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**Staging Brouček : the world premiere of Výlet pana Broučka do Měsíce by Leoš Janáček**

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Pamela Howard  
 Staging *Brouček*: The World  
 Premiere of *Výlet pana Broučka  
 do Měsíce* by Leoš Janáček

The World Premiere of *Výlet pana Broučka do Měsíce* (The Excursion of Mr Brouček to the Moon) by Leoš Janáček (1917). The first production to include the hitherto-unperformed Epilogue.

Original creation by Pamela Howard for *Národní divadlo v Brně* (National Theatre, Brno) 2010, as part of the *Janáček versus Expressionism* Festival.

### The Design Process

The gift and the challenge of being the first person to stage this version of the opera was at first daunting. On the first few readings, and after listening to existing recordings of only Act One (*Outside the Vikárka, Prague*) and Act Two (*On the Moon*) the work seemed incoherent and incomprehensible. The heightened language of the moon sequence appeared not to have any dramatic structure, or form; and, for a relatively short work, the stage directions (as conceived by Janáček) were cumbersome and threateningly expensive to realise. However, in opera it is usually the musical voice that is the strongest, and the most trustworthy; so within my limited competency I began to study the score and learn to play it from the piano reduction on my keyboards. Slowly, slowly I began deciphering the phrases. There is little or no ‘character development’ to support the dramatic structure, and the libretto is a confusion of many people’s unresolved ideas. At the same time, I began to sketch down some fleeting thoughts, and to listen nonstop to the CD recording when drawing. I simply had to get to know the music as well as I know

my own family. It had to get under my skin and to become part of me, otherwise I felt I would never be able to do it.

Gradually, the compositional themes began to make their voices heard, and as soon as I realised that the piece began with the end of one waltz, and ended with the beginning of another – the circular construction of the work began to be clear. A waltz is a circular dance. A Viennese Waltz is based on fast circular movements with couples dancing together, but holding themselves far apart. It is symbolic of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in its last heady days, and this provided the framework for the final production. I remembered a scene I had often watched in the years I have been visiting Prague, teaching and participating at the Prague Quadrennial, which until this year has always taken place at the Výstaviště. Outside, at the back of the great Julius Fučík Exhibition Hall, is a small open-air café; here, in all weathers, there is a small band and a circular stone dance floor. Elderly couples drink coffee and sometimes with all their shopping bags, heavy boots and outdoor coats, execute slow and stately waltzes looking into each other's eyes, as if in memory of times past. The waltz however, is only one motif running through the distinctive harmonies, sometimes obvious but often disguised or hidden, or just alluded to in a few bars or phrases. Overall, the music is lyrical, difficult to sing, but with clear 'voices' for each character – and this understanding was my beginning (as it often is with a complex new work), a way of getting to know each character as if they were my life-time friends, and a way of inventing a back story for each of them.

