

JOHN TYRRELL (CARDIFF)

JANÁČEK, RELIGION AND BELIEF

Famously in his final year, Janáček repudiated his pupil Ludvík Kundera's contention that the 'old man' had at last made his peace with God and become again a believer. 'Not an old man, not a believer! Young man!' he wrote indignantly to him.¹

Leoš Janáček was baptized into the Catholic Church² and given Christian names (Leo Eugen) that celebrated papal and saintly associations rather than family ones.³ Church-going was a part of his young family life, as vividly described in his famous feuilleton *Without Drums* JW XV/199, and it became even more so when at the age of eleven he was enrolled as a resident chorister at the Augustinian Monastery in Staré Brno. The adults who surrounded him there were mostly monks, including his music teacher Pavel Křížkovský; on the few occasions he managed to get away it was to stay with his priest-uncle Jan Janáček, who took over responsibility for him after the death of his father in 1866. It was at the Augustinian Monastery, presumably, that he was confirmed into the Catholic Church. If there is doubt about this it is only because of the lack of documentation.⁴ Janáček was due to be confirmed on the eve of his thirteenth birthday in June 1867, but in a letter to Jan Janáček he announced that he should have 'gone for holy confirmation', but 'since I had no clothes, again I couldn't go.'⁵

¹ LJ to Ludvík Kundera (Prague, 8 February 1928; reproduced in Bohumír Štědroň: *Leoš Janáček v obrazech* [Leoš Janáček in pictures] (Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, Prague, 1982), 43. Janáček later referred to his exchange with Kundera in his interview for the journal *Literární svět*, JW XV/306, where he added 'only when I see for myself'.

² Baptismal certificate reprinted in Bohumír Štědroň, ed.: *Janáček ve vzpomínkách a dopisech* [Janáček in reminiscences and letters] (Artia, Prague, 1946), 14–15.

³ See John Tyrrell: *Leoš Janáček: Years of a Life* (Faber & Faber, London, 2006–7) [hereafter *LJYL*], i, 134.

⁴ No confirmation certificate survives in the Janáček Archive of the Moravian Museum and no lists of confirmation candidates were kept by the church authorities (I am grateful to Dr Jiří Zahrádka for this information).

⁵ LJ to Jan Janáček, 5 June 1867, printed in Svatava Přibáňová, ed.: *Dopisy strýci/Dopisy matky* [Letters to his uncle/Letters from his mother], published as supplement to Vincenc

It is, however, inconceivable that he would have stayed unconfirmed during his remaining years at the monastery.

A life shaped by a conventional Catholic upbringing does not of course guarantee continuation in the same mould once the subject has grown up and is able to take decisions for himself. There is plenty of evidence that throughout his adult life Janáček had as little to do with churches and with religion as he could help. In the early days, however, he couldn't help himself that much. Financial pressures meant that he continued to associate with the Augustinian Monastery, serving as music director after Křížkovský's departure for Olomouc: he would play the organ and conduct the choir there until at least 1890.⁶ His post at the Male Teachers' Training College involved similar duties and it was only in 1904 that he was finally rid of it and the need to play organ at church services. And of course the Organ School, which he headed from its foundation in 1881 until its transformation into a conservatory in 1919, was an institution partly financed by the Catholic church for church needs such as the training of organists and choirmasters. Through all these connections Janáček continually came into contact with members of the religious community. Many were personal friends or at least close associates. The idea that led to the composition of the *Glagolitic Mass* (that had occasioned Kundera's remark) came from none other than the leader of the Catholic Church in Moravia, the Archbishop of Olomouc, whom Janáček occasionally bumped into in Hukvaldy, where both he and the archbishop had their holiday homes.

