

## Janáček's 'Cunning Little Vixen

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[Dorsey, Sarah](#). "Janáček's 'Cunning Little Vixen.'" *The Opera Journal* 29, No. 4 (1996): 28-41.

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### **Article:**

The composer Leos Janáček was purely and proudly a product of his unique world. He was wholly Moravian; his life and his music point to this cultural origin. Janáček's love of his homeland was not only a political one, but also involved a deep appreciation of the natural world in which he lived. He was raised in rural Czechoslovakia where life was simple and close to the land. This paper will elaborate on these points - tell you a little of Janáček's country, his life, and his work - and then discuss one of his operas: *The Cunning Little Vixen*.<sup>1</sup> Although there is no typical Janáček piece, in some ways this opera is a summation of his life and his work. In the context of an extraordinary late-life productivity, this work is not only a lovely piece of music, but one which meant so much to the composer he requested that the conclusion be played at his own funeral.

The recent history of Czechoslovakia has been one of velvet revolution and velvet divorce. The former Czechoslovakia known from 1918 to 1993 was made up of three main regions: Bohemia to the west, Moravia in the middle, and Slovakia to the east. The present day Czech Republic, created on January 1st, 1993, is made up of Bohemia and Moravia. Present day Slovakia has been restored to its historic boundaries. Janáček was born in the town of Hukvaldy in Lachia (a central region) and he spent much of his life in Brno in central Moravia. In 1991, the velvet revolution saved Czechoslovakia from Communist domination, a situation parallel to that in 1918, during Janáček's lifetime, when the unification of these three regions was a major victory ending a three-century domination by the Habsburg Empire.

During the reign of the Habsburgs, much of the cultural life of the country flourished in the villages and towns, not in the cities where the foreigners ruled. Music was a major part of the village life, and even Dr. Burney in his famous travels noted that "...All the children of the peasants and tradespeople, in every town and village throughout the Kingdom of Bohemia are taught music at the common reading schools, except in Prague, where indeed, it is no part of school learning."<sup>2</sup>

By the nineteenth century, Nationalism was flourishing. The strong musical tradition of Czechoslovakia was alive and healthy in the countryside. Along with music, the Czech language was being preserved in the villages, for German was the official language spoken in the cities. Czech literature began to appear, and art music came soon thereafter. The first Czech opera was produced in 1826. Although it was only a collection of folk songs strung together by Frantisek Skroup, it set the stage for a national consciousness to flourish. Forty years later, Bedrich Smetana returned to his native Czechoslovakia from Sweden. As a conductor, composer and critic he brought Czech national music back to the cities and to the people of Czechoslovakia. All of Smetana's seven

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<sup>1</sup> The historical and biographical material was compiled from the following sources: Michael Ewans, *Janáček's Tragic Operas* (London, 1977); Ian Horsbrugh, "Janáček and the Czech Tradition," *Royal College of Music Magazine* (LXXXII, 1986), also Ian Horsbrugh, *Leos Janáček: The Field that Prospered* (New York, 1982); John Tyrrell, *Czech Opera* (Cambridge, England, 1988) and his *New Grove* article (IX, 1980), 474-90.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Horsbrugh, *Leos Janáček: The Field That Prospered* (New York, 1982), p. 18.

operas are based on Czech history or centered around the village life which preserved a heritage almost crushed by the German rulers. In writing about the language of the stage in 1899, Janáček states:

If we want to have a theatre with "an individual character," then we need to plunge to the depths to find the truth; even the tone of our actors' language, in fact the speech melodies of the actors' language, have to be genuinely Czech, genuinely Moravian.

The melody of the Czech language, that which rings out from its speech, which pleases, or touches, which roars with thunder and whispers with tenderness, this florid attire of thought, and its embodiment, this melody, however, is debased through our contact with the Germans and, alas, also through all our schooling, from the very beginning to the end.<sup>3</sup>

As one of fourteen children (only nine survived), Janáček was born in 1854 and grew up in poverty. In 1869, after his training as a choir boy in Brno, Janáček embarked on the teacher training program expected of the son and grandson of teachers. In village life the status of teacher was high because often only the priest and teacher of the town were literate. Although he excelled at musical activities, Janáček was at age twenty only certified to teach Geography and History.

