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GEOFFREY CHEW

“LITERATUROPER”: A TERM STILL IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITION

1. Introduction

The articles in this volume generally commemorate the first performance of Janáček’s *Její pastorkyňa* (usually known in English as *Jenůfa*) in Brno in 1904. This was the work that is usually held to mark the beginning in Bohemia and Moravia of what is generally known as *Literaturoper* – opera written to a libretto, usually in prose, drawn directly from a pre-existing literary work, which in the case of *Její pastorkyňa* is the drama of the same name by Gabriela Preissová. The version of the opera performed in 1904 has been painstakingly reconstructed by Mark Audus (his account of its recovery is included in this volume), and that 1904 version first resurfaced in full a century later, in 2004, in a professional production at the Warsaw Chamber Opera.¹ Although this version cannot be regarded as Janáček’s final or best version of the opera – it is to be hoped that the 1908 revision will remain the normal version for modern productions –, it is of enormous interest, because 1904 appears to mark the point at which Janáček, arguably the greatest 20th-century Czech composer, began to speak with a mature voice as a composer, in an extended work of lasting significance. So the emergence of the *Literaturoper* in the Czech lands seems a central issue in the development of the composer, and of 20th-century Czech music more broadly, and I hope that the present volume of essays may assist our understanding of these things.

Despite the apparent straightforwardness of the definition of the genre given above, problems remain, it cannot be claimed that the articles in this volume have solved them all, and, as far as I know, they have never been satisfactorily solved elsewhere. I shall try to outline some of them here, but should admit at the outset that no comprehensive study of the *Literaturoper* can be restricted to the work of a single composer, even Janáček, however masterly, revealing or suggestive his work may be.

¹ It has been repeated in Brno in 2008.

2. *Literaturopern* and Their Models: Intertextuality

The term “*Literaturoper*” itself has been most often associated with Carl Dahlhaus, who famously used it in a study, best known from its publication in 1983, that is quoted several times in the papers printed here, and that drew Janáček directly into the definition of the genre. This was originally a paper given at a symposium specifically on the *Literaturoper*, organized by the Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater of the University of Bayreuth at Schloss Thurnau in 1980.² At that meeting Dahlhaus also offered a brief definition of a *Literaturoper* as a setting of the text of a play “as it stands”, though usually shortened,³ his concentration on plays, and his exclusion of novels or other types of literature as models, have not been followed generally in later writing (and would be problematic in the case of Janáček⁴). But the term is far older. As Peter Petersen and others have pointed out, it appears to have been coined by Edgar Istel in 1914, as part of a fivefold classification of libretti, primarily of operas by German composers (the “Gluck” type; the “Mozart” type; the “Lortzing” type; the “Wagner” type; and the “*Literaturoper*” or “Strauss/Debussy” type, with Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* offered by Istel as an up-to-date example of the fifth).⁵ Dahlhaus may well have been drawing for his definition directly on Istel, according to whom the type reflects compositions using “complete literary dramas, only slightly shortened, [but otherwise] just as they are (*wörtlich*)”.

² Carl Dahlhaus, “Zur Dramaturgie der *Literaturoper*”, in Sigrid Wiesmann (ed.), *Für und wider die Literaturoper: Zur Situation nach 1945*, Thurnauer Schriften zum Musiktheater, vol. 6, Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1982, pp. 147–163; in his summary of the interesting ensuing discussion (ibid, pp. 164–166), which took place in the absence of the author, Joachim Kaiser noted that “die Diskussion [...] fiel [...] recht kritisch aus”. The chapter was reprinted with very minor deletions in Carl Dahlhaus, *Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper: Aufsätze zur neueren Operngeschichte*, Munich and Salzburg: Emil Katzbichler, 1983, pp. 238–248, and reprinted again with no further changes (apart from orthographical ones) in the second edition of *Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper*, Munich: Piper and Mainz: Schott, 1989, pp. 294–312, though this edition is otherwise very different from the first, with deletions and additions of chapters. For the principal mention of Janáček, see Wiesmann (ed.), *Für und wider die Literaturoper*, p. 161; Dahlhaus, *Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper*, 1983 edition, p. 246; or 1989 edition, p. 309.