It is important, when considering the question of Janáček's connections to religion to determine what were Janáček's own spiritual needs and what were his professional obligations – which he could not avoid and which can thus be discounted (all his liturgical music for instance). A good question is whether Janáček continued to go to church during his studies in Leipzig, where he was out of his usual surroundings and relieved of his normal social and professional obligations. Full information is available about Janáček's time in Leipzig in 1879–80 since he described it in relentless and almost hourly detail to his sweetheart (and latterly fiancée) Zdenka Schulzová. We know from this source, for instance, that apart from attending concerts in St Thomas's, Janáček entered a church in Leipzig only once, when he went to Mass on 25 January 1880.⁷ A year and a half later he married Zdenka, and from her recollections of this event more information on Janáček's religious practices emerges. He could not avoid a church wedding and its related activities, such as the catechism classes that the young couple attended in preparation for it. It is revealing, however, that he had to do so from Zdenka's catechism book and that, as Zdenka states, he had 'forgotten the regulations'. Shortly before the ceremony itself, Janáček participated in Catholic sacraments

Janáček: *Životopis Jiřka Janáčka* [The autobiography of Vincenc Janáček] ed. Jiří Sehnal (Opus musicum, Brno, 1985), 74–6.

⁶ See *LJYL*, i, 83–4.

⁷ LJ to Zdenka Schulzová, 25 January 1880; reprinted in Jakob Knaus, ed.: *'Intime Briefe' 1879/80 aus Leipzig und Wien* (Leoš Janáček-Gesellschaft, Zürich, 1985, 2/2009), 148–9.

such as confession⁸ and taking holy communion.⁹ There is no evidence that he ever took communion again, or that he attended church once the professional needs to do so were no longer there. Zdenka herself summed up Janáček's attitude towards religion and church-going in the following way:

My husband's relationship to God was not at all clear to me; he never stood in the way of my religious duties, but he never took part in them himself. However, he had required that our children should pray. He never observed Friday fasting, saying that he'd fasted quite enough as a chorister, but he observed the fast on Christmas Eve and Good Friday. I never saw him pray. We never spoke together about religious things: I was frightened that again I'd touch a dissonant chord.¹⁰

Janáček's indulgence of the religious beliefs of his family were touchingly on display during the trauma of his daughter Olga's final days. Although not enthusiastic about the prospect, he did not stand in the way of Olga, who, on her deathbed, wished to see a priest. Janáček even commented: 'That's the right way. It would have upset me that you're saying goodbye to your friends and not to God.'¹¹ And later when Olga anxiously wondered whether there might in fact be 'nothing' after death, Janáček, again in Zdenka's words, 'gathered together all his eloquence and assured her convincingly that heaven and God existed.'¹²

Funerals seem to have been particularly problematic occasions for Janáček. The fact that he did not go to Hukvaldy for the funeral of his mother in 1884 is perhaps more revealing about his guilt-ridden attitude towards his mother than about his attitude towards religion. If in the next year he presided over the music for Křížkovský's funeral, this was hardly something about which he had much choice since Křížkovský was a luminary of the Augustinian Monastery, where Janáček continued to have professional obligations. Nor could he have avoided the Brno funeral of his daughter Olga in 1903. When however, sixteen years later, Janáček attended the funeral of his sister Eleonora, it seems to have been more of a pretext for a visit to Kamila Stösslová afterwards on the way home¹³ than a need to bid a formal, church farewell to his sister. The death later that year of his brother Karel (who lived nowhere near Kamila) didn't seem to need much more than a fond reminiscence when he mentioned it to Kamila: 'Today I got news about the death of my brother. We're a strange family. Distant from one another but nevertheless we like one another. We've not written much but thought of each

⁸ Robert Smetana: *Výprávění o Leoši Janáčkoví* [Stories about Leoš Janáček] (Velehrad, Olomouc, 1948), 27.

⁹ *Zdenka Janáčková: My Life with Janáček: the memoirs of Zdenka Janáčková*, ed. and trans. John Tyrrell (Faber & Faber, London, 1998) [hereafter *MLWJ*], 20.