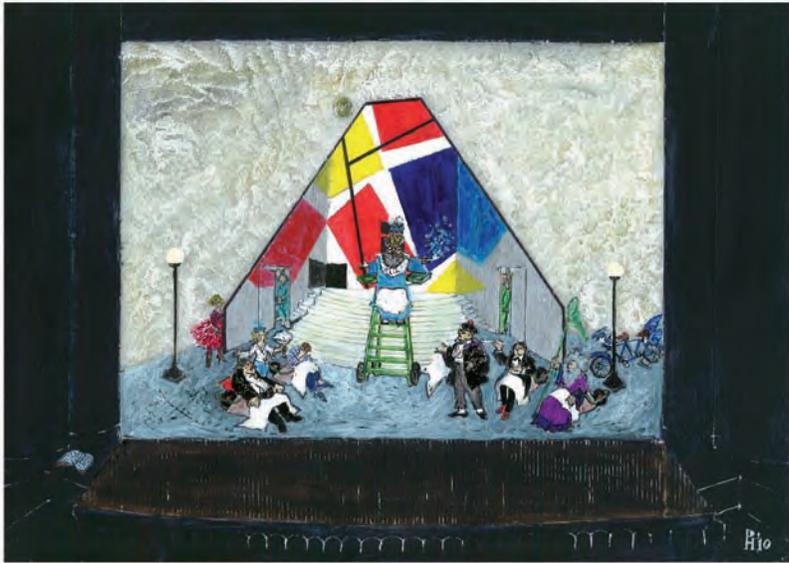
When beginning to discover the unknown, I think of myself as an explorer, and I have to make 'maps' in order to find my direction. My 'maps' often take the form of a Living Museum. Large sheets of thick brown paper line the walls of my studio, on which I start to stick visual references as I find them. These can be bits of colours, textures, photographs, sketches, reference drawings (usually not computer printouts from *Wikipedia*), things that strike my eye and are original research. Gradually each sheet takes on a life of its own and becomes a character. For example, I happened to be visiting my sister, who lives in Cambridge, a student city, and walking along one of the college streets I saw bicycles piled up against some railings outside a pub, one on top of the other. *Brouček* opens with the sound of students drinking in the Vikárka pub, culminating in a typical drinking song. I remembered a casual remark made by the Technical Director when showing me round the Janáček stage for the first time, when he morosely said: 'This stage is as big as a cycling stadium'; and then, in the window of a card shop in Cambridge, was a black and white photograph of a pile of cycles chained to some railings *circa* 1920; so I went in and bought it. Finally, I remembered in my studio library



Stage Design for Prologue: Chorus of Street Cleaners and Svatopluk Čech. ND Brno, 2010.



Stage Design for Act 1: Brouček in front of Vikárka. ND Brno, 2010.



Stage Design for Act 2: The Temple of the Lunar Arts. ND Brno, 2010.



Stage Design for the Epilogue: Prague the Next Day. ND Brno, 2010.

a large book of black and white photographs by Josef Sudek entitled *Prague Panoramique*, with double pages of Prague in winter, showing black lines of cycle tracks in the snow circling around Prague Castle. Suddenly, I had the opening image for the Opera! Returning home, I Googled ‘Czech bicycles’ and found the cycle museum; subsequently, I phoned them, speaking to a very helpful person who spoke good English. Here I discovered that in 1920, Czech cycles reigned supreme in the world, and were major exports under the trade name of *Es-Ka*. Later, the franchises for local manufacture were sold to Britain and other countries who re-named the brand. In Britain, a tandem cycle became popular. It was named Pegasus ‘The Flying Horse’ generating a popular Music Hall love song between a shy boy and a girl captive on the back of a tandem: ‘Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do [...]’. I found an old photo of a couple on a tandem, and realised that this could be the solution for Pegasus in the opera (which has to be able to take two people on its back). That’s how visual research works – one thing leads to another, but the mind has to be allowed to wander and to make connections, because in the end, all things do connect in the most surprising manner, if your mind is open, awake and in a state of ‘readiness to receive’. The important thing with contextual production research is to find a method of making it useful for the creator as well as for all participants in the production. A system is needed so that developing ideas can be seen and referred to by everyone. I always put up my design inspiration sheets in the rehearsal room, explain them briefly at an early rehearsal and then leave them. Each sheet is clearly titled with a subject or a dramatic character. I notice people casually looking at them and taking in their story.

The unstaged Epilogue of this opera is described by Janáček as taking place in Brouček’s three-storey house (the building he defiantly refers to at the start of the opera, when his tenant Mazal refuses to pay his rent). The stage directions ask for a bedroom adjoining the kitchen, a front door, a landing with stairs, and windows from the landing for Mazal and Málinka to look through. On a CD purporting to offer a selection of *Unknown Janáček* there was a recording of the Epilogue, and it was not quite fifteen minutes long. Since I wanted to play the whole opera in one uninterrupted sequence, with no intermission, knowing it would last not more than one hour and thirty minutes, this scene change seemed much too large and unduly heavy. It also implied that the scenic elements would have to be upstage of the singers (and so that old-fashioned convention of them having face front while singing to the back would come into place). Yet, I wanted to convey exactly Brouček’s bourgeois world – a place in which money should have given him the respect he craved. Suddenly, I thought: ‘If there is a cycle museum there must be a motor museum!’ and I found the *Škoda* Museum at Mladá Boleslav. Here,

