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COUNTRY BOYS, CITY AIR, REFLECTIONS ON JANÁČEK, BRNO AND THE REST OF THE WORLD IN MEMORY OF JIŘÍ FUKAČ

In his new book, *Time, Love, Memory* Jonathan Weiner speaks about what he calls, "ultimities," which he suggests are those problems which we sense contain secrets of extraordinary moment: the origin of species, the origin of the universe and the origin of life. "And the most intimate, the most immediate, in some ways the most intricate and the most important for our inquiring species, will always be the origin of behavior. We have asked these questions from the beginning: How much of our fate is decided before we are born? What is written and in what code and of what materials? What are the connections between atoms, thoughts, feelings, behavior? How much of our behavior is passed down from one generation to the next?"

In keeping with our scientific times, Weiner's book seeks explanations in genetic research, specifically Seymour Benzer's work on Drosophila or fruit flies. To him, critical aspects of large-scale behavior are encoded in genetic transmissions. Yet, there are other, somewhat less quantifiable, patterns of smaller scale behavior, however, which are of considerable moment for our own investigations. How does artistic behavior take shape? How do composers develop their modes of expression? How do we explain their responses to challenges? With the publication of Zdeňka Janáčková's memoirs specific questions are raised about Janáček such as: who on earth this guy? What made him tick? Who was this passionate anti-German who based his theories on Helmholtz and Wundt? Who was this Czech nationalist who borrowed more from Puccini than from Smetana? Another thing with which we have happily wrestled: the question of how do we explain Janáček's ever-growing popularity? It is the goal of this brief essay to explore the ways in which Janáček's journey from the provinces to the mainstream, and the accompanying tensions between center and periphery which lingered throughout his life, may have shaped his behavior.

It is some kind of truism to say that deep down, every town is provincial. Live long enough in New York or Paris, Tokyo or Hong Kong, Vienna or Prague, and

even these centers reveal themselves as places with limited possibilities and narrow attitudes. But there is a difference: most of the inhabitants of these cities are blissfully unaware that they anywhere but central, and in the telling of historical stories it is Rome and Vienna which are the suns while Brno and Reggio Emilia are the satellites. Small towns may be local centers, but many of the most educated inhabitants in these places, know as part of their belief system, that even if they are original and successful, it is not they who set the styles, nor do they exert the gravitational pull of newness - that comes from the big cities…

There is a paradox, however, that seems to defy explanation. Those movers and shakers who give the mainstream centers their cultural identities are usually from the provinces, and very often from what we might call, the deep provinces. Michelangelo was born in a small village near Arezzo, Shakespeare came from little Avon, Rembrandt got started in Leiden. Faulkner was part of a cadre of young Southern writers coming to the big city. Mozart got away from Salzburg as soon as he could, and Beethoven easily left Bonn behind. In the Czech tradition, not a single one of the all-purpose pantheon of Smetana, Dvořák, Fibich, Janáček, Suk, Novák, Foerster or Martinů came from the big city, they are all from towns and villages like Polička, Nelahozeves, Křečovice, and Hukvaldy.

There are some exceptions to this rule: Dante may have been born in Florence, but since most of the biographical information we have is from his poetry, we can't be sure. The Gabrieli's were probably from Venice, and Schubert was born near Vienna; but considering both the supposed cultural advantages of a metropolis for general education, and the demographics, we should certainly have expected far more great artists to have come from the big city.

Some of the reasons for this are fairly straightforward. There is the mystery and excitement of a city for those coming from the provinces, who often bring a giant sized chip on the shoulder with them. It is perhaps even possible to suggest that certain kinds of "work ethic" were more highly developed in small towns than in big cities where the educated tend to take their positions for granted. Whatever the case, so many stories concerning artistic maturation involve the interplay between excitement, ambition, insecurity, and conquest as the young man or woman from "outside," makes their way in the great world.

Janáček's attempts to conquer his world are almost caricature. His life in Brno literally begins with nothing, and he is virtually an orphan. He does not seek to make his way in Brno so much as he seems intent to ingest and reinvent Brno's musical life. His activities as a teacher, conductor, journalist, ethnographer, scholar, theorist and composer make exhausting reading, and this process of proving himself continues for his entire life. There are many explanations for this, from the genetic to the psychological, but we should not forget the significance of the phenomenon I call "Coming into the City" in shaping his approach.

