

Jakub Hrůša on Leoš Janáček

“He was a composer who never stayed on the surface, he’d always dig in to touch something deeper.”

Have you consulted the interpretation of Janáček’s work with your teacher Jiří Bělohlávek?

Hrůša: Jiří Bělohlávek taught a great deal of Czech repertoire at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, and we discussed Janáček, we discussed *Taras Bulba* for sure. I observed him rehearsing it and doing it with various orchestras. His students were invited by Jiří to follow him at rehearsals – not necessarily only in the Czech Republic, but also outside – and we participated and observed and learned.

And a couple of times he did *Taras Bulba*. It was interesting to see that although there was always his personality present, the result was a little bit different everywhere he went, apart from other things because of traditions of those particular places. It’s different if you do it for instance with the Czech Philharmonic in Prague or the Brno Philharmonic in Brno or the Janáček Philharmonic in Ostrava. All those orchestras have very specific traditions of how to do Janáček; and I think the conductor – unless he is a chief conductor who can really work every week on each particular style – cannot change it in one week completely. He can only mould it, and that’s what Jiří Bělohlávek did. It was actually fascinating to observe, and I always asked how it was possible, that one time he did it this way and the other time that way – and always successfully and in *his* way.

One of the wisdoms I learned from him, I believe, is that to change something this way is not necessarily a mistake; it is actually part of the conductor’s profession, to be open to what the orchestra brings. And in Janáček’s case, it’s even more special than usually. Because a lot of things that are written in music stay open to interpretation, and one person sees it one way and interprets it one way, and another person interprets it completely differently. And you have to make a choice. I also sometimes do things differently; there are different tempo transitions and so on. This ambiguity of detail without

losing any effect of the whole is a very typical feature of interpreting Janáček, I would say.

In Janáček, there are so many transitions, and tempo and balance problems, and this and that – you never stop thinking how to make everything come out the way it should.

Through his music Janáček transmits the most intimate emotions that the human soul can grasp

Hrůša: Well, he was, in a way, a very typical soul of the 19th century: similarly to Dvořák or Brahms, he belonged to a group of men who actually seemed rather harsh, stubborn and straightforward if you looked at them from the outside. But inside, their souls were incredibly sensitive, gentle and beautiful. And this conflict, which Janáček brought far to the 20th century and translated into modern musical language, is, in a way, in his music. His music is concerned with the most tender and beautiful and loving stories, yet at the same time he never prevents himself from presenting them in a shaking manner.

So, in a way, he is a composer who wants to grasp all your attention in a shocking way, in a very straightforward, non-cultivated, sometimes even harsh way, but the things that he communicates are the tenderest possible. It's usually a love topic in the operas, especially an eternity of love, a lot of compassion, especially of people who, in society, are in uneasy situations, often women. He adored women a lot – women as a general idea and women as concrete people. He is actually probably one of the composers, who are furthest from any kind of sentimental cliché, routine or comfort.

A lot of people don't like Janáček because they hate the feeling of immediacy that he brings to them. So Janáček is a composer who either leaves you loving him immensely or maybe you don't like his music – but as it seems to me,

almost everyone can like Janáček. It's only those who go to the theatre to be just comforted who usually don't like him, because it's too immediate and too close to their hearts.

*He always shakes you, he never lets you stay comfortable.
And when he does that, he introduces and transmits the
most important emotional ideas possible.*

The environment where Leoš Janáček lived and created is especially close to you. As a Brno-born citizen, how do you see his personality?

Hrůša: If we put it black and white, Janáček's life goes basically in two separate stages: one is more or less his life until he was sixty, sixty-two, and then his very last stage of life. Maybe we can even speak about three periods: The very first period, which is very long in his case, spans the first fifty years. Then the middle period and then the late period.