I discovered that 1920 was the year in which the famous motor manufacturers Laurent and Klement were taken over by *Škoda*, and again their automotive products rapidly became a major export to the world. Then the curator told me a most interesting fact: she said that in 1920, owning a car was a status symbol. Often people had a car outside their homes, but there was no connection between owning a car and being able to drive it, as there is today. If the car was required to be driven, a driver was hired for the occasion. She said that often owners treated their car like an extension of their homes, hanging lace curtains over side windows in the rear, obtaining leather-buttoned interior upholstery (like sofas), and even having pictures and flowers inside. Often a curtain separated passengers in the back seat from the driver, being an early version of tinted glass. Perfect! The solution for the Epilogue came before me, and taking the precise measurements of a modest model, I began to imagine that Brouček was too drunk to get home from the Vikárka pub at midnight, and had in fact fallen asleep in his *Škoda* car, which was parked in the street between the pub and his imagined house. It is here that Markéta his housekeeper will find him the next morning, when the news gets around that he was discovered in a barrow 'like a vegetable marrow' before he crawled to safety in his mobile home. Using the *Škoda* car centre stage would also give all the requirements of the scenic action, but in a dimension where the singers could easily have contact with the Maestro without having to stand in a straight line across the front of the stage.

The Epilogue contains four pages of wonderful staccato orchestration to Brouček's encounter with a barrow, and I puzzled over how that object could be realised, and how it could be carried onstage without over-signalling to the spectators that it was an important staging device. It seemed that the barrow was just a very ordinary humble everyday object, and this was Brouček's last humiliation. I began to research Czech and Moravian wooden barrows, which are many and varied, but they did not seem to belong to the world of *Es-Ka* cycles and *Škoda* cars.

Then, as a diversion, I read the book by Ivan Klíma: *Láska a smetí* (Love and Garbage), which describes a writer who, unable to write, takes a job as a nocturnal street cleaner in Prague, and discovers a whole new world of people who own the streets by night. I loved the book, and I began to think about street cleaners. How would they look? What would their tools be? I remembered in my childhood in the industrial city of Birmingham in England that near to our house the city incinerator had large white letters ascending its side saying: 'Made in Czechoslovakia'; and I started to research street cleaning in 1920. I subsequently discovered pictures of female American street cleaners in uniforms looking very glum, apparently modelled on 'The Czech Method'. Could it be that as well as exporting bicycles



Costume Designs for Čišniček (Boy Waiter) and Zázračné dítě (Child Prodigy). ND Brno, 2010.



Costume Designs for Wurfl and Čaroskvoucí. ND Brno, 2010.



Costumes Designs for *Málinka* and *Etherea*. ND Brno, 2010.

and cars, the Czechoslovakians were also exporting street cleaning? Quite quickly, I found photographs of Brno's organised street cleaning processes, incinerators, early machines, and the distinctive yet practical uniforms of street cleaners in the national colours of the First Czechoslovakian Republic. Of course the workers had modern steel wheelbarrows (an early equivalent of the wheelie bins of today) and city restaurants put their rubbish into a barrow in order to have it collected and emptied at night by the silent women's army of street cleaners. Thus such a barrow would have been commonplace in the city landscape, and this became the substitute for the front curtain, with a line of street cleaners waiting for the signal (the start of the overture) to begin to clear away the days effluence from the sausage shops at the heart of this opera.

The place of the Pork Sausage in the heart of the gastro-culture of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is the serious theme of *Mr Brouček's Excursion*. In Act 1, the little waiter (Čišnič) is running around looking for Brouček to give him the sausages he ordered, in Act 2 (*On the Moon*) there is a vegetarian society from which Brouček is expelled when he produces a string of sausages from his pocket; in the *Sausage Epilogue*, Brouček is finally re-united with his plate of sausages. Some years ago, while wandering around Prague, I noticed the fascinating anthropomorphic pigs that are to be found outside delicatessens and sausage shops, and I sketched them.

