

UDK 782.1 Janáček

John Tyrrell

School of Music, Cardiff University
Fakulteta za glasbo, Univerza v Cardiffu

Genre in Janáček's operas

Žanr v Janáčkovih operah

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IZVLEČEK

Avtor ugovarja Michael Ewansovim opisom Janáčkovih oper kot »tragičnim«. Zrelim operam, kot so *Jenufa*, *Lisička zvitorepka*, *Zadeva Makropulos* in *Iz mrtvega doma*, manjka tragične nezbežnosti, kažejo pa tudi žanrske tragikomične poteze (v *Lisički* in *Makropulosu*).

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ABSTRACT

The author takes issue with Michael Ewans's description of Janáček's operas as »tragic«. Among the mature operas, *Jenufa*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *The Makropulos Affair* and *From the House of the Dead* lack tragic inevitability and exhibit other genre characteristics, such as those of tragicomedy (in *The Vixen* and *Makropulos*).

In 1977 Michael Ewans published an influential book entitled *Janáček's Tragic Operas*.¹ The author, with a background in Greek tragedy, presented six of Janáček's operas as if belonging to this tradition. If one takes the central character of *Jenufa* [Její pastorkyňa] as the Kostelnička, it is easy to see her crucial murder of Jenufa's baby as being an instance of *hamartia*, the tragic flaw that leads ultimately to the downfall of an otherwise noble character. Her pride or *hubris* (which she acknowledges in Act 3) brings divine retribution, arousing pity and terror in both bystanders and audience.² I see two problems with this interpretation. One is that the opera does not end there. What follows (see below) is more important and places the Kostelnička's action into quite another, non-tragic context. Furthermore Janáček's music provides its own non-tragic commentary. Catharsis is achieved, but in a different way from that of Greek tragedy.

The one thing that can be said about Janáček's operas is that, with the exception of *Šárka*, *Káťa Kabanová* and possibly *Fate* [Osud], they are not tragic in any straightforward meaning of the word. That *Šárka* is a tragedy is no surprise. It belongs to a pe-

¹ EWANS, MICHAEL, *Janáček's Tragic Operas*, Faber and Faber Ltd, London, 1977.

² These attributes of tragedy are taken from BALDICK, CHRIS, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990, 226-227.

riod when tragic opera was the mainstay of the operatic stage.³ In *Šárka* Ctirad is killed by Šárka who, then has a change of heart and throws herself on to Ctirad's funeral pyre. Hero and heroine die; those that remain mourn. The tragedy of *Káťa Kabanová* is more surprising because Janáček's late works appear to inhabit a beyond-tragic world (see below) and his choice of an apparently tragic stage text as the basis for a libretto seems out of character. It is true that some Russian critics did not see Ostrovsky's play this way but instead as a 'positive' protest against the repressive political system of the time.⁴ However, Janáček made it clear that the Russian background was secondary for him and did all he could to strip the drama down to a straightforward human tragedy of a woman who seeks escape in death from her intolerable life. If such an interpretation seems crude, it is one that Janáček appeared to endorse by thrusting the spotlight on to the evil Kabanicha's crowing over Káťa's corpse at the end, with repeated hammer blows of 'fate' on the brass and timpani and with Káťa's offstage 'voices' now menacingly *fortissimo*.

Janáček did not provide such obvious clues in his most enigmatic work, *Fate*. Certainly there are tragic incidents: the death of Míla and her Mother at the end of Act 2 is signalled as such with Živný's reaction and the strong orchestral peroration after it. But it is difficult to interpret Act 3, which moves from student high jinks to a long, personal narrative by Živný during which he appears to have some sort of fit as he recalls painful events but - and there are no helpful stage directions to guide us - he then seems to get over whatever the problem was and is still alive as the curtain comes down. The end could in fact be read positively: through his public confession Živný has purged himself of whatever was troubling him and, with his young son Doubek by his side, he will go on to fight another day. Whether through design or his own uncertainties, Janáček's music provides no clear interpretative clues.