³ “Gegeben ist ein Schauspieltext, der, meist etwas gekürzt, ‘so vertont wird, wie er dasteht’”: Carl Dahlhaus, quoted in the proceedings of the 1980 meeting, in Friedrich Hommel, “Diskussion” [of a paper by Thomas Koebner, “Vom Arbeitsverhältnis zwischen Drama, Musik und Szene”], in Wiesmann (ed.), *Für und wider die Literaturoper*, pp. 81–85, this quotation at p. 84.

⁴ On this point, see in particular the valuable discussion by Oswald Panagl, in his paper in this volume, of Albert Gier, *Das Libretto: Theorie und Geschichte einer musikoliterarischen Gattung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998.

⁵ Edgar Istel, *Das Libretto: Wesen, Aufbau und Wirkung des Opernbuchs*, Berlin and Leipzig: Schuster & Loeffler, 1914, p. 18, quoted in Peter Petersen, “Der Terminus ‘*Literaturoper*’ – eine Begriffsbestimmung”, *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 56/1 (1999), pp. 52–70 (this quotation at p. 53), and also in Albert Gier, *Das Libretto*.

But Istel introduced a note that has continued to resonate in later years, in that he disapproved in principle of the *Literaturoper*, and regarded it as at best a stopgap solution to the problem of providing an adequate book for an opera. This aesthetic (or perhaps even ethical) suspicion of the genre persisted into the 1970s, particularly in relation to operas then classified as *Literaturopern*. (Indeed the 1980 meeting at Schloss Thurnau was more directly concerned with justifying the genre than with investigating its origins.) A representative example of the aesthetic objections to *Literaturoper* around that time is that of the English critic Paul Griffiths: writing about a recording released in 1980 of Aribert Reimann's *Lear* (1978), he turned his comments into a damning criticism of the genre as a whole:

This [*Lear*] is not a bad work of its kind; it is just a bad kind of work. [...] Reimann commits himself fully to the genre of contemporary opera, and this means forgetting any attempt at re-interpretation of the subject, which becomes instead a peg for otherwise redundant music. [...] The big solo numbers [...] have no musical strength other than that of having the grace to abdicate so that the words can tell. The orchestral music [...] is rarely, even in the interludes, more than just effectively atmospheric. [...] Music at that level is not trying to be more than a film score. [...] All these faults are faults of the genre.⁶

On this interpretation, any *Literaturoper* must automatically be compromised by the relationship it imposes between text and music: it becomes a genre in which music by definition fatally loses her ancient battle with the words, becoming the willing slave of a canonic text. But a better interpretation may be offered by taking into account another attempt at a systematic definition of the genre, as a literary genre and in terms of its literary models. This is a succinct dictionary-type one offered by Peter Petersen in an article that appeared in 1999. He expounds and glosses the definition, phrase by phrase, and yet remains undogmatic about imposing it on works from the repertory. Since the definition is not quoted elsewhere in this volume, it should perhaps be quoted here in full:

Der Terminus “Literaturoper” bezeichnet eine Sonderform des Musiktheaters, bei der das Libretto auf einem bereits vorliegenden literarischen Text (Drama, Erzählung) basiert, dessen sprachliche, semantische und ästhetische Struktur in einen musikalisch-dramatischen Text (Opernpartitur) eingeht und dort als Strukturschicht kenntlich bleibt.⁷

(The term “Literaturoper” refers to a particular form of music theatre in which the libretto is based on a pre-existing literary text (drama or narrative), whose linguistic, semantic and aesthetic structure is adopted in a musical and dramatic text (an operatic score), and remains recognizable as a structural level within it.)

⁶ Paul Griffiths, record review, *Musical Times*, 121 (1980), p. 107. The review was quoted by Derrick Puffett, who is always worth reading, in his brief article “Some Reflections on ‘Literaturoper’”, *German Life and Letters*, 35/3 (April 1982), pp. 238–240, where Puffett looks for the origins of the genre in Wagner rather than in a reaction against Wagner. Reimann himself contributed to the discussion at the 1980 symposium: Aribert Reimann, “Wie arbeite ich an einer Oper?” and “Warum ist das Komponieren von komischen Opern so schwierig geworden?”, in Wiesmann (ed.), *Für und wider die Literaturoper*, pp. 181–184.

