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WAS JANÁČEK OBSESSED?

There is a well-known picture of Janáček standing by the ocean with a notebook in his hands. The photograph taken in May 1926 by Jan Mikota, commemorates Janáček's brief stay in Flushing (Vlissingen) in the Netherlands, on the way back from London to Czechoslovakia. Many might assume that it shows him either notating a theme that has just occurred to him, a *nápěvek* he has just overheard, or the gurgling of the waves as they lap against the shore, in the hope that they might surreptitiously glimpse into his creative world and catch him in a moment of inspiration. But was that what he was really doing? Janáček's notebooks contain all sorts of notation: speech melodies (of people and animals), bird calls and the babbling of brooks, but also records of his students' grades, random doodles, and even budgets and other such miscellanea. So he may just as easily have been writing "Ship to Holland – 5 pounds" or "Accommodation for the night – 2½ guilders".

Reading the literature on Janáček's life and work, one often encounters the concept of obsession. In the public imagination, there seems to be a notion that Janáček was obsessed, thought the object of his fixation varies in different accounts. The most common themes of Janáček's obsession are either of the two Kamilas who were prominent in his life, speech melody, and aging. These assertions raise many questions. Did Janáček have a psychological disorder? Was he truly "obsessed" with Kamila Stösslová, Kamila Urválková, the sounds of the Czech language, or death? Or, on the other hand, are the claims of obsession mere carelessness of speech? Maybe a postmodern, ironic stance misinterprets enthusiasm, or passion, as obsession. How do we square the sophisticated and cosmopolitan Janáček whom we know with the accounts of the "obsessed" composer and all the implications that loaded term carries?

Since I am concerned here with Janáček's place in the popular imagination in the West, I have chosen examples drawn from sources on the Internet: articles, reviews, and personal statements about the composer and his music, and these may provide some insight into how the composer is publicly perceived.

If Janáček's "obsession" is to be regarded as more than a careless cliché, it should be considered from a medical point of view.[1] Obsession as a medical con-

[1] The following medical literature has been consulted for this paper: Ian Jakes, *Theoretical*

dition is often closely associated with a related condition, compulsion, and both together are diagnosed under the term obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). OCD is a neurotic anxiety disorder, as phobias are, and is understood in opposition to psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia. People with OCD frequently suffer from a feeling of helplessness, and the disorder usually has a significant impact on their lives, often causing serious problems in professional and personal relationships. One of the chief differences between a neurotic disorder such as OCD and a psychotic disorder is that OCD patients know that they have a problem, but cannot seem to help themselves; the perception of reality of psychotics, by contrast, is significantly impaired. If a person is to be diagnosed with OCD, he or she will have obsessions, compulsions, or both.[2]

Padmal de Silva defines obsession and compulsion as follows:

Obsessions are recurrent, persistent ideas, thoughts, images, or impulses that intrude into consciousness and are experienced as senseless or repugnant, although the person recognizes that they are his own thoughts. They form against his will, and he usually attempts to resist them and get rid of them. They also cause marked anxiety or distress.[3]

Compulsions are repetitive, purposeful forms of behaviour that are carried out because of a strong compulsion to do so. The goal is to prevent or reduce anxiety or distress, or to prevent some dreaded event or situation. However, the activity is not connected in any realistic way with such aims, or is excessive. The person generally recognizes the senselessness of the behaviour and derives no pleasure from carrying out the activity, although it provides a relief from tension. Compulsions are usually performed according to certain rules or in a stereotyped fashion.[4]

For the diagnosis to hold, the person's condition must not have been caused by any other mental disorder, and the obsessions or compulsions must cause distress to the person or have a negative impact on his life.[5]

An example of a true obsession is the unwanted recurrent thought that one is being contaminated by germs from strangers. A compulsion that could accompany this obsession is frequent and thorough hand-washing throughout the day,

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Approaches to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Michael A. Jenike, Lee Baer and William E. Minichiello (eds.), *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders: Theory and Management*, 2nd ed., Chicago: Year Book Medical Publishers, 1990; Stanley J. Rachman, "Obsessional-Compulsive Disorders", in Brendan P. Bradley and Chris Thompson (eds.), *Psychological Applications in Psychiatry*, Chichester: Wiley, 1985, pp. 7–39; Paul Salkovskis and Joan Kirk, "Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder", in David M. Clark and Christopher G. Fairburn (eds.), *Science and Practice of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 179–208; Padmal de Silva, *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: The Facts,* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

2 Discussed in Chapter 1 of de Silva, *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*.

3 De Silva, *Obsessive Compulsive Disorder*, p. 2.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

often leaving the hands raw and irritated. (An example of obsessive-compulsive behaviour in literature is that of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, who, obsessed with feelings of guilt over what she and Macbeth have wrought, compulsively washes her hands to try to remove the blood she imagines covers them.) Actual obsessions and compulsions usually seriously interfere with a person's life.