He went to Prague to study at the Prague Organ School for a year in 1874. There he met Dvorák and started a lifelong friendship. The next year Janáček returned to Brno, resumed his conducting activities and taught at the Institute where he was trained. He married Zdenka Schulzová in 1881 after a year of study in Leipzig and Vienna. His future father-in-law tried to distract Janáček from his daughter by encouraging the faraway studies, but to no avail. The marriage was never a strong one, however. There were cultural and political differences, as Zdenka (a former piano pupil) was from a German family and Janáček was fiercely Czech. Although they remained married for 47 years, the deaths of both of their children (a boy at age two and a girl at twenty) challenged an already strained relationship. For example, after their daughter Olga was born in 1882, Zdenka left with the child and went back to live with her family for two years.

This departure coincides with a period of enormous professional activity for Janáček. He opened two schools of music, an Organ School and one for singers and violinists. Was this feverish professional activity why his wife and child left or how Janáček dealt with their departure? His father-in-law was helpful and supported him in these ventures despite believing Janáček's patriotism to be fanatical.

Janáček also took time to cultivate his literary talents founding and editing the journal entitled *Hudební Listy* (*Musical Letters*) in 1884 when he was thirty. His writing style was in some ways similar to his musical style. He was an emotional man and not one to "hold things in." A sense of his intensity can be seen through his halting short phrases--almost a poetic prose. Here is an example of his writing from later in life (1927):

A painter - Frantisek Ondrusek - tells me: "I fail to understand much of what is painted now!"

What of "understanding!" One gate will always remain open in art: the gate of emotion. On the whirlwind of emotion, the development of music runs boldly forward.

Whether it scratches or caresses, it will always stick to you. You often run away from some kind of development. You are weighed down by it, but you bear it, and bear it out you must.

Even when the course of events tears you apart, thirsty for your blood, it will suck your lifeblood in order to grow. It is without mercy. You cannot run away from it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Leos Janáček, "The Language of Our Actors and the Stage," *Moravska revue* (1899), p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> Mirka Zemanová, ed. and tr., *Janáček's Uncollected Essays On Music* (New York, 1989), p.126.

Janáček also read philosophy voraciously, wrote music theory texts and wrote reviews for his journal. He was tireless.

Because he was not pleased with his first opera, *Sarka*, which appeared in 1888, Janáček turned from composition to folk music research. From 1888 to 1901 Janáček published eight volumes of folk song or dance either alone or in collaboration with his teaching colleague Frantisek Bartos. Janáček was indeed the Béla Bartók of Czechoslovakia.

From 1904 to 1919, Janáček devoted his energies to the Organ School. His dream of a Moravian conservatory to rival the Prague Conservatory finally became reality when the Organ School became the Brno Conservatory. Judging from contemporary reports, he was a compassionate yet impatient teacher. The death of his children perhaps encouraged him to pay a fatherly (although at times intrusive) attention to his young students.

One might expect a sixty-two year old composer whose opera *Jenufa* was finally performed in the big city of Prague to relax and retire. This was not so with Janáček. The surprising productivity of his last twelve years (from 1916 to 1928) is almost legendary. One of the leading Janáček authorities, Michael Beckerman of the University of California, Santa Barbara, in his 1988 article "Janáček's Last Twelve years,"<sup>5</sup> points out that not only was there a creative outpouring, but almost all the pieces for which Janáček is known today were written during these years.

Besides the acceptance and acclaim of his opera (which was published soon after its Prague premiere), there were two other important events which inspired the older composer to have an indisputably amazing autumnal output. These events were the declaration of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, and the beginning of the great romance of Janáček's last years in 1917.

