

Editing “From the House of the Dead”

John Tyrrell

Janáček wrote his mature operas three times. The first version was a complete, fully orchestrated, continuous score which, however, bore little resemblance to the final work. One could regard it as a sort of improvisation, a way of getting into the work and grasping its dramatic potential rather than a source of musical material, though some themes might resurface in later versions, where they would be subjected to Janáček’s intensive variation technique. On the other hand, the second version would be much closer to the final score. After the final version had been copied, Janáček would look through the fair copy, tinker with it a bit (adding orchestral doublings, for instance) and then hand it over to the theatre. From *Káťa Kabanová* onwards premières took place in Brno where the composer could keep an eye on rehearsals and work closely with the conductor František Neumann, making any last-minute adjustments that might be necessary. A second full score would be copied incorporating last-minute changes and sent to the publisher, Universal Edition. In this way *Káťa Kabanová*, *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *The Makropulos Affair* travelled quite easily from autograph to performance and publication. The modern, authentic editions which Universal Edition has released for *Káťa Kabanová* (edited by Sir Charles Mackerras) and *The Cunning Little Vixen* (edited by Jiří Zahrádka) had mostly to deal with problems no greater than the usual editorial headaches of resolving inconsistencies and other inadvertencies.

One might have expected the same to be true of Janáček’s final opera, *From the House of the Dead*, written in the same streamlined way, and going through almost all the same processes: three autograph versions by the composer (in Act 1 even a further partial version), a careful copy by Janáček’s two most trusted copyists Václav Sedláček and Jaroslav Kulháněk (Sedláček copied Act 1, Kulháněk Act 3, with Act 2 split between them). For three months the copyists came each day to Janáček’s house and worked with him, more or less acting as amanuenses. This enabled the composer to clarify problematic passages and dictate new ideas, so their copies often go further than what is in the final autograph score. Janáček checked the first two acts, adding doublings and minor revisions and, in the case of Act 1, even provided metronome marks (he carefully planned these first in pencil and then inked them in). Janáček took Kulháněk’s score of Act 3 with him on holiday in

August 1928, but died before revising this act in the same way.

In other words all that needed to happen for this opera to proceed to publication in the way that its three predecessors had done was for Janáček to look through Act 3 and to participate in rehearsals. A few discreet, practical additions were all that was necessary.

But this was not the case. Janáček's death in August 1928 was followed shortly afterwards by that of his experienced associate, the conductor František Neumann, and instead the production was entrusted to the stage director Ota Zitek, who revised the verbal text, and to two of Janáček's pupils. While Bedřich Bakala made the piano-vocal score (as he had done for *Káťa Kabanová* and *The Cunning Little Vixen*) and conducted the première, a revision of the score was made by another pupil, the composer Osvald Chlubna, whom Janáček had chosen to orchestrate the third act of his first opera *Járka*. What this team came up with, and what was subsequently printed in both full score and piano score by Universal Edition, was an act of extraordinary temerity, involving extensive reorchestration, extra bars, some retexting and a new set of stage directions, added vocal lines, and even a would-be "uplifting" ending grafted on.

In an article published in 1958, Chlubna attempted to justify this version by emphasising how very different the autograph looked from Janáček's usual final score, suggesting that the composer, knowing his end was approaching, was working furiously against time to get his thoughts down, and thus left a skeleton waiting for orchestral flesh to be added to it. This is of course nonsense. It is true that the autograph score looks different to Janáček's previous operas, written on sheets of plain paper with hand-ruled staves (whereas all operas up to *Makropulos* were written on printed score paper), but Janáček's hand-ruled sheets were the way things had been going for a while: even large-scale works such as the *Sinfonietta* and the *Glagolitic Mass* were written in this way the year before. Furthermore, the overture based on Janáček's unfinished *Violin Concerto*, was written in the same way, and it seems that he simply continued with the same method. Janáček had time to make three versions of the opera – if he really intended to go back and fill in many more instruments he would have done so in the course of the revisions or on the copyists' score. Furthermore, far from working against time, he found time to write his wonderful *Second String Quartet* (JW VII/13), an occasion-piece for the laying of the foundation stone of Brno's new university (JW IV/45) and to begin incidental music for a play (JW IX/11). Once the spotlight fell on Chlubna's additions and conductors began to omit them, it was found that the lean score that Janáček left worked perfectly well in the theatre. As for the revised ending, this seems to have been added on the

assumption that Janáček believed in uplifting cathartic endings (as in *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *The Makropulos Affair*) and would wish to do so in his final opera. It is clear, however, that this opera was a very different one from its predecessors: the bleak ending with the Prisoners' march is in keeping with the work's subject matter and shows how much in tune Janáček was with the pessimism of the time.

As in *Jenůfa*, the editorial problems facing an editor here are not ones that Janáček created but those created by those who came after him: the Prague conductor Karel Kovačovic, who remodelled *Jenůfa* for its Prague première in 1916, and the Brno team who remodelled *From the House of the Dead* in 1930. While extracting the final "Janáček" layer from the palimpsest score of some six layers in *Jenůfa* was often tricky, editing *From the House of the Dead* seemed at first more straightforward. Sedláček, Kulhánek and Janáček left a score written in black ink; Chlubna wrote his additions in pencil. All I needed to do, I thought, was to ignore the pencil and concentrate on the ink. But this is easier said than done. Particularly in the rewriting of the horn and trombone parts, where the ink surface has been scratched out, it was difficult to see what was there before. I needed to work from the original since a pencil staccato mark or even a hairpin crescendo mark can be indistinguishable in a copy from an ink one. So the process of checking and rechecking has been long and laborious. And there is also the question of what Janáček might have added himself (for instance to Act 3) when seeing the work in rehearsal. While it is easy enough to discard all the extra instrumentation that Chlubna added (harps, thick wind etc.), should one thin down the climaxes of the work to their original, surprisingly chamber-like proportions?

As for the verbal text of the opera, Janáček wrote his own libretto straight from the Dostoyevsky novel in the original Russian, translating as he went along and some of his libretto is a scarcely intelligible mishmash of transliterated Russian or even misunderstood Russian. It is understandable that Zítek attempted to provide an "intelligible" Czech text to be sung in the theatre. These days, however, with almost every theatre providing surtitled translations, it seems reasonable to leave Janáček's sung text in its original state, emphasising its distinctive sonic qualities, while allowing the theatre to provide an easily graspable text in the language of the country, be it Czech, German, English or any other. And just as Pierre Boulez, in his interview with Wolfgang Schaefler, laments Janáček's quirky methods of notation, which are not as "logical" as those of Stravinsky, this editor feels that the score should remain as Janáček left it without the wholesale rewriting of metre and time-values that a Stravinsky-like renotation might involve, with the view that the authentic Notationsbild is itself eloquent about how Janáček imagined his music should sound.

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