⁷ Petersen, “Der Terminus ‘Literaturoper’”, p. 60. My translation.

Compared with the definitions of Istel or Dahlhaus, this has a crucial addition in its final phrase. If the model for a *Literaturoper* necessarily remains present as a structural element within the resulting opera, a *Literaturoper* is essentially, by definition, intertextual. It follows that the success of such an opera can be measured, at least from this point of view, by the degree to which it succeeds in becoming part of the reception history of its model. (If so, Paul Griffiths's notion, quoted above, that a *Literaturoper* by definition leaves the original without reinterpretation, is directly contradicted, and I think rightly so.) A classic example of the *Literaturoper* in this sense is Peter Eötvös's opera *Three Sisters* (1996–7, first performed at the Opéra de Lyon in 1998), based on the play of that name by Anton Chekhov. Its libretto, like that of Reimann's *Lear*, was provided by Claus H. Henneberg, here in co-authorship with the composer. The opera replaces the chronological narrative of the original with three "sequences", the composer's word, in which the same events are repeated, each time from the point of view of a different principal character; "but even as he departs from Čexov, the composer seems to underline, to magnify, so to speak, some significant yet 'hidden' features inherent in this play and in Čexov's creative art in general".⁸ So the alteration of the mode of narration (downplaying chronological "time" as an important ingredient in the aimless, pointless lives of the three sisters) arguably reinforces an important element in Chekhov's original play, and thereby contributes to an audience's understanding of that original. Indeed, the ideal audience for a *Literaturoper* is an extremely sophisticated, knowing one, like the ideal audience for a cult movie, quick to pick up subtle allusions.

Some readers will no doubt feel that Eötvös's opera has little to do with prewar music in general and with Janáček's operas in particular: there are substantial differences between the stylized, very non-realist music of Eötvös and Janáček's stark realism. Readers may even think that Dahlhaus's attempt in 1980 to understand German *Literaturopern* of the 1970s in historical terms, as an outgrowth of the operas of the early 20th century with libretti based on plays, was misguided. And no doubt there is a danger of interpreting the operas of Debussy, Strauss, Berg or Janáček "teleologically", in terms of a later development unrelated to their practice.

Yet, in the case of Janáček at least, there do seem to be good reasons for continuing to interpret most of his operas in terms of their models, taking intertextual issues into account, and to retain the *Literaturoper* label for them. One is his literal dependence on his sources, even when he treats them fairly freely: the "evasive realism" of some of his late works, shown in his constructing libretti from

⁸ Radislav Lapushin, abstract of paper on this opera given in New Orleans at the 2001 conference of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL), "*Three Sisters: The Play by Anton Čexov and the Opera by Peter Eötvös*", in Jonathan Z. Ludwig (ed.), *AATSEEL 2001: Program of the 2001 Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages*, [Tucson, AZ: AATSEEL, 2002], p. 219.

fragments of dialogue, literally drawn from his models,⁹ bears comparison with the fragmenting and reassembling of the elements of Chekhov’s play by Henneberg and Eötvös. And, even though Janáček’s models (Preissová for *Jenůfa*, Těsnohlídek for *Příhody lišky Bystroušky*, even Karel Čapek for *Věc Makropulos*) are scarcely canonic in the way that Shakespeare or Chekhov arguably are, Janáček, like Reimann or Eötvös, shows himself reluctant to jettison the aesthetic essence of his models, or even words and phrases literally drawn from them.

