

The Makropulos Case, opera by Leoš Janáček

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Janáček's astonishing, even vehement prowess in his advanced age is one of the most interesting phenomena of psychology and physiology of creative ingenuity, especially since it was not actually spurred until the late success of *Jenůfa*. But every one of his works is an amazingly fresh, spirited and exciting new feat *per se* – and even those who cannot approve of everything must bow low to the fascinating, ingenious flight and the creative *élan* which everyone must perceive even in the shortcomings of these works. Janáček has always had a fine sense for the dramatic kernel of his libretti, even if he did overlook stylistic literary flaws when working them out. This time, he has turned his attention to the drama by his equally famous colleague, the Czech playwright Karel Čapek.

Although it is more sensational than deeply dramatic as a straight play, *The Makropulos Case* is certainly a secret elixir of life guaranteeing 300-year-old youth. The only person on whom it has been tried is the daughter of the alchemist Makropulos; she was born more than 300 years ago during the time of Rudolph II; she has seen the births and deaths of innumerable generations

and she always reappears somewhere else under a new name, bringing misfortune to amatory men. In the drama, we meet her in the guise of the famous singer Marty. An unfeeling, cynical creature, she brings about calamity during the three short acts – but at least in Janáček's dramaturgical version, she is trapped and dies as the sinister *Makropulos Case* is burnt.

This ending is far superior to Šapek's, which closes pessimistically; it also provides the music with a more human, dramatic foundation. Otherwise, the libretto offers very little to attract a romantic composer of old.

This is perhaps the first opera to be set in an attorney's office, where knotty inheritance trial matters are discussed, where people make telephone calls, etc.; only the ending gives the musicians the chance for full-throated singing. But Janáček's particular character does not need old, romantic opera props; his compositional method calls for clear, dramatically pointed situations with telegraphic brevity and terseness – lyric ado would be mere excess ballast.

That is why Šapek's comedy was a very lucky find for him. His short motifs, haunting every scene with impulsive rapidity, are basically the same as those of *Jenůfa* and *Katja Kabanova*, except here they are disburdened even more of their lyrical and melodic elements. In this opera, the purely musical is reduced to a minimum; in places, one is even tempted to call it "an opera without music" – but that only reinforces the prominence of the music's dramatic element all the more.

Yet the musician Janáček occasionally surmounts the dramatist. The short, dramatically pointed phrases do flow together at times to form larger areas which then gleam all the more. Consider how passionate young Gregor blazes so ardently toward Marty in Act One, and the ending, which rises to virtually mystic heights; world-weary Marty speaks both to the people who happen to be on the stage and to all humanity, which answers her in the form of a chorus positioned in the auditorium. Once again, the Slavic longing for collectivity has broken through the rational-dramatic principle. The short prelude also commands our attention; chivalric fanfares sound from behind the closed curtain, as if coming from the time of Rudolph II past to the banalities of today.

The performances in Brno's National Theatre were of respectable quality, mostly thanks to the capable opera boss and manager Fr. Neumann, who was responsible for the rehearsals; director Otto Zitek's production was sympathetic and modern. In Act Two, a concealed spotlight threw a ghostly shadow on a bald backdrop, which lent gigantic distortion to the action. Of the singers, youthful baritone Otava was most conspicuous, although Miss

Švabina in the lead role gave a solid performance. Only the closing chorus misfired; the singers were positioned wrongly, making the music sound far too corporeal. The premiere, which foreign critics also attended, was indeed a promising one.



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