¹⁰ *MLWJ*, 223.

¹¹ *MLWJ*, 83.

¹² *MLWJ*, 89.

¹³ *LJYL*, ii, 335–6.

other all the more. So you can imagine that I had a little cry on the side and I could hardly find a moment to remember everything that linked us.¹⁴

Janáček's avoidance of funerals and churches became a topic in the reminiscences of his niece Věra Janáčková:

He never went to funerals or cemeteries, he wanted to hear nothing of the dead and only rarely spoke of them. In the old days he would visit churches for atmosphere, preferably Emauzy [the Emauz Monastery in Prague]. But in later years I could not get him into a church, even to shelter from the rain. 'A church', he told me, 'is concentrated death. Graves below the flagstones, bones at the altars, pictures all about martyrdom and dying. Pews, prayers, hymns, death and death again. I don't want to have anything to do with all that'.¹⁵

Zdenka corroborates this in her memoirs, for instance when commenting on the death in September 1927 of Janáček's former pupil František Kolařík: 'I wanted us to go to the funeral, but my husband feared that it would upset him too much. He always avoided funerals.'¹⁶ And when Rudolf Těsnohlídek (the author of novel *Liška Bystrouška* on which Janáček based his seventh opera) committed suicide in 1928, it was Zdenka rather than her husband, who attended the funeral.¹⁷

It is possible, however, to reject the outward forms of conventional religion, and its handling of life events such as birth and death and yet have deeply-held religious or spiritual beliefs. Are there statements from the composer that tell us about his belief system and is there any difference between his public pronouncements and his more informal and unguarded comments? Let us examine a few of the latter.

On 26 July 1926, Archbishop Prečan consecrated a new set of bells for the Hukvaldy church. Janáček's commented in a letter to Kamila: 'Today they are lifting the bells into the tower. It would be nice if they weren't calling people to bamboozling.'¹⁸ In a word, then, Janáček regarded conventional religion as a form of 'bamboozling', a confidence trick.

This is not to say that he did not sometimes use the word 'God' in a more positive way. The Album for Kamila has a particularly rich store:

You came only from God's hands! (9 January 1928; Album, facsimile, p. 26)

You, darling Kamila, I know you like a child which God created in the happy dream of his creation.

As if you didn't even belong to this world; from which you wanted to jump off and fly unbound until you fell again into the arms of God.

Maybe He would ask you

¹⁴ LJ to Kamila Stösslová, 12 November 1919; reprinted in Svatava Přibáňová, ed.: *Hádanka života: dopisy Leoše Janáčka Kamile Stösslové* [The riddle of life: the letters of Leoš Janáček to Kamila Stösslová] (Opus musicum, Brno, 1990) [hereafter *HŽ*], no. 140.

¹⁵ Věra Janáčková: 'My uncle and death', *Lidové noviny* (11 August 1940), quoted in Jaroslav Vogel (English translation): *Leoš Janáček: a Biography*, Orbis, London, enlarged 2/1981), 336.

¹⁶ *MLWJ*, 213

¹⁷ *MLWJ*, 219.

¹⁸ *HŽ*, no. 404

‘Were you happy, my child, happy at least for a moment?’
 You would say: ‘Yes, I was! And I thank you for creating me!’
 And in reverie I would also turn to the Lord God and would say to him: ‘You didn’t forget me.
 Even I was happy for a moment of my life!’
 Now take both of us. Perhaps the world no longer exists for us. We want to be in the actual presence of God’s love.’ (13 February 1928: Album, facsimile, pp. 37-8).¹⁹

It could be argued that these, and the many other similar statements are merely sentimentalized references brought about by the peculiar circumstances of the Album and that the ‘God’ that is referred to, in view of Kamila’s Jewish faith, would of necessity be a more generalized, non-denominational ‘God’. And one could go on to argue that such allusions have little to do with what Janáček actually believed and are instead, comforting fantasies of a future life lived together, presided over by a benign fate, here designated as ‘God’.