Her name was Kamila Stösslová and he wrote her more than 700 letters over the years. She was a simple, uninhibited peasant woman, not a musician, nor highly educated. They met at a Moravian spa (Luhacovice) in July of 1917. A number of letters she wrote to him have not survived, some were burned at her request. This relationship was a large part of Janáček's inspiration, clearly filling a need for him which his marriage did not. An excerpt from one of his letters (anticipating her upcoming visit), dated a month before his death, shows his devotion and passion:

..Never, and no matter how long, would I have my fill of you. The longer we'll be together, the more I'd desire you. You're so beautiful, for me you're heaven, the sweet of the sweet. I don't know why it's so, but there's nothing dearer in the world than to have you.

You yourself perhaps don't feel how very dear you are to me. I can't kiss you enough; it's as if one drank a red-hot fire, always hotter and hotter. What is it that burns in your mouth, let alone in your dear sweet body! Can it be expressed! I think that the whole time I'll just carry you in my arms--and will never let you go. Would that it were so!<sup>6</sup>

A recent publication of this correspondence in English titled *Intimate Letters: Leos Janáček to Kamila Stosslova* (1994), edited and translated by John Tyrrell, fills in many blanks which have existed for years about the relationship. One wonders whether Janáček might have tried to file for divorce if he had lived longer. An appendix in *Intimate Letters* by the legal advisor to the Czech Music Foundation, Richard Klos, speculates about what the divorce suit may have been, had Janáček lived to file one.

Three of the last four operas, including *The Cunning Little Vixen* were inspired by Kamila, as was the string quartet *Intimate Letters*. In fact these two pieces share musical motives. Kamila finally accepted Janáček's

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<sup>5</sup> Kosmas (1988), Vol. 7, pp. 139-145.

<sup>6</sup> John Tyrrell, ed. and tr., *Intimate Letters: Leos Janáček to Kamila Stösslová* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 327-28.

repeated invitations and visited in Hukvaldy with her son in 1928. Ironically, Janáček caught the fever which led to his death (on August 12) while searching in the forest for Kamila's son.

*The Cunning Little Vixen* was in many ways a true homecoming for Janáček. Over the years, he had returned many times to his birthplace of Hukvaldy. When he did, he usually stayed with the forester Vincenc Sládek and his family. At the time of composing *Vixen*, Janáček was finally able to buy a cottage in town and live there. Certainly reminders of his own youth were ever-present, as was awareness of his approaching death, so the profound subjects of life and death were natural for him at this place and time.

The opera is based on a comic strip (or "a short novel with a large number of illustrations"<sup>7</sup>) written by Rudolf Tésnohlídek that was running in the Brno newspaper. The story follows the life of a vixen (a female fox). The opera opens in the forest with many creatures cavorting about. We see the young vixen captured by a forester, taken home, and tortured by his children. The vixen finally escapes and returns to the woods. The forester, in the meantime, meets with his cronies at a bar in town. They are all feeling very old. Back in the forest, the vixen meets an attractive young fox, Goldenstripe, and they court and marry. The vixen bears three cubs, but is later killed by a poacher.

The main character of the story is the forester. We see him with the humans in the bar and with the animals in the forest. Through his relationship with the vixen and (after her death) with her cubs, we see him come to understand the beauty and mystery of the cycles of nature. He becomes reconciled with his own approaching death. At the end of the opera he is blissfully at peace, surrounded by nature. Janáček altered the original story considerably, adding the death of the vixen and enlarging the role of the forester.

There has been confusion over the title of this work from the first publication. The original mistake by the printers of the newspaper story made "Liska Bystronozka" (Vixen Fleetfoot) into "Liska Bystrouska" (Vixen Sharp Ears). There is also an interpretation of the word "Bystrouska" which is diminutive and translates as "Sharp Little One." This would perhaps explain the traditional German translation of "Das schlaue Füchlein" (the sly, cunning or crafty little vixen) and the English "The Cunning Little Vixen."<sup>8</sup>

*The Cunning Little Vixen* exhibits many elements which reflect various influences on his compositional style. In general, Janáček's style is basically tonal with Moravian modality and French whole-tone influences. He frequently uses rhythmic and melodic *ostinati* as well as variation techniques and simple repetition. Janáček is careful to use motivic material to illustrate dramatic high points and create a subtle structural cohesion. Abrupt juxtapositions rather than smooth transitions often delineate sections. The strongest influences, as illustrated here, are folk music, the Czech language, and Janáček's natural surroundings--the Moravian countryside itself. The art he creates out of this mix is inseparable from these elements.

