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JANÁČEK AND MODERNISM

If Janáček's relegation in older histories of music to an uneasy position as a 'late nationalist'¹ hardly seems to fit the bill, his placing as a 'Modernist' may seem no less problematic. Here, after all, is a composer born in the middle of the nineteenth century, a generation before all Modernists of the 1920s and even before 'protomodernists' such as Debussy and Mahler. Anyone listening to most of Janáček's music written up till his sixtieth year would not naturally place him with the Modernists. Such a position can be awarded only on the basis of what he wrote in the last eight years of his life, when he was over sixty-five.

Furthermore, Janáček was too much a nineteenth-century composer, even in his works of the 1920s, to feel thoroughly at home in the Modernist camp. His training was conventional, from the conservative wing of German nineteenth-century music, and his initial musical outlook was formed by the 1880s, although a rebellious side was evident in his ideas on the juxtaposition of chords. While his style was opened out in the 1890s through his contact with Moravian folk music, this melodic and rhythmic stratum overlaid a basically tonal outlook. Janáček did not believe in the abandonment of tonality any more than he believed in fragmented melody. If he is a Modernist his brand of Modernism is very different from that of the mainstream.

A further objection to Janáček as Modernist might be that there is a distinction between 'modern' and 'Modernist' and that the latter implies a particular radical programme – a manifesto – and an historical self-awareness that Janáček arguably lacks.

Much depends on the rigidity of the definition of Modernism. More recent accounts such as that by Leon Botstein in the *New Grove* (revised edition, 2001) adopt a wider perspective that finds a place for Janáček as an 'indigenous' Modernist, i.e. one whose Modernism is home grown rather than coming from one of the leading Modernist traditions of Vienna or Paris. Although a key to much Modernist thought, in literature and particularly in architecture, is its association

¹ See, for instance, Donald Jay Grout: *A History of Western Music Revised* (Dent, London, 1960), 641–2.

with the city, it is possible to argue, as Botstein does, that Janáček overturned this: ‘Janáček’s forays into documenting folk materials and speech patterns represented the assertion of a preserved rural tradition against a progressive cosmopolitan urban culture. The past, sustained in the provincial present, held the key for modernity.’²

Janáček’s place in Modernism can be usefully compared with that of Bartók. Both composers rebelled against current orthodoxy by the espousal of folk musics. Both collected folk music and promoted it with scholarly editions and arrangements. In Bartók’s case the project was broader, concerned with a whole swathe of eastern European folk music; Janáček concentrated on Moravian folk music. The distinctive world of this music with its unusual scales and modes encouraged melodic flexibility; its text-based origins encouraged irregular rhythms and phrases. One can also argue that the unusual piano accompaniments in Janáček’s folksong arrangements stem from an attempt to reflect the original accompaniments: by cimbalom, bagpipes, or folk ensemble and led to a crucial freeing-up of texture in his own works.³ Janáček’s melodic and harmonic vocabulary, although still tonal, drew and developed from folk scales a range of modal variation (‘flexes’ or ‘inflections’ as they are sometimes called by Czech theorists)⁴ that in some ways coalesced with the western theoretical models (whole tone scales, octatonic collections, etc.) to which Janáček was gradually exposed.⁵ But there is a huge distance that such a ‘folk modernist’ would have to travel. In Janáček’s case one might argue that his own journey was merely stimulated by the fruitful encounter with folk music and that his own searching took him into realms that were entirely his own.

At first sight, it might seem as though Janáček, stuck in the conservative Moravian capital with only occasional sorties to Prague, lacked access to new music. But Miloš Štědroň, in his thorough and thoughtful examination of Janáček’s relationship with the music of the twentieth century, has carefully documented Janáček’s knowledge and absorption of the major artistic trends from verism onwards, in particular his knowledge of Debussy, Schoenberg, Berg, Stravinsky, Hindemith and Bartók, and a whole slew of less central figures ranging from the

² Leon Botstein: ‘The Cultural Politics of Language and Music: Max Brod and Leoš Janáček’, in Michael Beckerman, ed.: *Janáček and his World* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2003), 29.

³ John Tyrrell: *Janáček: Years of a Life*, i: *The Lonely Blackbird* (Faber, London, 2006), chap. 31.

⁴ See Miloš Štědroň’s discussion of Jaroslav Volek’s term in ‘Flexe’, *Leoš Janáček a hudba 20. století: paralely, sondy, dokumenty* (Nadace Universitas Masarykiana v Brně and others, Brno, 1998), 130–2.

⁵ A useful survey of Janáček’s harmonic practice can be found in John Kevin Novak: *The Programmatic Orchestral Works of Leoš Janáček: their style and their musical and extramusical content* (PhD dissertation., University of Texas, Austin, 1994), chap. 4; Paul Wingfield examines Janáček’s earliest use of octatonicism in ‘Unlocking a Janáček enigma: the harmonic structure of Kudrjáš’s “waiting song”’, *Music and Letters*, lxxv (1994), 561–75.

