

“How does one survive the day?”

Pierre Boulez and Patrice Chéreau



Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez at rehearsals in Vienna

Leo Janáček’s *From the House of the Dead* was hailed the “performance of the year” when Pierre Boulez and Patrice Chéreau unveiled their new international co-production. Janáček’s last opera had seldom been so vitally presented before, revealing a vast account of suffering and hope from people in dire existential straits.

Mr. Boulez, I believe you first heard From the House of the Dead under Sir Charles Mackerras – is that how you came to know it?

Boulez: Yes, it was at the Opéra Comique in Paris, certainly more than 20 years ago. I knew some of Janáček’s works – especially the symphonic pieces – from my time in New York. Many people think I’ve only just discovered Janáček – but that’s not quite right. I conducted the Sinfonietta in New York, for example; that was around 1975. I’ve known his music for a long time, although I had never conducted the operas. I’ve explained many times that I am not an opera conductor who conducts a different opera every two or three

days at one theatre. I do special projects, ones that intrigue me – House of the Dead was one of them; not only because it is Janáček's last opera; Dostoyevsky's post-mortem collaboration interested me, too. Dostoyevsky was a wonderful writer. The plot has something truly literary about it, more so than in other operas. That's also the case with Wozzeck. You have Büchner and Berg, but there is Büchner and here we have Janáček, but we also have Dostoyevsky.

You mention Berg and Wozzeck; Janáček liked Wozzeck very much.

Boulez: He heard it in Prague. He was very angry and annoyed because the piece was booed and they didn't want to keep hearing it. But he wrote that it was more for nationalistic reasons than musical ones.

Because Berg was Austrian.

Boulez: Yes, that's right.

Janáček wrote the following about Wozzeck: "Every note is dipped in blood." He also wrote of himself that mere notes did not interest him per se. Every note had to be rooted in life, blood and the environment. His approaches to Wozzeck and his own work were similar, yet in terms of compositional realisation they were as different as day and night.

Boulez: "Like day and night," indeed. Berg is truly a wonderful representative of development and transition. All the motifs are thoroughly worked through; they transform. There is life in that motivic writing which does not exist in Janáček at all. I've been asked about influences of folk music. There are some, but not at all as one imagines. There is no development in folk music – it repeats itself; perhaps in variations, but it repeats itself. Development is not the point in folk music.

Of course there are motifs in Janáček, more or less associated with a situation or a character. There's an idea, then another one, then yet another one. It is almost like the principle of collage in visual art, although Janáček did not conceive [his music] that way; you have one texture, then another, and you paste them together. Feeling is the basis of such a collage – and that is how Janáček composed. Look at the Sinfonietta and the Glagolitic Mass: one idea after another, alternating.

Here we've already broached the topic and the problem facing a director and a conductor to the same extent. It is a question of finding a continuative form, an arch, in the work. What difficulties did this type of composition pose for you as a conductor? For instance, notational changes in the score are often

flagrant, simply because Janáček worked on it intermittently.

Boulez: Well, I talked with Mr. Stolba (Universal Edition's senior editor) about the score for a very long time. It is written inconsistently. It is not without logic, but it is inconsistent. For instance: three minims, identical rhythm, the same motif, and suddenly there are six semiquavers. Why those short notes all of a sudden? There is no comprehensible reason. You find this inconsistency in *House of the Dead* and all of Janáček's other works. He imagined some of his ideas in small note-values and then he wrote other ideas or only a variation of one idea in minims – and no one knows why.

Studying the score and having to decide on the relation between this and that tempo, one should never think of how a motif is notated, but of how it is structured. For instance, the tempi are also differently interrelated in Stravinsky's *Les Noces*; but there you can tell blindfolded that the 25 minutes are so consistently written that you always know where you are. The same applies to the *Symphony of Psalms*, etc.

But with Janáček one never knows for sure; does he really want the same tempo or does he want the tempi to be proportional – 2:3, for instance. You have to make such decisions very often. I think that is very difficult for a publisher to recognise. For me, it is unsatisfactory when a musicologist says, "That's the way it is in the manuscript – no other way." I would like to know whether a reason can be found for the way Janáček sometimes writes one way and then sometimes another. And that is why the answer is coming from me now.