One opera, *The Beginning of a Romance* [Počátek románu], is 'comic' or at least 'romantic' (according to the designation on the programme at the first performance).⁵ It is in the tradition of Czech comic one-acters (such as Dvořák's *Pigheaded Peasants* [Tvrďe palice]): there are some overtly comic characters, the central young couple are united at the end and take home a few morals. Poluška fails to hook her aristocratic admirer and has to make do with her humble but loving swain, but all realize that this is for the best.

Brouček as a single excursion (*The Excursion of Mr Brouček to the Moon* [Výlet pana Broučka do měsíce]), was described as a 'burlesque' by Janáček though one tempered by lyrical impulses.⁶ In many ways the *Brouček* Moon Excursion has much in common with its predecessor *Fate*, with its mixture of grotesque comedy, deeply-felt lyrical outbursts, and its disparaging examination of artists in society. Complica-

³ Even if earlier genre designations of 'tragedia lirica' or 'melodramma tragico', for instance in Verdi's operas had given way to 'melodramma', 'dramma' or merely 'opera'.

⁴ MARSH, CYNTHIA, 'Ostrovsky's Play "The Thunderstorm"', in John Tyrrell: *Leoš Janáček: Káťa Kabanová*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982, 39ff.

⁵ SIMEONE, NIGEL, TYRRELL, JOHN and NĚMCOVÁ, ALENA: *Janáček's Works: a catalogue of the music and writings of Leoš Janáček* [JAWO], Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, 10.

⁶ JANÁČEK, LEOŠ to Karel Kovařovic, 4 June 1916, English translation in *Janáček's Operas: a documentary account* (Faber & Faber, London, 1992) [JODA], JP114.

tions arose when Janáček sought to couple this excursion with the much more serious Fifteenth-Century Excursion. The result was a mixture that even Janáček wondered whether it held together.⁷ It is possible to argue that the Fifteenth-Century Excursion has more tragic than comic elements. The elderly, noble Domšík is killed in action, eloquently mourned by his daughter. Brouček himself behaves despicably. If his cowardice is meant to be an object lesson, as Janáček professed,⁸ then it's one that leaves quite a nasty taste. Musically there are some clues. The thrilling Hussite chorales and the festive victory march proclaim something of heroic dimensions: historical, maybe even 'tragical-historical'. Polonius (in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) might have characterized the two excursions together as a fine example of 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral'.

Having creamed off these five operas, one is then left with four - *Jenůfa*, *The Cunning Little Vixen* [Příhody lišky Bystroušky], *The Makropulos Affair* [Věc Makropulos] and *From the House of the Dead* [Z mrtvého domu] - which belong together even if they resist easy genre categorization. All are serious (though none are without comic elements); there are deaths in all four works, in two of them of the chief characters. And yet it is hard to describe any of them as tragic, for one thing because the music with which Janáček concludes all but the final work is uplifting, for another because positive lessons have been learnt that will change the on-going stories of the characters. This seems to override the notion of tragic inevitability that Michael Ewans identifies in Janáček's operas.

At the end of *Jenůfa* the Kostelnička realizes that her murder of Jenůfa's child has not been the self-sacrificing action that she had thought but was committed to satisfy her own pride, while Jenůfa herself begins to understand that her stepmother's action came through misguided love for her. Jenůfa's forgiveness of the Kostelnička is one of the searingly radiant moments in all opera, its message memorably underlined by Janáček's music. There are few operas that hinge on forgiveness; *Jenůfa*, like *Le nozze di Figaro*, is one of the few. When the Kostelnička has been led away by the Mayor, leaving the stage empty except for Jenůfa and Laca, another small miracle takes place. Jenůfa at last understands and accepts Laca's love for her: another moment of sublimity against one of Janáček's cathartic slow waltzes.⁹ Whatever tragic outcome might have been predicted in the first act of the opera, the ending takes us elsewhere. The conclusion has come about through growth in the chief characters' perceptions and their overcoming of personal limitations. This is something to celebrate and 'tragic' is not the word to describe it.