And in the first period, he actually was a man who tried to find himself. He was actually seen as a rather conservative person, also aesthetically. He was very much against all experimenting of the Neoromantic School, the New German School and things like that. He adored the aesthetics of people like Eduard Hanslick, Dvořák and Brahms. And he struggled through it, because there was a certain conflict between his personality and this received knowledge. And he even didn't compose too much. You know, he did compose, but he was much more active as a conductor and teacher – and, as I said earlier, as a general “troublemaker”. He just wanted to influence musical life around him in all meanings – not only musical, he was a very poetic writer as well, and a journalist. And then it really took him something like 50 years to find his language, and that language appeared for the first time very powerfully in *Jenůfa*, which was composed around 1900. That changed his situation: suddenly he knew who he was, yet he wasn't successful and well-known, he was considered a collector of folk songs, and not even as respected as later Bartók for instance.

He was really considered to be a local guy in Moravia, somebody “far from the

capital where he faithfully collected folk songs” , something at which he was good, but there was not much else – I’m generalising, but it was pretty much like that. And *Jenůfa* was the first mark he left, yet it didn’t succeed in the capital, in Prague, in the first place: he fought hard to get it there and he didn’t succeed at first. When he did, after struggles and a lot of politics, it was in 1916, he was literally 62 years old. It was a triumph, and he spent the last 10 or so years of his life composing one masterpiece after the other.

And now, coming back to his life, I think his first stage was rather traditional: he married very young, his wife was a very, very young girl back then. This actually caused surprise, because she was, I think, 16 or something like that. They had a normal life with a lot of struggles – all the struggles that marriage brings, but nothing too extraordinary I think. Until the point at which both their children died. And I think that this was also a decisive moment connected to Janáček’s composing, because this was exactly at the time of *Jenůfa*. So it was really like a dark night of his life, which he overcame in a sense, but he didn’t overcome the marriage problem. It really parted husband and wife completely. And I think they were basically divorced from then on, although not officially.

I think since then, and even before, he was really trying to find his true love. He was trying to find his fame and his true love. And after several affairs, so to speak, he fell truly passionately in love with this woman called Kamila Stösslová, who didn’t really return her love for him so much, but she remained an incredible inspiration for him for the rest of his life.

So he was a seeker for his whole life. The first part of his life was rather traditional and “hidden”, whereas the second part of his life – which was the shorter one – was very exposed. I think that he was a man of inner conflict. I wouldn’t say that he was unhappy, but he was in an inner conflict. I think in a sense there were two or even more Janáček in that figure of Janáček: he could be a tender lover, but he could also be a harsh teacher; he could be a ruthless husband, and, at the same time, a person embracing the beauties of nature and writing the most beautiful love letters. So, in a way, he was a man of many faces but with one integral core – and that core was the thing, which we described: maybe an obsession with the beauty of love, compassion and music as his life mission.

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immensely important to him. And in the realm of inner creative inspiration, this woman was a femme fatale for him.

*Janáček did not receive praise as a composer until the “autumn” of his life after he succeeded with *Jenůfa* in Prague in 1916. His muse Kamila Stösslová and the Vienna publisher Universal Edition played a big role in this period. Then he composed one masterpiece after the other*

Hrůša: He lived in Brno, and, although the culture in Brno was not as bad as many people think, it was indeed provincial. And he needed a stimulus [and he really got it in three stages]. One was this success with *Jenůfa* in Prague, which opened the door to other places in the world, in the first place Vienna.

Yes, and indeed he got the most wonderful publisher, Universal Edition, and he gained all his confidence by then. I visualize him finally realizing what he could do, feeling free to experiment, not having to be afraid of every bright and bold idea. Still, he stayed in contact with Brno, all his operas where premièred there, it was like a laboratory for him. And they knew his style, they were rather respectful, more than anywhere else. But when he travelled around the world and visited shows in Vienna, Berlin or London, he always confessed how beautiful it was, so there must have been a difficult comparison. But he also esteemed Brno.

And yet another thing was this love story with Kamila Stösslová.

