

“Jenůfa” – original version

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Janáček’s opera *Jenůfa* was his breakthrough to the international scene. Along with other people, Janáček himself made many changes to the original 1904 Brno version – but now it is again available, after many layers of alterations to the score were peeled away to make the work accessible with the force that made it such a constant favourite with audiences from its earliest performances onward.

Although the ballade by Gabriela Preissová, on which the libretto is based, interlaces elements of “the abandoned maid,” fraternal hatred and infanticide, controlled via the oppressive moral standards of a peasant village community, they were not seminal to the plot until they came to the fore through Janáček’s unshakeable belief in the power of music. It even seems that it was Janáček’s musical genuineness which elevated the folk story altogether to the level of a gripping tragedy.

Leoš Janáček’s opera *Jenůfa* is among the most popular and widely performed of his works, and it laid the foundations of his compositional breakthrough and long-term success. Nowadays it is most frequently heard in the “Brno 1908” version, the result of a series of revisions to the opera made by Janáček himself between 1906 and 1913.

A number of reminiscences, reviews and anecdotes survive from the time of the work’s earlier première in 1904, and these accounts helped to establish many of the topics – including Janáček’s use of folk-music and “speech melodies” – that continue to fascinate us about the composer to this day. However, the precise form in which *Jenůfa* was first performed, and which first set out his distinctive musical style and artistic agenda, has long remained a mystery.

Now at last, after unpicking the many layers of revisions made by both Janáček and others, we can experience something of the impact which this perennially popular work made on audiences in the early years of its stage life. Originally performed by the tiny forces of the Brno National Theatre, the 1904 version of *Jenůfa* is ideal for productions in small and medium-sized theatres as well as larger opera houses.

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Although the opera’s basic narrative remains the same, and most of the music is clearly recognisable, many fascinating differences are revealed. There are increased vocal demands on the four major roles, and the orchestration is more redolent of the late nineteenth century. Several passages were extensively cut, including the Act 1 ensembles, which in the 1904 version approach something like the traditional pezzo concertato of Italian opera. And Laca’s declaration of love for Jenůfa near the end of Act 2 was originally an extended set-piece, subsequently cut by Janáček to just a handful of bars in later revisions. These are just two of the more obvious examples from a version full of surprises: Janáček’s own revisions to the opera left no page of the score – from the opening xylophone solo to the glorious closing bars – untouched.

Jenůfa in its 1904 version formed the basis for all performances of the work in its first two years of stage history. As such, it fills a crucial gap in our understanding of the emergence of one of twentieth-century opera’s greatest figures. But it is of much more than purely musicological interest. It allows audiences once again to experience the thrill of the new, the rawness of emotion that places this work much more closely in the context of turn-of-the-century verismo. And it permits us a glimpse, for the first time, of the youthful face of a much-loved friend.

JENŮFA

Original 1904 version (opera in 3 acts after Moravian peasant life) 3 3 3 3 - 4 3 3 1 – timp., perc., harp, str.
Stage music: xylophone, 2 horns, zvonky, str. (1 1 1 1 1) First performance: 21 January 1904, Brno