Czech Alois Hába (with his preoccupation with quarter-tone and other microtonal music) to the American Henry Cowell (who visited Brno in 1926).⁶ Furthermore, in the last years of his life Janáček started attending the festivals of International Society for Contemporary Music (in Salzburg 1923, Venice 1925, and Frankfurt 1927), where he came across an even greater range of music. Apart from his aphoristic, and mostly negative, impressions that he wrote up after the Venice festival (XV/281) and his notes on the Frankfurt festival (XV/348),⁷ we do not know much about what he heard but we do know, however, from Jascha Horenstein's testimony, that he carefully sat in on rehearsals and seemed eager to hear what was going on.⁸ It is certainly possible to argue that all of this had some effect on him, if only to strengthen existing trends, rather like his exposure to Charpentier's *Louise* in 1903 gave him the confidence to come to terms with the natural changes in his own style, which was diverging markedly from that of his Czech counterparts.⁹ It is striking that in the very late interviews that Janáček gave to foreign and Prague newspapers (XV/302 in September 1927; XV/306 in March 1928) he was beginning to take a position in which he defended experimentation and experimenters such as Berg, and allied himself with the future. Although it could be argued that this was a skilfully asserted public position, the same stance emerges in an off-the-cuff comment to his old colleague Emerich Beran: 'In Prague, we have had an international music festival. I can say for myself that I like listening to extremes.'¹⁰

There are certain areas where Janáček's new thinking is most apparent, areas that are not generally discussed in Modernist terms. What is attractive about Janáček to many listeners is that he was able to employ many traditional aspects of music (nineteenth-century melody, harmony, tonality) while at the same time refashioning them into something distinctively new. Janáček's concept of speech melody in particular was one that helped him develop an awareness of music in miniature: potent, concentrated and on a very small scale (a parallel rather than an imitative relationship to Webern). A fragment of someone's speech conveyed to Janáček a distinct emotion and in his own way he wished to translate this sort of concentrated emotion into music. An extreme example is the little piece that he wrote on the death of Alois Mrštík in 1925 (VIII/28). It is a complete piano piece, lasting seven bars – just a few seconds. But, quite characteristically, it says all it needs to say: a pent-up expression of both grief (at the death of a friend) and celebration (of his life and work). This technique of distilling and concentrating

⁶ Štědroň 1998, 55–126.

⁷ References to Janáček's writings and compositions are according to the numbering system in Nigel Simeone, John Tyrrell and Alena Němcová: *Janáček's Works: a catalogue of the music and writings of Leoš Janáček* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997).

⁸ Interview with Alan Blythe, *The Gramophone* (November, 1970), 768 and 775.

⁹ See Tyrrell 2006, chap. 46.

¹⁰ Janáček to Beran, 26 May 1925, Jernej Weiss, ed.: 'The transcription of the correspondence between Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) and Emerik Beran (1868–1940)', *Muzikološki zbornik*, XLII (Ljubljana, 2006) 151.

emotional expression is one that can be seen in the tiny pieces that festooned his *Lidové noviny* articles and finds its final expression in the series of keyboard miniatures that run through the Album for Kamila Stösslová's (VIII/33). The fact that Janáček constantly wrote about the concept and the importance of speech melody not only to him, but to anyone attempting to write operas, could well be regarded as Janáček's own Modernist 'manifesto'.

That Janáček can establish a mood and atmosphere with just a few notes is one of his great attributes, and incidentally a fine Modernist reaction to the heavenly (or arrogant) lengths of much nineteenth-century music. It is wonderful gift for a musical dramatist. It allows Janáček to establish scene moods instantly and to be able to change them instantly. Although in his later operas Janáček began to make a limited use of recurring motifs, his natural habitat was a type of music in which a motif was simply a neutral pattern of notes that in conjunction with the words and stage action took on atmosphere, emotion and 'meaning' entirely according to the type of manipulations (harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, colouristic) with which he varied it. In this the arbitrariness of Janáček's emotional and associational codes of musical language has parallels with the Modernist re-examination of the relationship of (verbal) language to reality.

Janáček's ability to draw music out of even the most unpropitious tonal events, is reflected at another level in the equally unpropitious choice of opera texts. Discard the first two of his nine operas as typical tropes of nationalist opera (serious mythical/historical; comic village), and what is left, with the exception of *Káťa Kabanová*, is all entirely surprising and seemingly anti-operatic: a 'manifesto' in all but name. Operatically Janáček began colonizing territory that no other composer at the time would have dared to. In *Jenůfa* he wrote a serious village opera (novel though not quite unique in a Czech context)¹¹ that dealt with taboo topics such as unmarried mothers, domestic violence and infanticide. In its successor *Fate* he wrote the first 'Künstleroper', i.e. an opera with strongly autobiographical undertones, based on the concept of composer-artist as central hero.¹² Thereafter the topics get more and more and more weird: time-travelling in *The Excursions of Mr Brouček*, animals and insects in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, science fiction in *The Makropulos Affair*, a prison camp in *From the House of the Dead*. Place these operas against those written by his best known operatic contemporaries (Puccini, Richard Strauss) and one sees immediately how extraordinarily varied, innovative and daring they are. Although three of the operas, *Jenůfa*, *Káťa Kabanová* and *The Makropulos Affair*, are based on well-made plays, the rest are based on librettos that Janáček wrote mostly himself, and are almost provocatively fluid and arbitrary in their handling of narrative and chronology. That Janáček was well ahead of his time dramaturgically is only emphasized by the well-meaning