3. The *Literaturoper*, Prose Libretti, and the “Truth” of Modernity

Further, Janáček’s “evasive realism” seems in part to be a side-effect of the use of prose. Although prose rather than verse does not seem absolutely essential to it (not every member of an audience is likely to notice that the libretto of his *Osud*, for example, is in verse rather than prose), this is an aspect of the *Literaturoper* that is usually emphasized, especially with reference to Janáček. In his *Testaments Betrayed*, for instance, Milan Kundera, in giving Janáček high praise, fastens precisely on his recourse to prose after *Jenůfa*, rather than seeking for evidence of intertextuality. Kundera regards the use of prose libretti as a sign of the “truth” of modernity, which he finds exemplified first in Flaubert’s novels, representing “a discovery that might be termed *ontological*: the discovery of the structure of the present moment; the discovery of the perpetual coexistence of the banal and the dramatic that underlies our lives”.¹⁰ And he underlines the point in that book by expounding a short story by Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”, which largely comprises just such understated, banal dialogue. At least ostensibly, he is claiming that the “Prosa des gemeinen Lebens”, as Hegel long ago called it, the prose of common life, has been discovered to be essential to art, rather than opposed to it as Hegel thought,¹¹ that the “Romantic lie”, the theatrical kitsch of Romanticism, is conquered and eliminated in the discovery, and that this development is essential to modernity in the opera. A similar insight

⁹ See Geoffrey Chew and Robert Vilain, “Evasive Realism: Narrative Construction in Dostoyevsky’s and Janáček’s *From the House of the Dead*”, in Paul Wingfield (ed.), *Janáček Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 56–78. A similar procedure can be seen at work in Janáček’s adaptation of Těsnohlídek’s *The Cunning Little Vixen* (both are novels and not stage plays), even though Dostoyevsky’s text might here be thought canonic and Těsnohlídek’s an example of *Trivilliteratur*.

¹⁰ Milan Kundera, *Les testaments trahis: Essai*, Paris: Gallimard, 1993; English translation as *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, London, Faber & Faber, 1995. This quotation is taken from the chapter “À la recherche du présent perdu”, at p. 129 in the English translation (corresponding to p. 157 in the original French).

¹¹ “Die kunstvolle Ausbildung dieses sinnlichen Elementes kündigt uns nämlich sogleich, wie es auch die Poesie verlangt, ein anderes Bereich, einen anderen Boden an, den wir erst betreten können, wenn wir die praktische und theoretische Prosa des gemeinen Lebens und Bewußtseins verlassen haben”: G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* [1835–1838], Stuttgart: Reclam, 1971, from section “Die Versifikation”, III/iii/i/B/3.

also informs another essay by Dahlhaus, on Musorgsky as a composer of realism in opera, and on Janáček as a realist in the same sense, which I shall quote again at greater length below.¹²

However, this introduces another complication to any attempt to define the *Literaturoper*, for operas with prose libretti are not necessarily the same as operas with an intertextual dimension, and sprang from different roots. In a groundbreaking article on the prose libretto, Hugh Macdonald shows that the first impulse towards the use of prose in musical settings of texts other than Latin texts or Biblical texts came from France, perhaps as a direct result of the constraints of the French language:

The temptation to abandon verse for prose was [...] greater for French composers than elsewhere: with their highly developed instinct for literary discourse they also found the issue of prose-setting for music, once raised, to be of consuming interest. With the exception of the Russians, for whom prose-settings were briefly a burning issue, it was the French who confronted the problem with the greatest ardour.¹³

Macdonald quotes a preface of Gounod's, written in 1874, which with its invocation of "truth" as a criterion for quality in an opera uncannily pre-echoes Janáček's and Kundera's concern with eliminating false rhetoric: "if he is induced to care for truth by the natural shape of prose, the composer has everything to gain in expressiveness, and nothing to lose but predictability".¹⁴

4. Was Musical Realism Inevitable? How Cunning Has Reason Been?

Gounod's preface in fact offers an almost exact contemporary parallel to Musorgsky's use of a dramatic prose text by Nikolai Gogol in his *Zhenit'ba* ("The Marriage", 1868), and there can hardly have been any contact between the two composers; we can believe Janáček, too, when he claims to have used prose in isolation, ignorant in particular of the work of French composers of opera such as Alfred Bruneau. So, however appropriate the idea of using prose libretti for operas may have been for France, it is clear that it sprang up, apparently independently, in various different places in the late 19th century. And in every case it appears to have been used in order to construct some kind of musical Realism;

¹² Carl Dahlhaus, "Mussorgskij in der Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts: *Boris Godunow* und das Problem des musikalischen Realismus", *Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper*, 1983 edition, pp. 39–48. The chapter was not included in the 1989 edition.