Of course I've listened to recordings to find out how Mackerras does it and what Václav Neumann's decisions are. But ultimately I found that such-and-such a series or proportion of tempi was more logical for me. Once I made my decision, I didn't change my mind; that is, that is how I see the tempo relationships. That was the big problem when I was studying the score.

"Once I made my decision, I didn't change my mind."

Pierre Boulez

Now there is not only the musical difficulty of finding the big arch in the

piece; surely the director must do likewise, staging the opera so that a storyline is perceptible.

Chéreau: I believe I can go along with Pierre in saying that the issues of the transitions and the arches were the most problematic ones for me. Pierre just stole the word “collage” from me – in fact, I can say exactly the same thing about the text. Reading the text, called the libretto in this case, it turns out that not a single word is by Dostoyevsky. (Many of the words are left in Russian or Ukrainian) – that is, we have a collage. I believe Janáček took a pencil and marked what he liked on the pages of the book and then “organised” it □

For instance, last week I was trying to find out why Skuratov sings, “A general is coming who will inspect all of Siberia.” It’s difficult, but using a computer it is easier, to find the place in Dostoyevsky. Two lines earlier, someone says, “Food? – for how much? – for a penny or for tuppence?” That is precisely the transition of those lines and he left it just as it was. The cook says, “Tuppence,” and then Skuratov arrives. Sometimes if the cuts he made were too large or too rough, maybe he would write a line for the transition – but otherwise he trusted quite naively – and at the same time, movingly – in collage – for example, “I’d like to put this bit right here, then I’ll take something of Dostoyevsky from before, and I’ll use that for Act III,” and so on □

The director has no choice but to begin by looking very deeply into Dostoyevsky. I believe it was Max Brod who said, when he was making the German translation, that Janáček’s libretto was not fully comprehensible without the help of Dostoyevsky’s text. Brod also thought that the libretto was like a quick commentary on a large book, because the text seemed so condensed.

It was my job to find an arch in that collage and – especially important for me – to locate the transitions. When a scene suddenly begins without a proper connection to the tissue, I must somehow construct that connection, or else make the right decision if a connection is absent.

Many of the difficulties need to be addressed as early as in Act I – and then an arch needs to be built from all of it. Even with fractures and with full respect for the music, transitions for a story with almost 100 people on the stage simply have to be built.

Yet I found it very intriguing because there is always a lot of freedom when working in such constraint. The greater the constraint, the more freedom I have □ complete freedom does not interest me at all.

When directing an opera, you always have the music as the continuum, just as you always have the continuum of time in a film. Did you discuss certain difficulties with Boulez to see whether the music could help out?

Chéreau: Yes; actually, the music always helps – I would have been completely lost with just the text.

Yes – but with especially difficult passages?

Chéreau: I think that all passages are difficult, from my standpoint. From the standpoint of directing, there has always been a certain solution – for example, I’m always hearing people who say that “there are no main roles” – and that is wrong. “There is no story;” I think that is entirely wrong. We shouldn’t be misled by the title “House of the Dead;” in fact, we do not know for sure whether the meaning of the title “From the House of the Dead” is Dostoyevsky’s. There is a new French translation simply called *La maison morte* – “the dead house” – instead of *La maison des morts*. But the most intriguing thing, which we shouldn’t forget, is that the work abounds, overflows with life and activity, despite being called “House of the Dead.” We must never forget that a jail or prison camp is not only a place of utter, profound despair; it is also a place containing another type of living, ordered society.

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Patrice Chéreau

An alternate, co-existent society?

Chéreau: Yes, yes, of course. As far as I know, that’s the case in every prison. I’ve seen some prison theatrical productions; it was very intriguing. Then we have the incredible notion that 10 minutes of the actual Act II are a single theatrical performance. 10 minutes out of 30 – that is a piece within a piece. The principle accounts about Skuratov, Luca and particularly Shishkov are also stand alone theatre pieces. Shishkov in 20 minutes – that is almost the story of *Wozzeck*. *Aculina* and Shishkov – that’s like Marie and *Wozzeck*; there you have two or three main characters already.