The following is a quote from Janáček:

I have lived in folk song from childhood. In folk song, there is the whole man: body, soul, landscape, all of it, all. He who grows from folk song, grows into a whole man...Folk song can bind the nation--indeed--nations--and bind all of mankind into one spirit, one kind of happiness, one kind of bliss.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking in London in 1926, Janáček states not only his passion for life, but also his belief in the power of folk song. Direct quotes from folk song in his earlier compositions is frequent. The later use is more of an evocation of the spirit of folk song.

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<sup>7</sup> John Tyrrell, *Janáček's Operas: A Documentary Account* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 284-85.

<sup>9</sup> *Janáček's Uncollected Essays on Music*, p. 60, from a speech given in London, May 3, 1926.

## EXAMPLE 1 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT

Example 1 illustrates the short phrases typical of folk melodies. The raised fourth degree of the scale (E-natural, not E-flat in measures 2, 4, 6, and 8 of the vocal line, shown here by plus signs (+) above the notes in question) gives the Moravian (or Lydian) flavor. The simple, two-measure rhythm is repeated four times. This example is from act 3, sc. 1: The vixen's cubs are playfully imitating their mother and stealing from her the way she later steals from the poacher who eventually kills her. Note a typical Janáček *ostinato* pattern in the accompaniment. The vocal melody appears later in the orchestra when the vixen is mentioned.

The importance to Janáček of speech-based music is another stylistic influence. He developed a habit from 1879 to the end of his life of traveling everywhere with a notebook and recording what he called "speech melodies" (or as some translate it "speech tunelets"). There are many notebooks full of these melodic dictations he took from the street, from acquaintances, and even from his dying daughter. They were Janáček's raw material for composing his vocal music. Janáček wrote in 1928:

...whenever someone spoke to me, I may have not grasped the words, but I grasped the rise and fall of the notes! At once I knew what the person was like: I knew how he or she felt, whether he or she was lying, whether he or she was upset. As the person talked to me in a conventional conversation, I knew, I heard that, inside himself, the person perhaps wept. Sounds, the intonation of human speech, indeed of every living being, have had for me the deepest truth. And you see - this was my need in life ...I have been collecting speech melodies since 1879; I have an enormous collection. You see, these speech melodies are windows into peoples' souls - and what I would like to emphasize is this: for dramatic music they are of great importance.<sup>10</sup>

There has been some debate as to the relevance of his "speech melodies." Janáček himself stated clearly that he did not quote them directly into his music, but learned from the inflection of everyday speech how to infuse his music with believable drama. He was serious about this collecting, though, and used a chronometer which divides a minute into 20,000 parts. This allowed him to measure the timing of speech more precisely.

## EXAMPLE 2 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT

Example 2 is a snippet of free speech-like music which abounds in the opera. This excerpt is taken from the beginning of the flirtation between the vixen and the fox (act 2, scene 4). The vixen is bragging about her adventures of thievery and self-defense. Note the use of triplets and quadru-plets fighting the prevailing meters-which themselves change between 2/4 and 3/8. There is little here in the vocal part which is predictable, but the orchestra accompaniment repeats almost exactly a leaping, dotted motive ending with a trill. Also note the retrograde nature of the rhythm and melody of the first and last measures of the vocal line in this example. Janáček did not produce endless lyrical melodic lines, but shorter, more life-like, utterances.

Another pervasive inspiration for Janáček was the ever-present, ever-constant force of nature. The title of *The Cunning Little Vixen* is itself informative. The fact that Janáček chose a story with creatures of the forest as characters, who have feelings, sing and dance, and are, in their simplicity, perhaps wiser than humans, speaks volumes. Living in the countryside and traveling through it to collect folk material, Janáček absorbed it through all his senses. He collected bird songs in much the same manner as his human "speech melodies." There are stories of the pet chickens he trained to jump on his porch table and say good night to him; he would talk right back to them.

