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**JANÁČEK AND THE PARAPHRASE OF OPERETTA MUSIC?  
Marginalia on a passage in the fourth movement of Janáček's Second  
String Quartet 'Intimate Letters' that could seem to be suspicious for  
serving as a 'mockery of the banal'**

In the revue *Opus musicum* (OM II, No 2/1970, pp 45–49) Klaus Stahmer once published a study with the title given by Czech translators Vojen Drlík and Eva Drlíková: 'Ironizace banálního. Několik myšlenek o pozoruhodných pasážích v díle Bély Bartóka' (Mockery of the banal. Some thoughts about remarkable passages in the works of Béla Bartók.). The study proved to be challenging and in that time it had a greater impact on composers than on musicologists. It is no accident that less than a year later the study was mentioned by Alois Piňos and Miloš Štědroň. Together they wrote a study 'Prvky banality a jejich ironizace v soudobé hudbě' ('Elements of the banal and their mockery in the contemporary music') for the same revue *Opus musicum* (OM III, No 3/1971, pp 49–54).

Stahmer chose a passage from the String Quartet No 5 by Béla Bartók to describe the so-called 'mockery of the banal'. Shortly before the end of the work, Bartók introduces a few bars marked *Allegretto con indifferenza* and "meccanico". How does Stahmer as the author of the expression 'mockery of the banal' describe them?

Let us see: (...) "*We deal with 8 + 4 + 10 bars of the simplest possible song melodics (with the Albertian accompaniment in A major), bitonal in the end. Whilst the A major accompaniment plunks in a mechanical manner, the melody in the highest register goes back to [the original] B-flat major. The passage itself, if perceived out of context, evokes the impression of a mechanical muffing of the hurdy-gurdy, transmitted together with the bitonal alienating impression to the medium of string quartet... If that same passage is observed within its context, we find that the incongruity of diverse semantical levels is being intensified right to the very disintegration of these. Sonority of clusters, atonal chords determined on a linear basis, highly differentiated colourness (We regret Stahmer's original German text is not available – 'colourness' doesn't unfortunately bring us to the apparently meant 'timbre pallet' – MŠ), and rhythmic – all this*

*contrasts with the short passage to such degree that most of the scholars have been puzzled so far ...*" (excerpt from the study, pp 45/46)

To conclude with the 'mockery of the banal,' Klaus Stahmer was obliged to face this quandary (or reluctance against keeping on such inquiry) and to reach further solutions. First and foremost, he exemplifies the existing quandary by some statements of his predecessors. Halsey Stevens, for instance, is said to conclude that "(...) *the extreme relaxation of the harmonic idiom is almost shocking*" and to describe the passage as "childishly simple". Analogically, says Stahmer, Ligeti remarks that "(...) *the meaning of these collages remains obscure.*" Another scholar involved is Matyás Seiber. In this passage he sees "*an extraordinary, indeed surrealist idea, that pleases as well as a tramway ticket stuck upon a picture (...)*" Stahmer then likewise quotes Jürgen Uhde, Serge Moreaux, Colin Mason, and Jürgen Balzer.\* In mutually varied understandings of this particular quantity, Stahmer finds outlines of a new quality that he calls a "mockery of the banal." He does not reduce this phenomenon to a mere Bartók-exception but rates it on the contrary as a wilful use of the differentiation of styles aiming at their mockery, persiflage, caricature. The relation of the 'mocking' to the 'mocked' is questionable and both can easily exchange their mutual positions. This is an apparent feature of the modern avant-garde. As a result we get a differentiation that places Bartók, Schönberg, or even Mahler on one side and the two Mozarts on the other...

But why such an extensive commentary is provided to the suggested possibility that in the closing part of Janáček's Second String Quartet ('Intimate Letters') we find such confrontation of a mocked, and thus picked up, let's say, operetta theme?! It was intended to present the method. Nevertheless, even in all what was said about it, there is no direct implication of its universal definition liability, which indeed cannot exist at all. Every time it will be necessary to study the particularity of the new concrete material.

Well, let's now move to Janáček.

Watchful observers, habituated to penetrating the superficialities of sources, noticed, although just as a marginality, that during his stay at Kamila Stösslová's place in Písek in the close of 1927, therefore some nine months before his death, Leoš Janáček and his host visited an operetta.