Janáček's initial vision of *The Vixen* was as a 'pantomime', i.e. something that involved mime and dance. Long before he wrote a note of the music, Janáček realized that he needed to present the animal world on stage. He did this partly through different voice types, the use of children's voices in particular, but also through movement. Although some of his animals sing, they also express themselves in movement, in dance.

⁷ See TYRRELL, JOHN, *Janáček: Years of a Life*, vol. II: *Tsar of the Forests*, Faber and Faber, London, forthcoming, chap. 24.

⁸ *JAWO*, XV/214; critical edition in JANÁČEK, LEOŠ: *Literární dílo*, Editio Janáček, Brno 2003, 431-433.

⁹ TYRRELL, JOHN, 'The cathartic slow waltz and other finale conventions in Janáček's operas', *Essays on Drama and Music in Honour of Winton Dean*, ed. N. Fortune, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987, 333-352.

The score is peppered with instructions such as ‘ballet scene’, some of the chorus parts (e.g. Midge, Blue Dragonfly, Squirrels) are designated as ‘ballet’ rather than singers.

The vocal and mimic aspects of *The Vixen* nevertheless do not disguise the fact that, in it, as in its immediate successor *Makropulos*, Janáček had returned to his post-tragedy line of operas about understanding and healing. In these two cases, the central characters come to terms with their mortality. The message of *From the House of the Dead* is more enigmatic. Certainly the march of the Prisoners at the end leaves a bleak message of prison life continuing. But Janáček insisted that his message was positive:

Why do I go into the dark, frozen cells of criminals with the poet of *Crime and Punishment*? Into the minds of criminals and there I find a spark of God. You will not wipe away the crimes from their brow, but equally you will not extinguish the spark of God. Into what depths it leads - how much truth there is in his work!

See how the old man slides down from the oven, shuffles to the corpse, makes the sign of the cross over it, and with a rusty voice sobs the words: ‘A mother gave birth to him too!’

Those are the bright places in the house of the dead.¹⁰

I have suggested elsewhere¹¹ that many Czech nineteenth-century operas, in particular Smetana’s, go against mainstream operatic trends of the time. In Smetana’s late operas based on librettos by Eliška Krásnohorská there is a preoccupation not with high tragedy or low comedy but with learning, with wisdom, and with coming to terms with problems. All these operas depend for their conclusion on the overcoming of internal obstacles, namely defects of character in the hero or heroine, which need to be remedied by healing journeys of moral re-education. Shakespeare’s late romances are a possible influence. Musically, however, this line seems to come from Vienna. The fairy-tale play, with its heroes engaged in an educational quest, and with music featuring strongly in the form of inserted numbers and even in stage props, was a well-established Viennese genre at the end of the eighteenth century. Modern audiences are acquainted with its most elevated exemplar, *Die Zauberflöte*.¹²

The line that stretches from Tamino’s and Pamina’s trials of fire and water through late Smetana to the ordeals of Laca and Jenůfa may seem a tenuous one. Nevertheless it is the background to Janáček’s consistent line of operas that go beyond tragedy and look instead for healing and reconciliation. *Jenůfa* is a wonderful example with no fewer than three of its central characters achieving wisdom and understanding. Preissová’s libretto is initially responsible for this but the importance that Janáček attached to such aspects can be seen in the way his music bulks out the final scene and draws attention to the healing process that is completed there. Similarly the Game-

¹⁰ JANÁČEK, LEOŠ (found in the clothes returned from the sanatorium after his death), English translation in *JODA*, ZD39.

¹¹ TYRRELL, JOHN, *Czech Opera*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, 166-170, *passim*.