Part of the tension comes from feeling simultaneously insider and outsider, and reverse psychological metaphors. In other words, though one may appear to be an insider on the outside, inside, one feels an outsider. This perspective may be one explanation for Janáček's choices of subject matter. Katya introduces herself by

telling how out of place she feels, while Emilia Marty is one of the most alienated and displaced figures in literature. Each of the prisoners in House of the Dead wants to be somewhere else, and poor Broucek never belongs anywhere, not even in the pub.

Even though the Vixen seems to glorify the provinces, some of the opera's most touching scenes are of displacement, as the Vixen finds herself on a leash like a domestic animal, or when as a counterbalance later in the opera, the forester sits sadly in the pub before beginning his cathartic walk at the end of the opera. Janáček's pastoral retreats may be somewhat less dysfunctional than Chekhov's, but they are never simple glorifications of the countryside.

So we may argue that some of Janáček's combativeness, ambition, and even preferences for certain plots and characters over others are related to his provincial roots. Yet this doesn't really give us deeper insight into his special case, nor can we explain why everyone who comes from the provinces isn't Janáček. In order to go further we may remind ourselves that there are two ways artists come into the big city. They may go there to study, staying or not, or they may make their reputations in the provinces, and move to a main center in order to take advantage of economic or artistic possibilities. Rembrandt moves from Leiden to Amsterdam, while Mozart and Mahler and so many others, head to Vienna.

In this matter, it would appear, Janáček wildly goes against the prevailing models by *staying* in a provincial center for his entire career. There are no doubt many reasons for this, which might include things such as Janáček's Moravian patriotism, a certain insecurity, and a fondness for local venues, but there are two larger, overriding reasons as well: Janáček was a late-bloomer by most standards, and the success which naturally might have catapulted him to the next level - the Brno premiere of *Jenůfa* - came when he was almost 50 years old. That might have been the natural time to re-center himself in Prague, but as is well known, the road to the next level had been blocked decades before as a result of the ancient feud between Janáček and Kovařovic. While critics have naturally focused on the emotional repercussions of Kovařovic's quarantine, and the effect it had on the international dissemination of Janáček's music, there was another, more compelling result: Janáček stayed in Brno. This invokes a second set of parameters related to the broad issue of center and periphery.

Amidst the rolling hills of central North Carolina sits a decaying plantation known as Coolemee, where the Hairston family owned huge amounts of slaves until the middle of the last century. The architectural centerpiece is an ante-bellum mansion rich in architectural detail, with carved columns and distinctive octagonal shapes. In the hundred square miles surrounding the estate one sees echoes of Coolemee in ways which are almost eerie. A little house ten miles to the West, hardly more than a shack, has Coolemee columns. A modest farmhouse fifteen miles away has an adapted pentagon, a humble cabin, just outside of the town of Lexington, sports a huge wrap-around porch, and dozens of houses take account of the manse in myriad ways. To say that these structures are ugly, strange or even

crazy is to miss the point, for I believe that the Coolemee phenomenon is a metaphor for the way in which mainstream designs are adapted and rethought according to the skills, materials, needs, and even misunderstandings of the periphery.

If *being* from the provinces creates one kind of life force and attitude, *staying* in a more provincial setting involves an altogether different process. Cultural centers, such as Vienna, Paris, London and New York, not only attract the best and the brightest from outside, but these assimilated outsiders initiate designs and artistic vibrations which are-eventually-received in the provinces and transformed in multiple ways. Or in other words, except in rare cases such as folk music collection, the periphery gazes at and models the mainstream, not the other way round.

Janáček's individuality undoubtedly lies in the way he manipulates inherited tradition in an especially *original* way, but there is another way to describe this process. Janáček adores Verdi, Charpentier, Puccini, and Richard Strauss, but could not copy them if he wanted to, any more than Van Gogh could copy the work of other painters. Janáček is incapable of writing even a single work "properly" shaped by the standards of the mainstream. He tries to write a concerto, and comes up with a concertino; he'd love to compose a symphony, but all that comes out are the unfinished Dunaj (Danube) and the suite-like Sinfonietta. He writes operas, but they are almost like half operas--as one violinist said to me recently about the *Cunning Little Vixen*: "how can you dislike an opera that has you in the pub by 9:30?"

It's no wonder that for the mainstream, the periphery more often than not simply "gets it wrong." If the products of the periphery ape those of the mainstream, they are usually considered to be insufficiently professional (as figures like Kovařovic, Nejedlý and Křenek considered Janáček a dilletante) and if they are unlike those in the mainstream, they will usually be called primitive or irrelevant rather than original. Prague, for example, is famous for a particular attitude that survives even until today. Pragocentrism assumes that the only important cultural things in the country happen in Prague, and if Janáček, or anyone else, is any good, they'd better be there.