A sharper sense of Janáček’s view comes in the sequence of letters that he wrote to his wife Zdenka describing rehearsals and preparations for the momentous Prague production of *Jenůfa* that would change his fortunes. Describing his joy at the way things were going, Janáček observed that nevertheless ‘in all that happiness I am completely alone’. He then referred to something that the writer Gabriela Preissová (the author of the play on which *Jenůfa* was based) had said. On 19 May 1916 Janáček visited Preissová and their discussions seem to have moved in unexpected directions: ‘Preissová believes in the soul and in its wandering and I know that all is just a process of life which ends so quickly – and there is no continuation. And I’d like now to live long.’²⁰

This brief comment holds so much. According to it, Janáček disclaimed any belief in an afterlife (and thus one of the key tenets of a Catholic world view). But the ideas here seem to have remained: his opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and its demonstration of the continuity of life in rather a different sense from the way Preissová and the Catholic church saw it, was his answer. Note too how the words ‘soul’ and ‘wandering’ lived on in Janáček’s memory for another eleven years to form the puzzling subtitle to his unfinished Violin Concerto (‘The Wandering of a Little Soul’).

For all his rejection of conventional religious beliefs there is plenty of evidence that such matters continued to haunt Janáček’s late years. In his remark, Kundera clearly picked up something, though he came to the wrong conclusion: the old man was not about to make his peace with the Catholic Church and its belief system but was nevertheless preoccupied with spiritual matters. Janáček’s last three operas, utterly different from one another, all point in the same direction: a preoccupation with the shortness of human life (*Makropulos*), its continuation in

¹⁹ Leoš Janáček: *Album for Kamila Stösslová*, ed. Jarmila Procházková, trans. John Tyrrell (Moravian Museum, Brno, 1996).

²⁰ LJ to Zdenka Janáčková, 19 May 1916; reprinted in Svatava Přibáňová, ed.: *Thema con variazioni: Leoš Janáček: korespondence s manželkou Zdeňka a dcerou Olgou* [Leoš Janáček: correspondence with his wife Zdenka and his daughter Olga] (Bärenreiter, Prague, 2008), no. 364.

other ways (*Vixen*) and the ‘spark of God’ that Janáček believed inhabited even the most desperate criminals (*From the House of the Dead*).²¹ This thought became the motto of the opera (the only such one in all his operas), inscribed at the beginning of the score (‘In every creature a spark of God’), and Janáček’s Violin Concerto, which, according to its subtitle, contained his musical musings on the wanderings of the soul, was incorporated into its overture. And in this opera there is a new transcendent dimension suggested by its music. A clue to this is Janáček’s adoption and adaptation of the expressive marking ‘Maestoso’, occurring at various points, especially throughout Act 1. Here the traditional grandiose and patriotic associations of the word, evident for instance in Smetana’s *Má vlast* or even in Janáček’s own *Ballad of Blaník* and *Brouček*, are shed. Instead the expression mark is reinterpreted in a strikingly personal way to mark moments of contemplation that go beyond the normalities of life and suggest some more spiritual sphere.²² Janáček’s practical attempts to embody the ‘spark of God’ can also be found in the ‘comforting’ and haunting orchestral ritornello that punctuates the most searing of all the monologues in the opera, that of Šiškov in Act 3.

It is from Janáček’s works that the clearest indication of any belief system can be inferred. This short survey is not the place for a detailed examination of the evidence, but a more exhaustive enquiry would be able to highlight the fact that Janáček’s larger, ‘oratorio’ type works for soloists, chorus and orchestra, written over a thirty-year period (and thus suggesting a continuity of approach), namely, *Amarus*, *The Eternal Gospel* and *The Glagolitic Mass*, all, in their different ways, draw upon types of religious experience; one of them actually uses the words of the Mass. All three texts were chosen by Janáček himself, and at least one of them, by Janáček’s admission, contains autobiographical references.²³ A detailed examination would need to explain why Janáček chose these particular texts and how they inspired him, and to what extent his settings reflected existing tropes of religious expression and what Janáček himself brought to it. What does it mean, for instance, when Janáček set, in the *Glagolitic Mass* and with overwhelming force, the crucial words: ‘I believe in one Catholic church’?