¹² *Ibidem*, 166-170.

keeper in (*The Vixen*) and Emilia Marty (in *Makropulos*) proclaim their new-found wisdom to some of Janáček's grandest music. In Janáček's final opera, *From the House of the Dead*, we are not shown any particular reconciliation or wisdom achieved - the work does not operate through time - but instead it is Janáček's compassion that illuminates each grisly story, no better illustrated than by the tender orchestral ritornello that drifts through Šiškov's narration.

Interestingly, Janáček three 'middle works', the succession of *Fate*, *Brouček* and *Káťa Kabanová*, lie beyond this line. The first two are experimental, with *Fate* in particular looking beyond the Czech tradition for its models. With *Káťa Kabanová* the personal impulse that drove it (the Butterfly-Kamila-Káťa connection) is so strong that Janáček was arguably distracted from his earlier preoccupation. Once he had written his tragic Kamila opera out of his system he was able to return to earlier tendencies.

Tragicomedy in Janáček operas

Of Janáček's late operas the most innovative and intriguing in terms of genre is *The Cunning Little Vixen*. It is best characterized as a tragicomedy, a mode exemplified in Shakespeare's late romances (*The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*) and one seldom encountered in opera. The characteristics of Shakespearean tragicomedy have been reckoned to be:

- the juxtaposition of contrasting but paradoxically similar worlds, usually focussed on youth and age;
- a strong sense of ambiguities and therefore uncertainties, usually about identity;
- a volatile dramatic mode that mixes comedy, pathos and tragedy;
- moments of dramatic understatement or anti-climax;
- a recognition but not necessarily an understanding of numinous or supernatural forces benevolently at work in human affairs;
- a cyclical patterning to life that encompasses death and, necessarily, rebirth.¹³

All six features of tragicomedy as defined above are present in Janáček's *Vixen*. An essential part of the opera is the juxtaposing of the contrasting and 'paradoxically similar' human and animal worlds (with human-animal parallels suggested by the voice-doublings). There is also an emphasis on the contrast of youth and age, no better illustrated than in the final scene with the Gamekeeper (who has just complained of growing old) and the Young Frog. As an anthropomorphic work, the opera trades on ambiguities and uncertainties about identity. Much of the humour arises from animals behaving like humans, but there is also poignancy, for instance in the scene when the Vixen is tied up and, in her dream, appears as a girl as a symbol of liberation; or the lovelorn, and presumably shortsighted Schoolmaster seeing the Vixen as his distant beloved, Terynka. The swift oscillation between comedy and tragedy is particularly evident in Janáček's handling of the death of the Vixen. Janáček himself introduced this element into Těsnohlídek's work (which is unequivocally a comedy) but inserted

¹³ DUTTON, RICHARD, *Modern Tragicomedy and the British Tradition*, Harvester, Brighton 1986, chap. 1, especially 28-53.

no prophetic hints of what might happen, no preparation for a tragic dénouement. Equally, Janáček underplays what could have been a powerful or sentimental climax. The animals scatter, so there are no sorrowing Fox and Cubs and there is no great orchestral welling up such as the final interlude in Berg's *Wozzeck*. Instead the scene is notable for its musical and dramatic restraint. There is the noise of gunshot, then silence and a short, subdued orchestral musing on a motif associated with the Vixen.

Furthermore, this is not the tragic end of the act: there is much more action to be presented that will comment on and reinterpret what we have experienced. The Vixen's death is followed by a scene of human regrets: the Priest faraway and said to be lonely, the Schoolmaster shedding a tear at the news of Harašta's marriage to Terynka, the Gamekeeper growing old. Finally there is a scene in which the Gamekeeper shows his recognition both of numinous forces benevolently at work ('a more than earthly joy', as he proclaims in his scena), and of the cyclic pattern of life: death and then rebirth. Here the fact that the composer did not trouble to turn Těsnohlídek's high-flown philosophical sentiments into the Gamekeeper's homely Moravian dialect comes across not as one of Janáček's editorial oversights but as a way of conveying the Gamekeeper's understanding of things beyond himself, a state of mind that is musically underlined by a familiar Janáček finale trope, the cathartic slow waltz. The Vixen is dead, but, as the Gamekeeper awakes from his reverie, he is confronted by another vixen: 'The young Bystrouška, the spitting image of her mother' (Janáček's title for the scene), and there, too, are all the creatures that were present at the beginning of the opera, including the Little Frog, or rather (since this is an opera about renewal) the grandson of the Little Frog seen in Act 1.

