

# *David Pountney on staging Janáček*

“Even a hundred years later, his music is still strikingly original and arresting.”

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*Can you still recall what was the first piece you ever heard by Janáček?*

**Pountney:** *Katya*.

*And where was that?*

**Pountney:** I remember exactly where it was. I was visiting my friend Mark Elder, who is now a very famous conductor – we were students, I was 16 or 17 or something – in his parents’ house in north London. And we got some records from the Hornsey Library. And there were some LP’s of *Katya*. I’ll never forget hearing the opening music of *Katya*, the beginning of the overture, the prelude, which has such an incredible sound. That was it. I was hooked.

*And your first Janáček opera that you did as a stage director was which one?*

**Pountney:** It was *Katya*.

That was about five years later, in 1972. I did *Katya* at the Wexford Festival. And actually that was a funny story, because I had already been boring the guy who was running the Wexford Festival, where I had worked as a stage manager the previous year, saying “You have to do Janáček, we should do Janáček,” And in fact, Mark Elder and I did *Huťárka* in Cambridge when we were students, so we’d also done some other Czech music.

The following year I received a letter from the Wexford Festival, asking whether I’d like to do a new production for them of Bellini’s *Il pirata*. And I thought, “Well, of course, I’m a young director, I have to say yes, whatever, you can’t say no” although honestly Bellini was not really my thing. Then three weeks later I got another letter saying “Dear David, I’m very sorry, I hope you don’t mind, but somebody else is coming to work for the festival who really wants to direct *Il pirata* by Bellini, would you mind if instead you

did *Katya Kabanowa*?”

I don't know whether someone was making a joke of this, but it seemed like an incredible twist of fate. And I was very, very lucky, because it was an amazing cast. Ivo Štěpánek, who was a very famous Czech tenor of this time, was in it, Soňa Štěrbená was in it, and there was a very wonderful Czech conductor called Albert Rosen. And they really taught me how to deal with Janáček. I mean, I was very young, very inexperienced, and this cast was amazing.

*Janáček's operas were still quite unknown in UK and the Irish Republic...*

**Pountney:** Well, the early UK performances had already been put on at Sadler's Wells with Charles Mackerras conducting. I had actually even seen *From the House of the Dead* at Sadler's Wells before that. So there were a few performances, but the operas were not really well known, especially not outside London.

*Was it sung in Czech?*

**Pountney:** It was in Czech, yes, and no surtitles of course in those days. But I think they were blown away because Ireland then was a very conservative, religious country. So this story about a woman breaking out of her marriage and in the end killing herself because of her sense of guilt – I think this spoke very powerfully to the Irish society. And it was a perfect size theatre for that kind of piece, so the effect was intimate and visceral.

And shortly after that while I was already working at the Scottish Opera, I was invited to go to the Welsh National Opera to do *Jenůfa*, so I proposed to my boss in Scotland that we should make this the start of a joint cycle of Janáček productions between Wales and Scotland.” As a result of that we did *Jenůfa*, *Katya*, *Makropulos*, *House of the Dead* and *The Cunning Little Vixen* between those two companies in the 1970s. And two of those productions are still alive today: *House of the Dead* and *The Cunning Little Vixen*, which we did in Wales only two years ago.

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*Can you speak about the structures in Janáček's operas?*

**Pountney:** *Jenůfa* and *Katya* and *Makropulos* are constructed like what I'd call in English "a well-made play". They are linear stories with three acts: a beginning, a middle, an end. It's a very clear narrative structure. And the other pieces, *Osud*, *Brouček*, *Vixen* and *House of the Dead* are constructed like collages, they do not proceed through linear storytelling, but are made up of cinematic juxtapositions of ideas and scenes.

Perhaps the most complex is *The Cunning Little Vixen*, which is to my mind the most perfect piece of modernist dramaturgy, because it's such a brilliant utilization of all the different possibilities of operatic expression. He knows exactly how to use dance or an orchestral interlude to tell a certain part of the story, he knows how to use a strophic song and equally well how to use wordless singing.