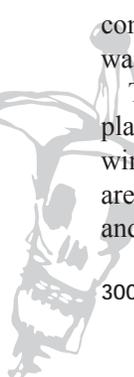
Some are dressed as chefs, some as cooks, some as housewives – I even found a ballet-dancer pig carrying a plate of sausages. Then I read that it was the custom for sausage shops to be situated next to pubs, and for the waiters to be common to both establishments serving beer and sausages – exactly as Janáček describes. I found my early sketches of these decorations, and that led me to discover eighteenth-century illustrations of anthropomorphic animals, which were popular prints of that time. I found families of cats, rabbits and dogs, but pigs were always represented as cooks, or butchers, or farmers selling, so to speak, themselves as a sausage. I decided the *Vikárka* should be symbolised by a nineteenth-century enamelled shop sign showing a pig carrying a plate of sausages, and that led to substituting St Vitus Cathedral as it is described by Janáček for an emblematic Madonna and Child: the Pig and the Madonna confronting each other.

At the end of Act Two, when Brouček returns to Earth from the Moon, the character of Svatopluk Čech appears from the pub, in brief conversation with Wurfl, who is obliged to sing his name several times, as otherwise the spectators would have no idea of the identity of this man, whom they have never before seen. It's a very clumsy device. Dramatic writing was not Janáček's forte, so it is little wonder he went through so many librettists during the long and protracted labour of writing this opera. Taking my cue from Ivan Klíma, I thought that Svatopluk Čech could be shown right in the front of the stage before the spectators enter the auditorium. He would be writing his book and looking out at the street cleaners of Prague, waiting to begin their night's work. Then, the Dramaturg and the Conductor of the production suggested that Čech could double as Obláčňý, the High Priest of Poetry on the Moon, thus ensuring we could get a first class singer for what would be a really good part.

This was a tremendously good idea, and it enabled Čech to come back in the Epilogue as an unseen figure – a 'transparent' figure, wandering through his own story and, joining in the great waltz at the end, dancing with the other 'silent' character (a little orphan street girl who also wanders through the opera) describing the extremes of age and status that exist in the world so familiar to Brouček.

When working on a subject, I am always amazed at how everything starts to come together before my eyes. It's almost as though it is all already there, just waiting to be uncovered.

The dramatic timescale of the opera, including the unstaged Epilogue, takes place over twelve hours – from midnight to the following noon. It begins on a cold winter's night with deep snow in Prague outside the *Vikárka* pub where students are drinking. The spectators see Brouček staggering out of the *Vikárka* shouting and railing against the injustices of modern life, taxes, bad tenants, and Modernism.



Brouček falls into a drunken stupor, and then goes to the Moon. It became clear to me that dramatically and musically he did not really go to the Moon, but that we, the spectators would have to enter his drunken dream and go with him to the Moon (which is still recognisably Prague but somehow opposite to Prague). Brouček thinks he recognises everyone on the Moon, yet they are somehow different. He thinks he will find order, but only finds further confusion. The Janáček Theatre stage at *Národní divadlo Brno* (National Theatre, Brno) possesses extremely sophisticated technology and, for a short time, I flirted with different configurations, until I thought that the Moon must be recognisably the Vikárka in another guise, and I simply turned the structure round manually as though the transformation was being effected by the people of Prague.

The challenge was to keep the shape of the Vikárka, but to make it as opposite to Prague and as dream-like as possible. I looked at the paintings of the Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, as well as at Cubist and Modernist artists – trying to imagine what would make Brouček astonished. Then, by a miracle, the Tate Modern Gallery in London mounted a major exhibition of the work of Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931): *Van Doesburg and the International Avant-garde*. Van Doesburg was known as the *Cosmic Occultist*; and there, in the stark Modernism of his work, it all was: flat plain red, yellow and blue rectangles and squares bisected by strong black diagonal lines, the absolute antithesis of *The Bay of Naples at Sunset* or *The Reclining Venus*, the paintings favoured by Brouček, and seen to be hanging in his bedroom, as described in the libretto.