¹³ Hugh Macdonald, "The Prose Libretto", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1/2 (July 1989), pp. 155–166; this quotation at p. 156.

¹⁴ Quoted from the preface to *George Dandin* (published by Georgina Weldon in *Autobiographie de Charles Gounod*, London, 1875, pp. 88–93) by Macdonald, "The Prose Libretto", p. 155. As Macdonald explains, the score of the opera itself may or may not be lost, but was inaccessible when he wrote.

Musorgsky wrote of *Zhenit'ba*, in a letter of 1868, that his “music must be an artistic reproduction of human speech in all its most subtle windings”.¹⁵

How are we to account for this? If we take Kundera at face value, it may seem to have been the response of different composers, independently, to a *Zeitgeist* in Hegel’s sense, a current of opinion whose time had at last come, which by an extraordinary *List der Vernunft* (“cunning of reason”) supplies history with a rationale.¹⁶ In that case, the setting to music of prose may seem to have been an aesthetic necessity for the period, a response to an inevitable historical development whose task was to unmask the false consciousness of Romanticism.

But even if one allows the possibility of a Hegelian *Zeitgeist* controlling the music of the late 19th century, such an explanation will not quite do, as Dahlhaus shows in the chapter on Musorgsky that I have already quoted. For Dahlhaus, Musorgsky’s development of the *Literaturoper* in *Boris Godunov* is something that goes precisely *against* the *Zeitgeist* of the second half of the 19th century. He suggests that the path taken by music diverged from that of literature and painting in the era of positivism that followed the failure of the revolutions of 1848/1849: Realism became dominant in literature and painting, and Romanticism peripheral, while Romanticism remained dominant in music (“the most Romantic of the arts”), whether one thinks of Brahms or Wagner, while it was Realism which took a peripheral place there.

So, for Dahlhaus, a musical Realist at that time must necessarily have been an “outsider”, and it was his outsider status that Musorgsky used to construct a strikingly original Realism – original precisely because it did not correspond, for the time being, with the *Zeitgeist*. And though the primary focus of his chapter is Musorgsky, Dahlhaus draws Janáček into the argument as well; Adorno’s famous footnote about Janáček’s “extra-territorial” (outsider, peripheral) status cannot have been far from his mind.¹⁷

Dahlhaus’s chapter on Musorgsky introduces a further topic that has been recurrent in the discussion of both Musorgsky and Janáček: the charge of amateurism. In fact the chapter takes this as its point of departure; and one might see both Dahlhaus’s chapter on Musorgsky and Kundera’s chapters on Janáček as comparable defences of the two composers against such charges – for the corrections of

¹⁵ Quoted by Robert W. Oldani, in his “Musorgsky, Modest Petrovich”, *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/19468>, accessed 12 December 2008.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Georg Lasson, Leipzig, 1919, 1/105. It is quite amusing to note how reluctant some Anglo-Saxon authors have been to allow the possibility that history is haunted by Hegelian *Zeitgeister*. Even the Celtic Macdonald does not mention Hegel at all, and Arthur Marwick, in his university textbook on historiography, comments: “It will seem that I have done poorly by such philosophical writers as Hegel and Croce. Frankly, neither of these famous philosophers mean [*sic*] much to me as a historian, and I have thought it best to admit this openly” (Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, London: Macmillan, 1970, p. 8). Caveat lector.

¹⁷ In the English translation: Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1973, p. 35, n. 5.