The opera's opening scene with the forester in the woods is a good illustration of Janáček's use of natural elements. Other characters in this scene include a badger, a cricket, a grasshopper, a mosquito and a frog. The

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 121, from an interview in *Literarne svet*, March 8, 1928.

drunken forester sits down, talks to himself and falls asleep. The musical elements include a typical *ostinato* in the orchestra on a hauntingly open (other-worldly) sound of a seventh and tritone. Interspersed with that are measures of insect-like trills. The clarinets and pizzicato violins "chirp" the arrival of the cricket and grasshopper.

### **EXAMPLE 3 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT**

After the forester goes to sleep, a dance commences between the cricket and grasshopper. The melody of this waltz ( example 3 ) is a lovely retrograde inversion of itself repeated every two measures. The accompaniment is static, repeating exactly for four measures and then simply transposing down a fourth for two measures. Janáček reveals his economy of material here. Even though the mood of this waltz is one of serenity, there is tension between the melody and accompaniment in the first phrase (8 measures) from the clash between the F-sharps in the melody and the F-naturals in the accompaniment. This is diminished in the second eight measures by slightly altering the accompaniment. The dance continues after this example with rhythmic variations on the original tune. Later the mosquito (drunk because he has bitten the soused forester) is sitting on the forester's nose and a frog jumps to catch the mosquito, waking up the forester.

### **EXAMPLES 4 AND 5 ARE OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT**

Nature, folk song and speech melodies are building blocks, but do not necessarily create art. The next two portions of the opera for examination are the musical frames (architectural portals, perhaps?) to the fourth scene of act II, the love scene. These scenes show Janáček's subtle and efficient use of his building blocks to create a vibrant, vigorous work of art. The first example ( example 4 ) sets the stage for the vixen and fox to meet in the woods and the second ( example 5 ) is their wedding dance music.

Here again is Janáček's motivic economy. Compare example 4 (the chorus singing offstage for the opening scene to act II) to example 5 (the forest spirits singing at the wedding celebration). The melodies are the same again with the raised fourth. The two examples are in the same key as well. Compare the melodic lines of two measures after rehearsal number 45 (in example 4 ) and rehearsal number 83 (in example 5 ). Both have G-naturals (not G-flats) of the Lydian scale (indicated again by plus signs over the raised notes).

The tempo and spirit of the two moments are quite different, however. The first is contemplative (*adagio and pianissimo*) and the second rather raucously celebratory (*allegro and forte*). They are both juxtaposed with different contrasting material. In the first instance louder, faster material is interspersed and at the end of the scene, a triple meter figure with a descending melodic line provides the contrasting music. In discussing this wedding music, Michael Beckerman states "...Janáček has, despite his reputation as a somewhat primitive, white-hot scribbler, artfully recalled almost all of the opera's primary material in this minute and a half of music."<sup>11</sup>

The end of the opera was clearly close to Janáček's heart. Elements of the dramatic closing music are heard at two other high points of the opera, once in a love scene between the vixen and the fox (act III, scene 1) and later in that scene after the vixen has been killed. Janáček's portrayal of these emotional high points is like his representation of nature: short, to the point and not without wit.

Even on such a somber occasion, where the natural cycles of life and death are being portrayed, and Janáček is clearly seeing his own end, he gives us a humorous twist. In the beginning as in the end, furry creatures frighten a frog who jumps and wakens the forester from his nap. In the first act, the frog jumps to catch the drunken mosquito on the napping forester's nose. In the opera's last scene, the forester has just seen the vixen's cubs for the first time. He catches the frog, instead of the vixen he caught in the first act. The frog says to the forester,

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Beckerman, "Pleasures and Woes: The Vixen's Wedding Celebration," in *Janáček and Czech Music: Proceedings of The International Conference* (Saint Louis, 1988) ed. by Michael Beckerman and Glen Bauer, (Stuyvesant, NY, 1995), p. 53.

"I'm not the one you think...that was my grandfather...he used to talk a lot about you." So, two generations have passed in Froggy Land and the final lines of the opera are sung in a child's voice by--a frog.