The Vixen's death and life are thus not seen as tragically finite but as a contribution to a larger, infinitely-continuing life cycle. The suggestion of the numinous at the end of the opera echoes the framing of the courtship and marriage scene by the offstage, other-worldly 'voice of the forest'. Unlike those forces fatefully and saddeningly at work in the love-lives of the Schoolmaster and the Priest, the numinous is portrayed here as benevolent and joyful. The final event of the opera is a moment of wonder that Janáček described in a letter to Max Brod: 'The Gamekeeper's gun slips from his hand in rapture - a milestone of life - and the Little Frog proclaims his new horizon'.¹⁴ The Gamekeeper's last gesture - the gun falling from his hands - is a literal letting go of that instrument that is symbolic of human power, control and destructiveness and a strange, unconscious echo of Prospero's breaking his staff at the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. But it is also a metaphorical letting go - an involuntary (the libretto says 'absentmindedly') opening up to the numinous power, order and creativity of nature's world.

As he began work on the opera, Janáček described it to Kamila Stösslová as 'A merry thing with a sad end'. Since the Vixen's death is so carefully placed mid-act and its emotional impact muted, this is clearly not the 'sad end'. Janáček's brief description to Kamila continues to explain that this is a personal opera: 'and I am taking up a

¹⁴ JANÁČEK, LEOŠ to Max Brod, 26 June 1925, English translation in *JODA*, LB63.

place at that sad end myself. And so I fit in there!¹⁵ With his new routines in place,¹⁶ Janáček knew when he began how long this opera would take to compose and that its first performance would probably fall in the year he turned seventy. Unlike *Káťa Kabanová*, written partly as a celebration of his love for Kamila Stösslová, *The Cunning Little Vixen* was written for himself alone: 'I caught Bystrouška for the forest and the sadness of the late years', as he put it in a letter to Kamila.¹⁷ It was a work in which he came to terms with his own mortality.

For all the differences in subject matter, its successor *Makropulos* is its continuation, its genre adjusted from Čapek's 'comedy' to tragicomedy. Janáček jettisoned Čapek's witty discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of a very long life (including prophetic insights into the problems of the pension industry). He also added the death of the heroine at the end, just as he had made the Vixen die. But in neither case did death mean tragedy. In *Makropulos* Marty's death and Janáček's musical clues simply reframe the original text and emphasize tragicomic elements already present. Once again there is the juxtaposition of contrasting worlds, focussed on youth (Krista) and age (Marty). There is the sense of ambiguities and uncertainties about identity (Marty's multiple lives). Comedy, pathos and tragedy is mixed in a volatile dramatic mode with Marty's constant debunking of the expectations of her star-struck admirers. And, with his magnificent cathartic-slow-waltz finale including the added offstage voices ('things and shadows'), Janáček stresses something that is lacking in the rational Čapek original: a recognition of numinous forces benevolently at work in human affairs. The cycle of life is completed with Marty, in her dying moments, handing over the Makropulos formula to her young counterpart Krista (Marty 'reborn'). And, since this is also an opera about healing and education, Krista has learnt not to make the same mistake as Marty but instead lets the Makropulos formula and its inherent tragedy be consumed by fire.