Every type of operatic expression is in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and it's perfectly placed and utilized to tell a very complex story, centred on a big philosophical idea about nature and the cycle of life. There is a huge pantheistic idea of nature and the world as an arch over the whole piece, but in detail it's also a comic cartoon that has very funny moments and very detailed little scenes. So it's a vastly complex construction, very cinematic, very collage-like, cutting very quickly between one idea and another.

And the amazing thing is that he did all of that out of nowhere, really. I mean there was no model at the time for anything like this in opera, or any other kind of theatre.

*What makes his music so attractive for international audience who cannot really understand Czech?*

**Pountney:** I think it's that the pieces are incredibly direct. They are telling very powerful stories in a very direct, visceral way. So there is no kind of literary or musical convention like you have in earlier operas where you have arias and choruses and ensembles, structured into a certain kind of formal convention. In these pieces you just follow the drama: the music follows the drama. And it directly expresses the drama, so there is no elaborate, complicated structure around it, it just focuses on that. And so in a way these operas work like really

good films. They just tell the story, and they're very immediate and humane pieces. Janáček is really the most important 20<sup>th</sup> century opera composer.

*But his pieces are not as popular as Puccini or Strauss, those are kind of more easy-listening I suppose?*

Janáček is never sentimental, so he doesn't exploit these kinds of emotional moments in the way that Puccini does. The brilliant interlude and scene that follows the death of the Vixen, is a good example, where he just allows a kind of extraordinary stillness to take over after the firing of the shot. He then goes into an incredibly touching scene, the last inn-scene, in which the schoolmaster is sitting on his own, and he's realized that the mysterious woman he has been fantasizing about, Terinka, doesn't really exist or stopped existing. So the scene shows the emotional devastation of this rather repressed little man. And it's an exquisitely controlled piece of writing, very truthful without being in any way indulgent. So if you're really concentrating and paying attention as a member of an audience, then you can be very moved by this scene. But if you want somebody to come at you with their heart on their sleeve, and supply overwhelming grand-standing emotion – well he doesn't give you that.

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*What makes it so interesting for a stage director to stage Janáček's operas?*

**Pountney:** I think the group of pieces that I call cinematic collages are very interesting for a stage director because Janáček moves through these pieces with the speed of a cinema editor. So he cuts from one idea to the next idea and from one scene to the next scene. And this is complicated to do on the stage, because on the stage you have things to move around. You have to shift things physically – you can't cut like you can in a film. So conceptually they are quite challenging and interesting for a director.

*From the House of the Dead* for instance just consists of all these different prisoners telling their life stories, but there is no story as such. You have to find the story, or invent a pattern or create the world in which it takes place, but it's not a linear story. There is a kind of story – or cycle, anyway – in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, but so many different little scenes to be slotted into that cycle. It requires an inventive use of theatre space to be able to accommodate this very rapid cross-cutting technique.

Pieces like *Jenůfa*, *Makropulos* and *Katya* are in that sense easier to stage because their dramaturgical structures are much more straightforward. Although, all those three pieces share this feature that at the end of the piece Janáček does something which blows the walls of the theatre apart, he lets the music lead us off into a kind of universal apotheosis about the situation – not directly about the situation, but about life and the philosophy of the story. It's sometimes a challenge for the director to follow that, to find a way of not inhibiting the audience in this moment from experiencing this very generous transformation of the story into something much broader, more universal, more apocalyptic.

*Do you have a favourite stage production of Janáček that you have done?*

**Pountney:** Probably the *Vixen*, I guess.

I just think that, together with the designer at that time, Maria Björnson, we found a very, very simple but clever solution to the problems of the piece, so it's very satisfying, it feels like it really works.

*Would you think of any Janáček opera you would like to direct in the future?*

**Pountney:** Well, I'd like to do Mr. Brouček again, because it's a very complicated and difficult piece. It's a wonderful piece I think. But again, it's a very complicated idea, because it's a double satire. Through Brouček the effeminate, artistic world, set on the moon, is satirized and on earth the ridiculously dogmatic, fanatical world of the Medieval religious fundamentalists is satirized, but at the same time Brouček himself is satirized as a contemporary petty bourgeois philistine, so it's a double satire. Usually in a satire you have an Everyman figure through whom you see that the world is absurd. But in this piece you see the world as absurd, but you see that the central figure is absurd as well. So there is no centre.