Now let the sources speak:

1.

*Hádanka života. Dopisy Leoše Janáčka Kamile Stösslové*

(Enigma of a life – Leoš Janáček's letters to Kamila Stösslová)

edited by Svatava Přibáňová, Knižnice Opus musicum, Brno, 1990

Letter No 516 (p. 248; for English version see John Tyrrell's translation later in the text):

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\* Unfortunately, the translators produce only fragmentary works' titles.

Brno, 15. 11. 1927

Moje milá Kamilko!

Neměj mi za zlé, že jsem tě tehdy požďuchoval. Předně byl to jen šetrný dotek, stisk. Báł jsem se, abys nevykřikla, ne proto, že bych ti to zazlívál! Bože chraň! Ale proto, že ta opereta byla tak nesmírně hloupá v celku, až na některá místa, kde bych se byl též zasmál, kdyby celek mne byl uspokojil...

Commentary: Most probably, Janáček and Kamila Stösslová saw the first of the two operettas given by the visiting České Budějovice Theatre Company in Písek on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1927. Thanks to the director of the Historical Institute of South-Bohemian University in České Budějovice, prof. dr. Václav Bůžek, CSc., I got a copy of an issue of Písecké listy 31 (1927), No 48, from 10 November 1927. In the section 'Theatre and Music' there is a commentary on a performance of Janáček's Jenůfa by the visiting South-Bohemian National Theatre Company from České Budějovice. The final remark says that "(...) *the present composer received lively acclamations and, together with the main protagonists and the director of the Opera, he enjoyed a great success.*" Much more important for us is the continuation of the gloss: "*On 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> November two operettas were played: 'Adieu Mimi' by Alex. Engel & I. Horst and 'Dolly' by Fr. Arnold & A. Bach. Both now impressed a wider audience because joyful music and various so-called 'hits' often enraptured an applause even within acts.*"

In Písek, Janáček saw the first operetta Adieu Mimi. The music had been composed by even nowadays popular Ralph Benatzky, born in Moravské Budějovice. Písecké listy – by mistake – mention only the librettists. Names of both composers are missing. The music to Adieu Mimi is – as we have already said – by Ralph Benatzky and to Dolly by Hugo Hirsch. In the 1920s both operettas were successfully staged in a considerable number of Czech and German operetta houses across Central Europe – thus including Czechoslovakia. Benatzky's Adieu Mimi, for instance, was premièred on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1926 in the Vinohradská zpěvohra, on the same stage as Hirsch's Dolly on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1925. Czech Operetta Company in Brno staged Adieu Mimi, directed by Oldřich Nový and under the baton of Janáček's pupil Rudolf Kvasnica, in Reduta on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1926. (Thanks to dr. Vojen Drlík for providing valuable information not only about the Prague premières)

## 2.

*Intimate Letters. Leoš Janáček to Kamila Stösslová*

Edited and translated by John Tyrrell. Faber and Faber Limited, London 1994:

Tyrrell makes comments about the letter No 516 on page 146, where a passage about the operetta is translated thus: "*But because that operetta was so extraordinarily stupid as a whole except for a few places where I'd also have laughed if the rest of it had pleased me*"...

His comments follow: "*Janáček attended an operetta with Stösslová given by the České Budějovice company during his trip to Písek in early November*"...

In his 'Diary of Meetings' (survey) (pp. 365-367) Tyrrell remarks:  
 ...?1-4 November Písek: LJ stays in Písek to see a performance of *Jenůfa*  
 there on 2 November with KS and her Mother, given by the České Budějovice  
 Opera. They all go to see an operetta... (p. 366)

Comments: John Tyrrell realized the importance for Janáček of this spectacle  
 given by the visiting České Budějovice Theatre and Operetta. He is the only  
 Janáček scholar to recall this fact so far.

