always effortlessly easy, but it was always an experience to fire the imagination.

When I last visited him in Brno, he showed me the score of *House of the Dead* that he was working on at the time. No other score looks like one of Janáček's – he doesn't use staff paper. "All those empty lines cause me to write too many notes," he explained. He draws staves on normal blank white paper, and if for example a bassoon only has a single figure to play, he writes it on a staff one centimetre long, and on the rest of the sheet there is not a single line left for the bassoon. There are only lines for the instruments which are actually playing, thus eliminating the mechanics of "filler voices" and entailing extraordinarily economical and transparent orchestration by notating it that way. A page of Janáček's music paper resembles elaborate mosaic work.

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That cannot be imitated any more than anything else in his life and art. When Janáček died, that rarest of men departed: one who trusted in a demon. What he did, what he did not do – no law governed him except his persona. His music, his ideology – both are completely inaccessible if one does not find them spellbinding. Of course they enrapture the spellbound by luring them into an ocean of beauty with its own laws, where a slow, cautious approach is absolutely forbidden and impossible.

The same applies to *The Cunning Little Vixen* – Janáček's second most beautiful creation after the incomparable *Jenůfa*. I often hear that the libretto is bizarre, difficult to stage because the animal figures must be played like animals, the music is not exactly accessible and it is tricky to perform, very difficult – Oh, these senseless objections! It is the forest itself onstage; here, a drama has been created with only one main character: panicky nature itself – and yet the response is all finicky critical points based on conventional

experience.

Take this enormously daring venture as it is, give in to the intoxication rushing forth from the leafy undergrowth and buzzing insect swarm, the sun and the croaking frogs and the mad orgy of nocturnal animals, the great Knud Hamsun-like wedding under the open sky. Then, with a single tug, the entire plot is laid open clearly; the woodsman (a constant in the piece) is the eternally longing man, yearning for Nature – he has a home, a family, but the forest beckons to him. There, he finds freedom to fall in love with a wild gypsy girl and catches himself an adorable little vixen.

Both these forays are one and the same to his hunter's heart; there is not much needing interpretation – and it ends badly for him, as with all yearning. The gypsy girl decamps and disappears with a vagabond. The vixen runs away and is shot dead – but not by the woodsman; she is killed by the same vagabond who had taken the girl from him. But the eternally yearning human heart is unharmed, finding peace in the infinity of forest life.

[Vaclav] Neumann, the director of the Brno Theatre, had the brilliant idea – and a truly sympathetic one it was, too – to perform the final chorus from *Vixen* at the obsequies. What a requiem – the mortal man's ascension into Infinity, composed with an inimitable surge as an eternal paeon of life – the sound rang through the theatre foyer, applause broke out, washing over the bronze coffin where the dead man lay – it was impossible to grasp the fact that such music would never again be heard by the man who created it (at least in his corporeal form) – that music, so truthful and colossal in its truth, intimate yet sublime as it sprang directly from that intimacy.

No one will ever forget that moment, when life and death seemed to coincide, with wreaths and ribbons, catafalque, guards of honour, mourners and glowing candlelight, as the orchestra and soloist sounded with “And yet it is beautiful, how the forest nourishes this swarm – that is eternal youth! Again and again, life begins anew in the forest, and the nightingales return in the spring – and they find nests, they find love. Goodbyes turn into welcomes; the leaves and blossoms come back, and all the flowers, cowslips, violets, dandelions have never been so happy. People pass by and bow their heads if they understand – and they know what Eternity is.”

That is the eulogy the genius had composed for himself: *requiem aeternam* – and *aeternam vitam*, as well.

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