These criteria do not seem to match Janáček's interest in, or activities involving women, speech melodies, or death. None of the activities in which Janáček engaged, whether letter writing to Stösslová or recording of *nápěvky*, could be classified as compulsions. There are some 700 letters extant from Janáček to Kamila Stösslová, even though some were destroyed completely or partially by her.[6] Yet Janáček's letter-writing to Stösslová, which was the most frequent, usually took his attention less than once a day, although sometimes as much as several times in a day. We can speculate that he often thought about Kamila, but there is no reason to think that he regarded these thoughts as "senseless" or "repugnant" or that he tried in any way to avoid them, as a person with obsessive thoughts does, nor does he seem to have been driven to write the letters against his will by an inner compulsion. Moreover, he was quite productive in other areas, and this would indicate that they did not constitute an obsession that dominated his life.

Likewise, he did not see *nápěvky* as intrusive invasions of his time and attention; on the contrary, he felt that recording speech contours honed his sense of the melody and rhythm of the language. That Janáček was interested in, even passionate about, speech melody, and particularly about its implications for enhancing the dramatic power of his music, there can be no doubt, but his activity was neither an obsession nor a compulsion. There are seventy-five folders of the composer's notebooks at the Moravian Museum's Janáček Archive. The letters Janáček wrote, the books he read and annotated, as well as his compositional output, represent a considerable quantity of completed work, and it hardly seems that they were affected by "obsessions" of any kind.

Other explanations for his behaviour can be suggested, though. Changes in the limbic system and temporal lobes of the brain can cause a condition called hypergraphia, which signifies a compelling and near-irresistible desire to write. It is unclear to what extent this condition is the force behind the creative impulses of artists, writers and composers; but hypergraphia is not considered to be a medical disorder, it requires no treatment, and, in any case, it has never been suggested that Janáček had this condition.

Janáček did indeed enjoy the company of Kamila Urválková, whose voice seemed to him like a "viola d'amore", and who sent him the red roses that began their acquaintance, but his infatuation with her never had the character of his relationship to the other Kamila. Some consider that obsession could apply to Janáček's relationship with Kamila Stösslová. If Janáček was obsessed with Kamila, did he identify himself with Janíček in *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*?

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6 They are contained in John Tyrrell, *Intimate Letters: Leoš Janáček to Kamila Stösslová*, London: Faber and Faber, 1994.

It's certainly possible, as he wrote to Kamila that he thought of her as the Gypsy girl.[7] It is an interesting poetic conceit that Janáček should be seduced by a dark, mysterious Kamila in spite of the risk of the serious disapproval of society, just as his near-namesake did in the *Diary*. Of course the reality was quite different, as Kamila did not return his feelings, at least not in the way he would have hoped.

It is not a new idea that the creative activity of Occidental (particularly Austrian and German) composers has often been associated with ideas of control, logic, calculation and mastery; Oriental composers by contrast have been thought to be subject to fits of obsessive creativity that overtake them completely, making of them a mere vessel for external inspiration – even though this idea has been deconstructed almost as often as it has been asserted or implied. But Janáček was not like that in any case. He had as rigorous a training in harmony, counterpoint and composition as any German or Austrian composer, he had a keen sense of the dramatic, and he coolly calculated his musical gestures for maximum effect. To assert that Janáček was obsessed can marginalize the composer and prevent him from speaking to us as Brahms or Mahler do – with the authority and force of genius. In Western music history and theory courses, the music of composers such as Skryabin and Janáček is often mentioned only fleetingly, and almost never analysed. This omission implies that the music is not structured in a way that analysis would help us understand.

Michel Foucault, Edward Said and others have argued that Western constructions of the Orient are inextricably intertwined with constructions of power, which reflect the domination of Eastern peoples by the West. The Orient in this context can extend into the areas east and southeast of Germany and Austria, eastern Europe, north Africa, and practically all of Asia.[8] Derek Sayer, however, has made an attempt to explain to a Western readership the place of the Czech lands in the history of Europe, and to re-situate the Czech lands in the heart of Europe rather than at its fringes.[9] Similar histories have been written about other eastern European countries.[10] We are thus starting to question misleading representations and fashion new, illuminating histories of peoples and cultures that have been thus far little understood in the West.