## 3.

*Leoš Janáček: Památník pro Kamilu Stösslovou.*

[Album for Kamila Stösslová]

edited and with studies provided by Jarmila Procházková. Edice Poklady muzea,  
 Vol. 2, Moravské zemské muzeum, Brno 1994

In her commentary on the edition of the Album Jarmila Procházková observes  
 (p. 10): ...*"It is probable that on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1927 LJ and KS visited an oper-  
 etta performance together in Písek."*

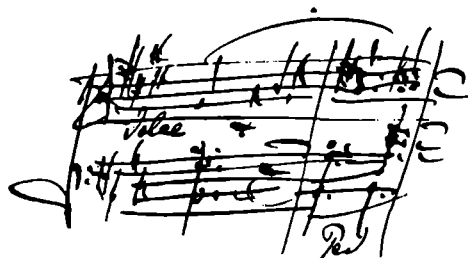
Let us pay attention to the following little composition (or just a motif) for  
 Kamila from her Album(s), the foreground commentary included:

2<sup>nd</sup> November 1927

Back here again, so happy beside of Her, my savage

And again let us promise ourselves, promise ourselves those children – but only  
 those imagined ones, but so vividly imagined – oh! understand, you who are read-  
 ing

The image shows a musical score for a piece by Leoš Janáček. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature is two sharps (D major) and the time signature is 6/8. The first system is marked 'dolce' and includes a 'Ped.' (pedal) instruction. The second system includes 'cresc.' and 'accel.' markings. The music features a melody in the right hand and a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand, with various articulations and dynamics.



Three months past his November visit to Písek and his operetta episode Janáček's intense work on the Second String Quartet 'Intimate Letters' reached its climax. In the fourth movement – incidentally again shortly before the end of the work – we find an interesting passage, evoking a waltz-like operetta paraphrase or mockery of the banal. For long I wondered about the origin or the function of the passage. With no connection or evidence I associated dance, operetta, café, or period cinema music, etc. Operetta offers one way to seek paraphrases, the short composition in Kamila Stösslová's *Album* another. Let us now consider the passage in question from the fourth movement of the Second String Quartet 'Intimate Letters,' bars 205 – 218. We refrain from any semantic connotations as we do not want to speculate about the meaning of the text from the *Album* in relation to its analogous function in the Quartet. However, let us notice a certain similarity of the passage from the Quartet with *Album*'s piano part written in the beginning of November 1927:

12 *espress.*  $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$   
*mf*  
*espr.* *mf*  
*pp.*  
*p*  
*f espress.* *mf*

H.M. 726 P.

On the other hand we should diminish the importance of the passage mentioned of the Quartet, because it is composed in Janáček's favourite and frequently used form, designated by John Tyrrell as a "slow cathartic waltz". And there's another aspect that will actually restrict the exceptionality of this "banal" passage in the Quartet's fourth movement: from mid-1920s a certain remarkable melodic simplification appears in the pure form of Janáček's musical themes and motifs, in passages of catharses in particular. (e. g. somewhat cathartic coda in the fourth movement of the "Danube" Symphony before the coda proper, 'Vzpomínka' for piano, or most of the miniatures and sketches in the 'Album for Kamila Stösslová'; his penultimate work 'Čekám Tě' – Waiting for You – is fairly significant: as for the harmony, these passages which are given a cathartic character are generally placed in the context of an ostinato-like lingering on the second-inversion tonic chord.

Although this remark to a certain extent diminishes the relevance of the explicitly banal origin of the Quartet's passage and its relation to the piano composition from the Album (the piano texture to be conceived in the upper transposition of two octaves), both textures can be regarded as in some way connected.

## CONCLUSION

The passage in the cathartic part of the fourth movement of the Second String Quartet 'Intimate Letters' we consider enigmatic and preliminarily characterize it as approaching the situations labeled "mockery of the banal," is definitely worth further scholars' attention. It is almost certain that the hitherto unknown operetta episode and Janáček's visit of the performance of Ralph Benatzky's *Adieu Mimi* on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1927 was not the impulse to the creation of this, in Tyrrell's words, slow cathartic waltz. The likeness of the Quartet melody and the little piano piece from the Album for Kamila Stösslová dated 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1927 is obvious. However, both could serve as a paraphrase of something ulterior, unknown so far, what Janáček could have regarded as an important account or atmosphere in his relation to Kamila Stösslová. There are numerous possible explanations: for example a reference to the functional music – let's say cinema, gramophone, piano etc. – connected with an emotional experience. At any rate, the puzzle has no outright solution yet...

*do angličtiny přeložil Jan Špaček*