There are similar questions to be asked about Janáček tapping into religious experience in his operas. For all his professed agnosticism there are more Christian references in his operas than in those of his Czech compatriots, even the pious Foerster, who came from a strongly Catholic background and whose faith was an important part of his musical personality. On several memorable occasions, Janáček picked up casual references in the plays he was adapting as operas and

²¹ See John Tyrrell: *Janáček’s Operas: a documentary account* (Faber & Faber, London, 1992), ZD39.

²² A detailed examination of Janáček’s ‘Maestoso’ markings will be the subject of a future article.

²³ e.g. in *Amarus*; see Max Brod: *Leoš Janáček: život a dílo* [Life and works] (Hudební matice Umělecké besedy, Prague, 1924), 38.

filled them out musically so that these moments leave a much deeper impression than in the originals. Memorable examples include the scene in *Kát'a Kabanová* where Kát'a tells Varvara of her vision of angels in church, with the sun streaming down through the incense-filled cupola, or in *Makropulos*, where Janáček turns Čapek's offhand reference to the Lord's Prayer in Greek ('Pater hemon') into a striking, twice-repeated and touching symbol of Emilia Marty's approaching end. Similarly Janáček's Jenůfa repeats the prayer 'Zdrávas Maria' to calm herself at the disappearance of her child much in the same way that Kunka and Kedruta (in *The Excursions of Mr Brouček*) sing the Lord's Prayer to comfort themselves when their menfolk have gone off to fight. Prayers such as these in the context of death are common set pieces in much nineteenth-century opera (the Italian *preghiera*, the French *prière*). They are effective ways of characterizing vulnerability and express the need to be 'rescued' by some supernatural force.

In all his operas from *Jenůfa* onwards except *Fate*, Janáček included Christian references. Since he was his own librettist for all but one of these and could easily have expunged them, their presence is even more arresting than the few in the operas of Smetana, Dvořák and Fibich that go back directly to particular librettists. The fact that Janáček's first two 'traditional' operas (*Šárka* and *The Beginning of a Romance*) lack Christian reference altogether is merely confirmation of the fact traditional Czech opera does not employ Christian reference as one of its defining characteristics.²⁴ Janáček, on the other hand aligns himself more with the Italian and French operatic traditions of exploiting religious tropes in opera, from the pious blessings by the Grandmother in *Jenůfa* to the echoes of Orthodox ceremony in his last opera *From the House of the Dead*, where into the festivities of Act 2 he introduced a Russian priest, who blesses the prisoners before their meal and the church-like bells which announce his entrance. Is this simply good, operatic instinct, exploiting the audience's own range of references to deepen its operatic experience? Or does it demonstrate Janáček's ability to get under the skin of a conventional believer (in just the same way that he was able to comfort his dying daughter with the thought of a happy afterlife)? Or did in fact Janáček's monastery upbringing leave more of a trace on his outlook than he generally let on in his pronouncements on the subject?

RESUME

This article summarizes what is known of Janáček's Catholic upbringing, what remained of it in later life, and his later avoidance of churches and funerals. It comments on Janáček's informal statements about God and religion and suggests that the best evidence of any belief system in Janáček can be found in his works, particularly his later operas and his oratorio-like works such as *Amarus*, *The Eternal Gospel* and *Glagolitic Mass*. The article touches on the question of the ubiquity of Christian references in most of his operas (in contrast to their absence in traditional Czech opera).

²⁴ John Tyrrell: *Czech Opera* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988), 146–7.