*They are like watching really good films.*

*Janáček stayed quite unknown for a long period of his life. Do you think that the international recognition after 1916 supported his motivations in writing music, in writing operas?*

**Pountney:** That's very, very difficult to tell. He didn't travel a lot and he didn't try very hard to exploit himself in other places. He was very rooted to his own environment. There's quite a funny story about him visiting some musical congress in Frankfurt, and somebody said, you know, there is this chap at the back of the stalls who they thought might have been the janitor of the building. You know, they thought he was the cleaner or something. And it turned out to be Janáček. He was not a publicist, not at all that kind of person. But I do think he was very inspired by the prospect of Czech independence, and the rebirth of his national heritage, that was a huge inspiration to him.

*Still today you are constantly amazed by his originality, aren't you?*

**Pountney:** To my mind I don't know where he could have found the idea that you could write a dramatic piece like *Osud* for example – which is such a collage of different snippets of atmospheric information and off-stage voices and little bits of chorus here and there. It's an incredibly complex piece to stage. He had an amazing imagination as to how such a thing could possibly be put on – I mean, he wouldn't have known how to put it on the stage, but he could sort of think of it in his head. And I just don't know where he would have had any kind of model for that sort of thing, so that's one of his great achievements. The music is also incredibly original of course, it still sounds original now, but the dramatic structure of these cinematic pieces is extraordinary, and there is no model for it as far as I can make out.

He was partly so original because he remained so uninfluenced by other composers. One often talks about a stylistic and to some extent ideological connection between Janáček and Mussorgsky. But actually I think the facts are that he didn't see a performance of *Boris Godunov* until very late in his life. So it actually didn't influence him at all, he was already completely established by that point. So he saw so little – I mean, he saw *Wozzeck*, we know that. He

saw some Puccini of course, but he was very isolated, he wasn't part of the modern music scene that was going on just down the road in Vienna.

The roots of his music are in a way quite clear, and we know quite a lot about the way in which he studied folk music and the way he notated speech rhythms and all of this – we can see that the cellular characteristic of his music is rooted in that.

But I think there's also another thing. I know that I've used this image before when talking about his work. Because he was so interested in nature, and because his music is built up of cellular structures, his music is in some sense built up like the ingredients of biology. I mean it's built up in cells, like nature is built up in cells. And the cells mutate and transform and so on. So in a way you could say that his music is a kind of DNA of the characters that he's describing, they are embedded in the music in a sort of biological, organic sense.

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*What place did Kamila Stösslová take in the autumn of Janáček's life  
according to your opinion?*

**Pountney:** I think he was obsessed by his fantasy about her, and I think she remained for him a necessary fantasy. And that's why he fed the fantasy, but was careful never to actually arrive at the point of driving it to a conclusion. Because then he would have found out that it was terribly disappointing. It remained a fantasy, so that he could always believe in that fantasy.

*What are you thinking of Janáček nowadays in terms of being performed  
more?*

**Pountney:** The most interesting territory where he has been least played is Russia. They have begun to do Janáček now in Russia, a bit, but he himself being a great Slavophile, it's quite interesting that the Russians are very prejudiced about other Slav nations. But to my mind that's the biggest gap, otherwise he is performed in Europe, in America

*Do you think that he was suffering a lot during his life?*

**Pountney:** Well, he was definitely domestically unhappy, wasn't he? But then he also treated his wife very badly. I don't think he was a particularly nice man, actually. I mean, why should he be a nice man? Just because he is a great composer? He certainly didn't behave well towards his wife.

*What comes to your mind when you hear Janáček?*

**Pountney:** I think one is constantly amazed by the original gestures of his music. Even a hundred years later, his music is still strikingly original and arresting. You're sort of surprised, even when you know it really well. And it has this amazing energy, this real kind of visceral energy. I'm thinking of this phrase in the love-scene of *Katya* [sings], this to me is Janáček, this terrific rush of passion and feeling and emotion. This great rising phrase. [sings]

*And you are happy now to be in Brno at the Janáček festival?*

**Pountney:** Yes, it's always nice for me to reconnect with this very important part of my life.