To suggest Janáček's final opera *From the House of the Dead* is also tragicomedy is a harder claim to sustain. For all its mixture of knockabout comedy and pathos (e.g. in Act 2) it is essentially a darker piece than its predecessors. True, there are crucial moments of dramatic understatement or anti-climax such as the Elderly Prisoner's two crucial responses: his naive question that undercuts the drama of Luka's tale in Act 1 and the humanity that reframes the brutality of Šiškov's tale in Act 3 ('A mother gave birth to him too'). And perhaps the release of the eagle near the end of the opera, its broken wing mended, to triumphant cries from the Prisoners celebrating the Prison Governor's release of Petrovič, counts as a sort of rebirth. But there are no juxtaposed worlds here, no ambiguities, no uncertainties. The prison is the single, real and only world for the Prisoners at the moment, and, apart from the lucky Petrovič, there is no escape from its repetitive routines. Like the world of *The Vixen* it is cyclical - Janáček makes much of the seasons in both works - but unlike *The Vixen* the cycle brings no

¹⁵ JANÁČEK, LEOŠ to Kamila Stösslová, 10 February 1922, English translation in *JODA*, LB11.

¹⁶ See TYRRELL, JOHN, 'How Janáček composed operas', *Janáček and his World*, ed. Michael Beckerman, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2003, 55-78.

¹⁷ JANÁČEK, LEOŠ to Kamila Stösslová, English translation in John Tyrrell: *Intimate Letters: Leoš Janáček to Kamila Stösslová*, Faber and Faber, London 1994, no. 217.

rebirth, no healing, no hope. Crucially there is no sign of numinous powers benevolently at work, simply Janáček's compassion for the characters. It was a chilling opera with which to end his life work. Sensing the difference in this opera from its predecessors, Janáček's pupils Bakala and Chlubna added an 'optimistic' ending: a repeat of the Prisoner's 'Freedom!' chorus neatly trimmed with a major-key (and horribly portentous) version of the Act 1 motto theme. But Janáček knew exactly what he was doing when he ended his final opera with the grim and repetitive Prisoners' march.

POVZETEK

Avtor ugovarja Michael Ewansovim opisom Janáčkovih oper kot »tragičnim«. Tako na primer v *Jenufo*, pravi Ewans, naj bi Kostelničkino precejnjevanje same sebe (ki jo pripelje do umora otroka) povzročilo božje maščevanje, ki vzbuja sočutje in strah – klasičen propad sicer plemenitega človeka. Težava je v tem, da tu še ni konec opere. Kar sledi – Jenufino odpuščanje mačehi in njeno razumevanje Lacove ljubezni – postavlja Kostelničkino dejanje v popolnoma drugačen, netragičen kontekst. Od Janáčkovih devetih oper je možno brez vsakeršnega dvoma kot »tragični« označiti zgodnji deli – *Šarko* in *Katjo Kabanovo*. Zgodnja opera *Začetek ene romance* je »komična« in dve eksperimentalni operi skladateljevega srednjega obdobja (*Usoda* in *Izleti gospoda Broučka*) sta glede žanra nejasni. Avtor članka meni, da se

Janáčkove zadnje tri opere (*Lisička zvitorepka*, *Zadeva Makropulos* in *Iz mrtvega doma*) skupaj z *Jenufo* odvijajo v drugačnem svetu onstran tragičnega in da dve od njiju, *Zvitorepka* in *Makropulos*, kažeta tragikomične poteze, ki in kakor so bile odkrite v Shakespearovih poznih odrskih delih, tako da so ugotovljene poteze naslednje: konfrontacija nepričakovano podobnih svetov, osredotočenih na mladost in starost; močno poudarjen občutek nedoločljivosti in zato negotovosti, večinoma glede identitete; samovoljen način mešanja komedije, patosa in tragedije; trenutki dramatsko pretirane zmernosti ali antiklimaksov; priznanje, a ne vedno tudi nujno razumavanje, religioznih ali nadnaravnih sil, ki dobrohotno posegajo v človeško dogajanje; ciklično »krojenje« življenja, ki zaobsega smrt in po potrebi tudi ponovno rojstvo.