

Marko Ivanović on Leo Janáček

“Janáček was well ahead of his time.”

What makes Janáček's music exceptional for you?

Ivanović: I must admit that, as a conductor and also a composer, I have always been interested in the relationship between music and drama, music and the word, and, in this regard, Janáček is unique for me. The more I delve into these scores, the more I realize and marvel at the original way that Janáček managed to mould music and the spoken word into a convincing shape, and, at the same time, how, at the beginning of the 20th century, he was thinking in theatrical terms. In this, I think, Janáček was well ahead of his time.

This is also shown by the fact that those scores that were often used by his contemporaries and even by the next generation, are often annotated with comments, which in some way or other attempt to improve Janáček. Even some of my professors believed that Janáček was an excellent musician and a great expressionist, but that he needed help with phrasing. This means placing responses to follow on without the characters talking over each other too much; it means waiting, using ritardandos. However, I feel that those are temporal issues, subject to a certain interpretational practice. This was so even in Janáček's time.

Yet nowadays, Janáček's work can be performed as it is actually written in the score with all those sudden changes, the relations of tempos, which are often asymmetrical in a certain way and not entirely clear, without any of those prepared ritardandos, which are often used in performing practice for Janáček's works. For this reason, discovering Janáček is an ongoing adventure for me.

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corresponds with the emotion and the correct timing of the line the character is supposed to say at that moment.

*You have *Jenůfa* and *The Makropulos Case* in your repertoire. How do you perceive them?*

Ivanoví: In terms of opera, *Jenůfa* is a more traditional piece. It contains coherent ensembles. Although the opera flows in one piece, and it is a through-composed opera, certain self-contained numbers can still be picked out here and there.

In contrast, *The Makropulos Case* is a lively drama. In this work, I think Janáček brought to perfection his theory about what musical theatre should be like. I feel that the style that he was approaching in *Jenůfa* was brought to perfection in *The Makropulos Case*.

This means that the spoken word is put to music in a way that gives those words some emotional charge. And there is really nothing else. There is no pleasing song that would interrupt the plot. All the timing and melody are managed in a way that corresponds with the emotion and the correct timing of the line the character is supposed to say at that moment. This means that so much effort has simply been put into the many details because nothing is left to chance, which is a thing I began to discover only when I got deeply involved in studying it.

*Did you manage to get even deeper under Janáček's skin, conducting *The Makropulos Case* from the critical edition?*

Ivanoví: This was also due to the fact that I had the chance to be the first to stage this opera from the critical edition. This means I was able to fall back on how it was performed at its premiere, on what Janáček corrected, and, on the contrary, what Janáček did not correct. And suddenly we found ourselves facing things, like we suddenly found that Janáček actually wrote piano for a sentence that is commonly sung as forte.

And now – did he write piano there because he didn't realize, or because it was a mistake, or was it really his intention? And, in most cases, we found out

that it really was, most likely, his intention. For example, when Emilia Marty gets angry, and she presses the lawyer Kolenatý to break into the apartment of the noble Prus, and he tells her that he cannot get there any other way, the music is building, and her reply is commonly interpreted in forte: "Then you have to get the parcel in another way!" There is piano in the score, and it makes perfect sense because, after the great dramatic culmination, she just states (in piano): "Well, you have to get that parcel another way".

These are the kind of details rife in the opera. They are very well thought out details – I don't know to what extent it is Janáček's calculated intention and to what extent it is his instinctive feel for drama, feel for theatre, but I believe there are actually no mistakes in this opera. It is remarkable.

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Abroad, Janáček is one of the most played and respected opera composers. Yet he struggles to fill Czech theatres

Ivanovil: This is why I believe that a Janáček festival is a great idea, and it's great that it is held regularly. I believe that it will take few more years, but it will surely be reflected in the general view of Janáček. I think that the majority of people in Brno and in the Czech Republic respect Janáček, but, at the same time, they are a bit afraid of him. The audience that comes to the Janáček festival is very specific. They are connoisseurs, people who seek out Janáček, like him and know the majority of his work.

But now we need to attract people to come and see Janáček who are among regular opera audiences, or not even opera but theatre audiences, because I believe that anyone coming to see *Jenůfa* cannot say afterwards that they have seen something alien, something unpleasant, whether musically or theatrically. Simply, I think that it is a prejudice, which must be uprooted by a

revolution, but underpinned by evolution. Because, let's be honest, I think that for an uneducated audience, Janáček is much more accessible than, for example, a Mozart opera. Janáček is immediate and, in his expressiveness, his passion, he just grabs us by the collar and shakes us. I know that this works wonders with a teenage audience. They really do take to Janáček.

And another thing I think is that, as in the National Theatre in Prague, Smetana should never be taken off the repertoire. *The Bartered Bride* should always be in the repertoire. It should be the same for the Janáček Theatre in Brno – Janáček should always be part of the repertoire. This is not always so, for the reason I mentioned earlier – filling the theatre.

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Do you ever think about how his contemporaries and audiences perceived Janáček?

Ivanovil: I admit this is not only a question for me. I, myself, am interested in how he reflected the reactions of the public. It is true that he was greatly respected after his *Jenůfa* was performed in Prague. After that, he was in fact a first-class star, and his operas enjoyed great success everywhere. So I think that he did not have to struggle with any kind of crisis in that regard. And I believe that contemporary audiences were far more open to new things than they are nowadays – I am talking about Czech opera audiences, who are very conservative. He was a maverick – I mean Janáček. I think Brno can boast of many such mavericks.

What is it that resonates in you when you hear Leoš Janáček?

Ivanovil: I think he was a genius composer, genius not only in his musical language but also in his feel for theatre, and there are not many composers in history with such a theatrical feel. And I think that a number of composers who are nowadays among the world-renowned opera composers, still do not

possess Janáček's great musical imagination.

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Interview: Jana Gajdošíková
Brno, November 2014
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