For some, Janáček's music does not convince through logical argument as a Bach fugue or a Beethoven sonata may seem to – it *seduces*, its quality exists *in spite of* a certain "irrationality". Bart Moore-Gilbert has noted that perceptions of the East as voiceless, sensual, female, despotic, irrational and backward are

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7 Janáček, in a letter to Kamila dated 24 July 1924.

8 Edward Said puts this point of view, also with regard to music, in his influential *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1978. It should be added that Said's argument remains controversial.

9 Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

10 Paul Lendvai's *The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003, and Lucian Boia's *Romania: Borderland of Europe (Topographics)*, trans. James Christian Brown, London: Reaktion, 2002, are examples.

opposed to perceptions of the West as masculine, democratic, rational, moral, dynamic and progressive.[11] (Admittedly, certain societies can fall on both sides of this scheme: Eastern Europeans can see Asian or Arab cultures in the same terms. This Orientalist construction is clearly apparent for instance in *The Diary of One Who Disappeared* in the opposition between Western Janíček and Eastern Zefka.)

Theodor Adorno had something to say about this. In a famous footnote he distinguishes between "extraterritorial [*exterritoriale*] music", in which tonal material can be used "without embarrassment", and traditional, nationalist, and conservative *Blut-und-Bodenmusik*.[12] As an example of extraterritorial music, Adorno mentions the music of the agricultural regions of southern Europe, and he singles out Janáček and Bartók for praise as extraterritorial composers. He attributes a power of alienation to this music, which he associates with the avant-garde, and holds that it is among the most progressive art music in Europe.[13] An exclusionary term like "extraterritorial" serves to identify the author with one group by stating its polar opposite. Although "extraterritorial" can be understood in different contexts, it has specific geographical implications, even if these are difficult to define exactly. (Composers of Slavic or Finno-Ugric descent are clearly included in the term, although Stravinsky is often seen as transcending his territorial bounds.)

Non-specialist scholars in the West may often be hazy about composers from areas east of the Danube. A short example should serve to illustrate my point. A colleague and I were recently accepted to read a joint paper on Janáček and speech melody at an international conference. The acceptance included comments from anonymous readers about our proposal. One of them welcomed our "interesting comparison between music transcription and Kodaly's own transcriptions of language. I am curious to hear findings of intonational analysis". I would also be curious to hear about Kodály's transcriptions of language, but would have first to learn Hungarian. For the reader's Western eyes, the East is an imaginary landscape where Kodály can easily substitute for Janáček.

At a time when Janáček is becoming better and better known in the West, it is important to examine attitudes to and assumptions about the man and his work. His music is more often heard in concert halls and opera houses today, and critics frequently speak of his surprising originality and his underrated status, but he is still excluded from most basic textbooks on music history and music anthologies outside the Czech Republic.[14] If he is included, it is usually as a footnote under

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11 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, London: Verso, 1997, p. 39.

12 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, orig. pub. 1949, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991, pp. 41–42.

13 I would like to thank my colleague Lubomír Spurný for drawing my attention to this quotation, and for giving me access to his article, "Exteritorialní Hába: několik poznámek k Adornově pojmu exterritoriale Musik", *Opus musicum* 6 (2001), pp. 11–16.

14 Examples that do not mention Janáček include history texts such as Roger Kamien's *Music:*

the heading "Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Music". Some composers, such as Dvořák, extraterritorial in at least some respects, have been "rehabilitated" by various Western critics, who have somehow made them honorary Western composers and thus worthy of inclusion in the canon.

In Janáček's own time, relatively little was known about psychological disorders. Although much has been made of the psychological import of Janáček's operas (and even of his programmatic instrumental works, such as his string quartets), there were no contemporary studies of Janáček's mental health, and there have so far been no serious analyses of the extant evidence that would support contentions about obsession. Imprecise references to obsession may obscure our perception of the man and his work, and maybe it is time to reject such assumptions. To label Janáček as "obsessed" needlessly marginalizes the composer, and misunderstands him, both in his own milieu and for our own time.

An Appreciation, 8th ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004; D. Kern Holoman's *Masterworks*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001; Joseph Kerman's *Listen*, 4th ed., New York: Worth, 2000; and Donald Jay Grout and Claude Palisca's *A History of Western Music*, 5th ed., New York: W. W. Norton, 1996, as well as anthologies and analysis texts such as Robert P. Morgan's *Anthology of Twentieth-Century Music*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1992; Charles L. Burkhart's *Anthology for Music Analysis*, 5th ed., Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1994; and Joel Lester's *Analytic Approaches to Twentieth-century Music*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1989.