Janáček imagines the Moon as a place of industry presided over by the Grand Master Čarouskvoucí, who admits he is not an artist himself, but who ‘knows what he likes’. He commands the ‘wings’ of music, poetry, and art, from a central position on high. This suggested to me that he was like an umpire in a tennis match who can see over the whole of his universe. Then, as the music became more and more familiar, and the speech seemed less odd, the chorus and principals led by *Zázračné dítě* (the Miraculous Child) sing the Patriotic Hymn ‘*Sláva! Sláva!*’ and it seemed that the Temple of the Lunar Arts was organised in very similar fashion to a Masonic Temple, with the drunken incoherent Sacristan as the mad Great Orator Lunobar and the prose writer Svatopluk Čech as the fanatical Demon of Poetry. As I was contemplating this in my studio in England, a fellow artist and neighbour brought me a book of the engravings of the French artist J. J. Grandville (1803-1847) entitled: *Un Autre Monde* (Another World). This volume (first published in 1844) describes life on the Moon as a parallel to the world of France. Sometimes called the father of Surrealism, Grandville was labelled as a caricaturist, but his astute vision is inspirational and has featured on the album covers of rock bands such as



Costume Designs for the Chorus of Students. Act 1. ND Brno, 2010.



Costume Designs for the Chorus of Musicians. Act 2. ND Brno, 2010.



Costume Designs for the Chorus of Painters and Sculptors. Act 2. ND Brno, 2010.



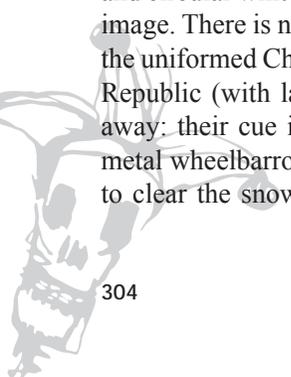
Costume Designs for the Chorus of The Poets' Circle. Act 2. ND Brno, 2010.

Queen. The notion of a parallel universe has resonances with Masonic orders, and temples that have their own private regulations and rituals. In turn, this also related to the Cosmic Occultist art works of van Doesberg. Such serendipitous collision is typical of the coincidences and elisions that creative contextual research can bring to support a production, and the ways in which others join the collective aim.

Exploring the context is, however, only the beginning of the adventure. Performers have to bring the ideas of directors and designers to life, musically and dramatically, and every aspect has seamlessly to synthesise and be intelligible to the spectator who is receiving all of this information only once. There are no second chances to explain, and even a well-written programme note is no substitute for the actual participatory experience of an audience member in the opera house. Clarity and truth are the keynotes from which I work, and are the main notes I continually give to performers. In this production, I asked them from the beginning not to play comic or caricatured people, believing that the comedy comes from the fact that the characters in the opera take themselves so seriously that we cannot help but laugh at them. Using the same dramatic language, all of the scenic elements had to be real and not ‘cardboard cutouts’, or representations of reality. This was initially a difficult concept for the workshops; although, by the end, it seemed totally obvious. My single aim was to take the audience into Brouček’s head so that they could enter his drunken dream and go to the Moon with him, knowing it was not a real excursion but just an out-of-body experience. To do this, it was essential to establish Prague on a cold snowy December night, through the material reality of well-chosen and well-placed objects: a *Škoda* Car, *Es-Ka* cycles, galvanised rubbish barrows, street sweeping brushes, as well as in performances through which spectators would first meet the dramatic characters.