I think in the realm of everyday life, the publisher was immensely important to him. And in the realm of inner creative inspiration, this woman was a femme fatale for him. It's difficult to imagine. If you look at her picture, actually she was very beautiful; a little bit dark in her appearance. I wonder what would have happened if they really had got together. I think it couldn't have lasted very long, but because of their distance, the projection of an ideal of her—it's fascinating, there is probably no such example in the history of creativity. That a person, being so distant and showing such an unequal amount love, could be such an inspiration. We have Tchaikovsky and von Meck, of course, but it wasn't a matter of passionate love for the composer,

was it? But maybe it's just the fervour which is incomparable in Janáček's case

Hypothetically, if you could discuss some pieces with Janáček, would you ask him something?

Hrůša: That would be tricky. To imagine that he would be alive, and I'd have to greet him and ask him questions. I think he often didn't know himself. He was a very compulsive composer, so the general message and the main stream of a piece were always clear, as was the power of where it goes and what the meaning of the music was. There's no doubt, if you're sensitive enough you can really feel it immediately.

But the details, his writing! If you look at his handwriting, I wonder whether he could read it himself. I think that he was always open, he was a smart guy, he was not stupid, of course, so when he sat in the rehearsals, he carefully observed and he changed a lot. Every rehearsal, he listened to what his music sounded like and changed a great deal of things, not often in writing. He was a very compulsive person, for example, he would go to the stands of the [last] flute player and change a note.

I remember reading a story about *Taras Bulba* being played in Prague, conducted by Václav Talich. Talich actually struggled through one place because he couldn't understand what was written there, and he was actually eager to ask Janáček when he was there in person, so he did. And Janáček basically didn't remember what the solution was. He said something like, "You know, last time we did it, it was probably done that way, but maybe we have forgotten, do exactly what you think is right." So he was too occupied by his artistic goals and he was always composing something new, therefore asking him about past projects must have been difficult. And, also, he was an unpredictable and difficult person; everyone says that. There are some people in Brno whom I know whose parents knew Janáček in person. And they said that you'd better have avoided him when he was in a bad mood, he could be a really harsh and unpleasant man. But at the same time, he could, one day later, be a most loving man.

So, in a way, if he really were alive, I'd be honestly a little bit worried if I needed to speak to him. In a way, all of us interpreters do that virtually all the time, at least I do. I mean, of course, I don't actually have conversations like this, apart from in my heart, but I always ask myself what he would say "If we do this, would he like it?" And it's not the only decisive point, the interpreter's voice is also important, because composers can be distracted a lot. But it is an essential question that we must ask: "Would he be happy if it went like that?" If the basic feeling is yes, then you can trust in that it's probably a good way to

go. At least I believe in this kind of personal honesty

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What is your favourite piece by Janáček..?

Hrůša: So *Taras Bulba* is at the core block of music of my life, I would say. And more than any other piece by Janáček: not necessarily by choice, it just happened like that in my life. It was practically the first one, and I stayed in love with it.

In Janáček, there are so many transitions, and tempo and balance problems, and this and that – you never stop thinking how to make everything come out the way it should.

Janáček liked to work with humour and satire. Do you think he had a sense of humour in his normal life?

Hrůša: I think he was maybe wittier in his works than in real life. And I think that satire and irony, the kind of humour which provokes you, that was very him. Maybe a gentle, embracing humour a little bit less, because he took himself very, very seriously. I think that the majority of his time he was thinking about what he was doing himself. But he had an equal capacity for the tragic and the comic, and you can see it very well in his works, that's true. He was simply a great dramatist.

On the other hand, a piece like *From the House of the Dead* – you know, there is humour there too, but what kind of humour: humour in a prison! He couldn't have written anything that wouldn't have had a deeper meaning, so he was a composer who never stayed on the surface, he'd always dig in to touch something deeper. And where humour was the right way, he did it

through humour. But it was not humour to be entertained by, it was humour to point to something deeper. So again, it's a humour that shakes you, it's not a humour that just makes you happy.

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Interview: Jana Gajdošíková
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