Indeed, in some ways, our ante-bellum mansion Coolemee is somewhat like Brno, for though it exerted a forceful aesthetic pull on local structures, the design of this bracketed Hudson River style Florentine villa was itself based on a plan found by the Hairston's in the *Goodies Ladies Book* in the 1850's, the *Ladies Home Journal* of its day. Coolemee, like Brno, always hovers between the big city and the deep provinces.

There is still another aspect of the provinces that remains to be mentioned as a means to explain the kinds of "difference" which may flourish there. One of the greatest chapters in *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Svejk in the Second World War* is the bit in the insane asylum. Here Svejk, somewhat ghoulishly, turns madness on its head "It was really like living in paradise there. You could kick up a row, fight, sing, cry, bleat, yell, jump, say your prayers, turn somersaults, crawl on all fours, hop, run about, dance, skip, squat all day on your haunches

and climb up the walls. No one would come to you and tell you: 'You mustn't do that, sir. It's not decent. You should be ashamed of yourself. Aren't you properly brought up?'"

Though Svejk is arguably an extreme case (and Brno is no asylum), it is easy for people to develop patterns of expression in cultural isolation that would never survive in a larger city. For all their claims to cultural superiority places like New York, London, Paris, Tokyo and Prague always has a higher level of neurosis, insecurity and ultimately, conformity. Yet to the mainstream, the periphery, when it crosses its synapses at all, appears either as an aesthetic kindergarten or the lunatic asylum.

Thus amateur, genius, professional and crackpot can coexist in provincial settings with marvelous but uneven results. One of the most famous buildings in the United States is President Thomas Jefferson's house Monticello, designed and built in the hills of Virginia by the statesman, inventor and enlightenment man over decades. Touted even today as an architectural marvel, we can see it represented on the American nickel. The image on the coin suggests an idealized, neoclassical structure, and I was somewhat shocked to find that the real Monticello does not look anything like this. Crammed with artifacts from mastodon bones to Native American silhouettes, the weirdly shaped, angular rooms, the lighting, and the placement of staircases along the window create somewhat of a claustrophobic effect. Upon seeing Jefferson's architectural designs close up one is reminded of the famous line of Glazunov's "Of course amateurs are the best musicians, too bad they can't play." This comes home even more strongly when one regards the rotunda at the nearby University of Virginia. Designed by Jefferson, it was destroyed by fire in the late 19th century, and rebuilt by the famous architect, Stanford White. The difference between an ingenious amateur idea realized by an amateur, and the same idea realized by a professional is palpable.

Let us move to Brno, but stop at the philosophical traditions of the city before coming to Janáček himself. Although Herbartian thought did play a role in philosophical systems in Prague, it was in Brno where the idiosyncratic aesthetics of Zimmermann and Durdík became like a religion. An entire system of thought which, in the face of Hegelian philosophy was relegated quickly to the level of a curiosity, was able to thrive in Brno, where it decisively affected the young, emergent Janáček.

In transferring this argument to the subject of our study, I do not intend to imply that he was a crackpot or an amateur, but that his level pure inventiveness and utter artistic difference could survive much longer in the provinces than it could in the metropolis. Janáček was ultimately a professional musician, with some serious training, so his "crackpot" ideas were far better realized than, let us say Jefferson's, and sometimes have earned him the title, "visionary."

But it would be a mistake to suggest that Janáček sounds like Janáček soley on the basis of his skills and intentions. In his attempts to model the mainstream from a different cultural perspective and his preoccupation with certain idiosyncratic theories and approaches, it is his *inability* to ape the mainstream that stands

out; and his almost total lack of slick artifice. Janáček and Brno cannot do anything the way they do it in Prague. That is their glory and the deepest roots of their power.

In the next few decades the Human Genome Project will continue to provide us with astonishing insights into aspects of human behavior. My son will probably find out precisely which gene causes him to pull on his shirt collar when he is excited just like his Uncle Jon, and even such things as temperament, ability to concentrate, and imaginative type will be secrets no more. We will know an enormous amount about the origins of human behavior. Yet it is quite likely that even in the far-flung future our descendants will still be able to say with some impunity: tell me where you are from , where you are, and where you are going, and I will tell you who you are.