¹¹ Foerster had preceded him in *Debora* (première, 1893).

¹² See Claire Taylor-Jay: *Artist-Operas of Pfitzner, Krenek and Hindemith: politics and the ideology of the artist* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2003) for an examination of the German phenomenon.

but ultimately misconceived attempts by an attested dramatist, Max Brod, in trying to push *The Cunning Little Vixen* into a more conventional mould.¹³ By the time Janáček got to the final one, *From the House of the Dead*, he wrote an opera with no overall plot and no main characters. Characters emerge from the anonymity of the chorus to tell their tales and then disappear. Most of Janáček's operas defy the usual notions of character development, but because of Janáček's gifts are for conveying emotion in such concentration, one is usually not aware of this shortcoming (if indeed it is such). It is simply not part of what he was trying to do. In abandoning verse librettos as early as 1894 Janáček was forging a path that most opera composers took only well into the twentieth century.

Another area that defines Janáček's modernity is his approach to collage and montage,¹⁴ one of the key characteristics of visual Modernists such as Braque and Schwitters, but not something that percolated into music until rather later in the twentieth century. Much of Janáček's approach is do with adding layers (here, for once, there is a parallel with his theoretical works, in this case his analysis of rhythm); this becomes clear in the examination of Janáček's sketches, variants and manuscripts, and the way that in them such layers are manipulated.¹⁵ Allied with this are the innovative aspects of Janáček's orchestration. This is visually evident in the way he wrote his later scores: rejecting printed score paper and writing out individual staves for particular instruments only when he needed them, a practice parallel to that of Stravinsky in his sketches for *The Rite of Spring*. It means that Janáček's scores are increasingly lean, with unexpected juxtapositions of instruments, and, in his orchestral music, rebel against one of the principles of traditional scoring: the even spread of instruments over the entire range. Janáček liked extremes, tops and bottoms, and emphasized this by leaving out the middle. High piccolos and low trombones characterize Janáček's first instincts in *From the House of the Dead*, with strings grudgingly added in later versions. Janáček saw music not only in odd tonal events, but strange sounds. Examine his non-verbal speech melodies and one finds an astonishing range of natural sounds that he transcribes. Not just animal noises and birdsong but sounds for mountains, fountains, wind, stalactites and so on. And when writing music he remembers all these. The folksong arrangements included in *Starosta Smolik* (XV/245) for 'whistling wind' and 'moonlight' are not entirely serious, but the wonderful collection of chains, saws, swords and work tools in *From the House of the Dead* are certainly for real.

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13 Antony Ernst: *Durch kleine Ritze nimmt man Abgründe wahr: An examination of Max Brod's German performing versions of the works of Leoš Janáček* (PhD dissertation, University of Newcastle, Australia, 2003); see also John Tyrrell: *Janáček: Years of a Life*, ii: *Tsar of the Forests*, chap. 8 (Faber, London, in preparation).

14 See Štědroň 1998, 148–9.

15 Štědroň 1998, 148.

Janáček's Modernism did not espouse the tenets of the more assertive Modernists with their manifestos and deliberately rebarbative language. As Botstein notes, his 'economy of means and surface simplicity had initially concealed his capacity to confront the dilemmas of modernity'.¹⁶ This concealment evidently confused one of the high priests of Modernism, Theodor W. Adorno, when he dismissed *Jenůfa* because of its folk elements. After his later encounter with the more cosmopolitan *Makropulos*, Adorno conceded Modernist elements in the 'fragmentary' scoring and the story line that allowed comparison with Kafka. Nevertheless Adorno found the work difficult to categorize and he consequently placed it on the margins as a unique, enigmatic and experimental work.¹⁷ Janáček thus formed no part of Adorno's Modernist discourse and the composer slipped out of Modernist consideration. Today, however, with a broader and less partisan examination of Modernism, one can argue that in his conscious attempt to reforge musical language and remodel the substance and subject matter of opera, Janáček generously fulfilled the requirements for a Modernist composer, an endeavour all the more remarkable in view of his advancing age and seeming isolation.

¹⁶ Botstein 2003, 31.

¹⁷ Adorno's reaction to Janáček is examined by Botstein 2003, 34–5; appended are English translation of Adorno's three Janáček reviews (44–8).