Janáček by Karel Kovařovic (in *Jenífa*), Max Brod (in *Příhody lišky Bystroušky*) and Břetislav Bakala and Osvald Chlubna (in *Z mrtvého domu*) were undertaken to correct what all these admirers considered poor or amateurish decisions by the composer.¹⁸ Dahlhaus's final verdict on Musorgsky resonates strongly for Janáček, and is worth quoting:

The literary aspect in Musorgsky's case, which seems dubious to "good" musicians, is the basic reason why an outsider, running the risk of apparent amateurism, was the man who succeeded in playing a part in the central artistic current of his period, a current to which music generally ran counter, as if it were "by nature" a Romantic, anti-Realist art. To put it bluntly, Musorgsky's place in the history of 19th-century music encapsulates the paradox of a "representative exception".¹⁹

So the difficulties that Kundera raised – even though Dahlhaus's account of Janáček is far more nuanced than that of Kundera – relate to an essential part of the *Literaturoper* in its earliest stages. And this in turn may supply an explanation of the reservations that have traditionally been held about *Literaturopern* ever since Istel first wrote about them in 1914. The apparent amateurism is, as Dahlhaus puts it, a price that must be paid for the originality of the conception. Or, as one might rephrase it, an apparent denial of the *Zeitgeist* is essential if an authentic *Zeitgeist* is to emerge. And the suspicion of amateurism is, in these cases, the sign of authenticity.

5. Conclusion

It will, I hope, be seen that no satisfactory overall definition of the *Literaturoper* is yet possible; the intertwining elements of Realism, intertextuality, subordination of musical considerations to literary ones, and the elevation of prose rather than verse into a normative position in the construction of libretti, form a complex matrix of criteria which do not easily map on to one another. Yet the emergence of the *Literaturoper* is a centrally important issue in the music history of the "long 19th century"; and even if Janáček alone does not and cannot provide a basis for defining the genre, it is clear that his music too, by tapping into the *Literaturoper* in its own idiosyncratic way, "encapsulates the paradox of a representative exception".

¹⁸ In Musorgsky's case, the charge is sometimes a consequence of his habit of concealing the true order of the revisions he made of his compositions: see Robert W. Oldani, "Musorgsky, Modest Petrovich". In Janáček's case it may be noted that even in 2008, a new production of *Z mrtvého domu* in the Czech Republic has ill-advisedly ironed out the idiosyncratic differences in linguistic register that the composer introduced or retained in the text, presumably in the hope of correcting the amateurism of his solecisms.

¹⁹ Dahlhaus, "Musorgskij in der Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts", p. 48.

Of the papers included in this volume, it is only that of Oswald Panagl that attempts a systematic definition of the *Literaturoper* as a genre,²⁰ though several may help in approaching Janáček’s own particular versions of the *Literaturoper* by considering the idiosyncrasies of their dramaturgy and their libretti (Vysloužilová, Zahrádka, Příbáňová, Křupková), one by considering Janáček’s experience of operas by other composers during and after his education (Němcová), and one, already mentioned above, by tracing the origin of *Jenůfa*, arguably the key work in Janáček’s development of the *Literaturoper*, from a historical point of view (Audus). Other papers included here provide useful context: accounts of work then in progress by researchers centrally concerned with Janáček’s activity as a folklorist (Procházková) and as an author of reviews and other articles, some verging on theoretical issues (Drlíková),²¹ accounts of Janáček’s psychology (Christiansen) and attitude to language (Pearl), accounts of Janáček’s influence on an opera on a Realist subject by Emil František Burian (Spurná) and on operas by Slovak composers (Blahynka), and an account of the reception of Janáček’s operas, especially *Jenůfa*, under National Socialism in Germany (Levi).

20 Prof. Panagl made a considerable impression in Brno in 2004, from his very first appearance among the audience at a performance in the Janáček Theatre, owing to his remarkable physical resemblance to the composer himself.

21 Drlíková’s useful edition of the “literary works” of Janáček, to which her paper in this volume supplies an introduction, does not include some articles that had previously been published in Zdeněk Blažek (ed.), *Leoš Janáček: Hudebně teoretické dílo*, vols. 1–2, Prague: Editio Supraphon, 1968, 1974; and her numbering of the individual items very unfortunately, and confusingly, diverges from that compiled by Theodora Straková and published in the authoritative catalogue of Janáček’s works: Nigel Simeone, John Tyrrell and Alena Němcová, *Janáček’s Works: A Catalogue of the Music and Writings of Leoš Janáček*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.