You talk of Luca, who dies in Act III – but in act I you already show how ill he actually is. Those are very deliberate techniques []

Chéreau: It's like in a film. If you want to wreck the fun and enjoyment, you recount the ending [first] – although that wouldn't make much difference with Janáček. He is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. We are in a prison; prison is always prison, even if one of the prisoners is ultimately freed – one person, while the others remain. That has nothing to do with optimism or pessimism; there they are – that is the place where they live and struggle. It's astonishing what I've learned from this music; it is always so lively and active. Just like *Wozzeck*, the music forces me to keep pushing onwards, in a certain sense – that doesn't happen very often.

Mr. Boulez, the orchestra is often very dense, and yet the voices are supposed to stay audible. How did you solve that problem of balance?

Boulez: I try to make the singers as audible as possible. Of course, the music mustn't sound feeble, and sometimes its character is brutal, and one has to accept this brutality. The singers have to accept that, too, which means that they must occasionally sing brutally, not beautifully. That is important for me. The orchestra is seldom very loud, although there are of course some loud moments. Dense polyphony is generally absent in Janáček and especially in this opera. Yesterday I was rehearsing Schönberg's *Pelleas und Melisande* with the Webern Symphony Orchestra students. Now, that is heavy, densely polyphonic music! Generally speaking, Janáček's polyphony is only in two voices – instead, his language is harmonic – conceived much more in terms of harmony than counterpoint.

For example: if you want to make things easier for a singer, you ask the orchestra to play piano or mezzo forte. With Janáček, it's easier to attain this dynamic contrast than with Schönberg or with *Wozzeck*. There are scenes in *Wozzeck* which are very, very difficult to balance, because the music is written in a dense and rhythmically complex way. Janáček's rhythms are simpler – the influence of folk music. The rhythms may seem quite straightforward, but the difficulty is in forming a string of pearls. There is this bit and that bit and another one – and without that string you can't make an objet d'art – and by that I do not mean something abstract; I mean something real.

How did Janáček approach the material, as opposed to Dostoyevsky?

Boulez: I think Janáček was much more optimistic than Dostoyevsky, because he transformed everything. It really struck me that the eagle doesn't play a part in Dostoyevsky. The poor animal is there and everyone forgets it. With

Janáček, it is a gigantic symbol. A symbol of what? Freedom. And at the same time we know that it is a false hope. The people know it is a false hope. Perhaps Janáček was influenced by Dostoyevsky's life. The only prisoner who is freed is a politician – he is not to be confused with a criminal. The only role he plays is giving Aleya the possibility of freedom through education. That was typical of the French Council Republic – education could gain you freedom. But we see that it did not have any great consequences □

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Patrice Chéreau

I believe – as you show so well, Mr. Chéreau – the men in that narrow space are exposed to the psycho-social and group-dynamic process. Dostoyevsky wrote: “If those prisoners had not had any work, they would have devoured each other like spiders in a jar.” How did you deal with that dynamic? What are the survival techniques you show? Retelling seems very important □

Chéreau: A prisoner's greatest task is to survive. That is his main profession, I would say: how does one survive the day? And they can survive the day quite well if they are not always deeply depressed. They invent a different life, with its own rules, economy, groups, families. Every prison is like that and ends that way – with theatre-making and work alike.

But they also survive by remembering, and sometimes by projecting a different life.

Chéreau: It is interesting because at least three people in the opera recount why they have killed, and that has to do with more than just remembering. I simply tried to shape their stories as if it were the first time they were finally talking about them. I must be honest and say that it is not written that way – it doesn't appear in the music like that – but that is what I wanted. You can't simply tell a story, especially if it takes 20 minutes and it is about

someone who tells that story all the time every day. That's why I always tried to see it as an event. Musically, it is written very precisely for Luca, Skuratov and Shishkov. On that day, he suddenly talks about something that could never emerge from him before. We must never forget that they are criminals.

Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler