

LEOŠ JANÁČEK

BY PAUL GRIFFITHS

Though older than Mahler and groomed in the tradition of Dvořák, Leoš Janáček belonged musically with the younger generation of Bartók and Stravinsky. He came to prominence, as they did, around the time of the First World War, when they were in their thirties and he in his sixties. He also shared his junior contemporaries' zest for material encountered in the raw: folk music and, in his case, the speech patterns he would hear around him in his native Moravia, the south-eastern part of the Czech lands, which for most of his life formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. What he heard from village singers and from people on the street went into his music, to create its energetic repetitions, strongly characterized motifs and tangy instrumental combinations, counterbalanced by what was part of his older, Romantic inheritance: the ability to come up with moments of almost shocking radiance.

Born in 1854 into a line of village teachers and musicians, Janáček began his long apprenticeship in the choir of the Augustinian monastery in Brno, the Moravian capital, from which he went on to the city's teacher-training college. Apart from brief periods of further study in Prague, Leipzig and Vienna, he remained in this distinctly provincial city as a teacher and choirmaster. In 1881, recently married, he was appointed director of the new organ school in Brno, a post he retained until 1919. Neither his composing nor his marital life was so settled. Apart from his first opera *Šárka*, not performed at the time, his creative achievements in his twenties and thirties consisted mostly of small choral pieces and folksong arrangements, and his harsh treatment of his young wife—not yet 16 when they married—resulted in a long period of separation. Even when they were back



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together their relationship was strained, and after the deaths of their young son (in 1890) and 20-year-old daughter (in 1903) they lived as strangers.

During the decade of work on his third opera, *Jenůfka* (1894-1903), he discovered all the themes and means of his operatic maturity—not least the tight drawing of an inevitable tragedy and then, at the last moment, the outburst of optimistic hope in youth and love. But though the work was a success in Brno, it was not seen elsewhere, and its composer was left directionless again. He worked in turn on two troublesome if striking operatic projects, the semi-autobiographical *Osud* (*Fate*) and the satirical fantasy *The Excursions of Mr. Brouček*, of which the latter again occupied ten years (1908-17). Other works of this period include further choruses and a violin sonata.

Various circumstances then released his creative energy. *Jenůfka* was at last staged in Prague in 1916, and from there began its international career. Janáček was freed from administrative and teaching obligations at the organ school, though he continued to give master classes. His patriotic hopes were

fulfilled with the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918. And in 1917 he fell in love with Kamila Stösslová, a married woman less than half his age. Henceforth she was his confidante (in a voluminous correspondence) and his muse. Transmuted she became the heroines of three operas he wrote in quick succession—*Katya Kabanová*, *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *The Makropulos Case*—and the boy who radiates and reflects humanity in the prison of his last opera, *From the House of the Dead*. She was also the seductress of his dramatic song cycle *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*. He wrote the *Glagolitic Mass* for their imaginary marriage, and two string quartets that told their story with reference to a Tolstoy novella (*The Kreutzer Sonata*) and to his letters to her.

His achievement, at what was an advanced age for the time, was astonishing: four operas completed in under a decade, besides these other works. Moreover, the operas range widely in subject, from the family drama of iron rule and the heart in *Katya Kabanová* to the lives of forest animals in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, the continuing life and allure of a three-century-old woman in *The Makropulos Case*, and the prisoners' tales of *From the House of the Dead*, based on a novel by Dostoevsky.

Hindered by Nazism and war, these works were slow to make their way into wide circulation. Charles Mackerras's recordings, in the 1970s, hastened them on their way, but only now are they being accepted as part of the central operatic repertory. Music for which this composer waited so long is still new.

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