### **The Progressive Experience of the Audience**

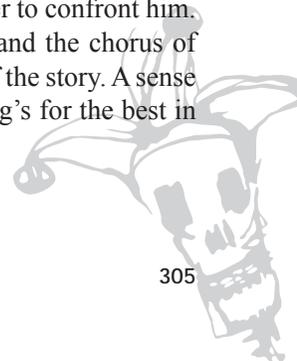
As the audience enter the theatre, they see on one side of the stage, in a spotlight, the figure of Svatopluk Čech in his armchair writing his book. His costume, chair, and circular white rug are faithful reproductions of the well-known popular graphic image. There is no front curtain. Across the front of the stage, facing the spectators, the uniformed Chorus of Street Cleaners, dressed in the national colours of the First Republic (with large red rubber gloves), wait for the signal to clear the rubbish away: their cue is the start of Janáček’s music. Their armoury is a collection of metal wheelbarrows filled with swill from restaurants, and large sweeping brushes to clear the snow. These are the night soldiers of the streets. From the *Vikárka*,



sounds of life waft out as students drink, the scene is only illuminated by the Moon. As the orchestra starts, the Chorus clears the stage, and sweeps the snow. Gradually, the whole stage is revealed. An early *Škoda* car (an MB001) is parked to the side of the *Vikárka* and emptied wheelbarrows are placed close by to form the low wall along which Brouček staggers. Cycle tracks can be seen in the snow. The music at this point suggests a waltz and suddenly *Málinka*, obviously furious, followed by a puzzled *Mazal* emerges from the *Vikárka*. They are not happy. Brouček emerges from the *Vikárka*, drunk, despondent and angry. *Svatopluk Čech* has by now gone, but his chair and book remain throughout. Landlord *Wurfl* calls ‘Time!’ and the students emerge and get ready to depart on their bicycles. However, they torment Brouček like bees ready to sting. They circle around and around him until he falls to the floor. His head and even the *Vikárka* start spinning until he falls into a drunken slumber.

From this point onwards, spectators share Brouček’s drunken dream (in which he imagines he goes to the Moon). Everything on the Moon is the opposite of Prague. Prague is monochrome – The Moon is highly coloured. In Prague it is winter – on the Moon it is a hot summer’s day; the sun is shining. The reverse side of the *Vikárka* becomes the Temple of the Lunar Arts presided over by *Čaroskvoucí*, who very closely resembles Mr *Wurfl*. In fact, Brouček thinks he recognises everyone he knows in Prague, but they have all become strangers to him. As is the manner of dreams, things are both familiar and bizarre.

The Chorus of Street Cleaners have become the eccentric *Družky* (Companions); the Students have transformed into the Chorus of Artists. The Temple is a shrine to the Modern Art Movement. Brouček discovers that everyone present is a vegetarian – and he begins to think the Moon is no better than life in Prague. His expulsion from the Moon (undertaken as a result of his undeniably carnivorous identity) is in fact his awakening. We see the *Vikárka* pub from a different angle to that of the show’s beginning. It is cold, but sunny – the middle of the next day. Evidently, Brouček was too drunk to get home last night; he was found in one of the wheelbarrows, and has just managed to crawl into the back seat of his parked car in order to fall into a heavy sleep. His Housekeeper and Maid are both shocked and outraged when they discover him. *Málinka* and *Mazal* walk towards his house in order to confront him. They also find him in his car. In the background, the students and the chorus of women come to drink coffee and dance, echoing the beginning of the story. A sense of acceptance of the reality of life prevails. After all: ‘Everything’s for the best in the best of all possible worlds [...]’.





Costume Designs for the People of Prague. Epilogue. ND Brno, 2010.



Costume Design for the Chorus of Street Cleaners. Prologue. ND Brno, 2010.



Costume Designs for Harfoboj and Duhoslav. Act 2. ND Brno, 2010.



Costume Design for the Heavenly Chorus (*Družky*). Act 2. ND Brno, 2010.

## Conclusion

This rich and seemingly complex stage picture is in reality very simple: one trucked piece on castors (that could be turned manually by stage technicians) became the Vikárka whose reverse side was the Temple of the Lunar Arts. For the Epilogue, the Vikárka set-piece was seen again from another angle. The detailed stagings upon which the production was predicated were created in collaboration with the wonderful choreographer Ladislava Košíková, and lit by Daniel Tesař (both of whom contributed hugely to the entire production). This production was never merely an exercise in stage pictures, although it was part of a festival somewhat oddly named ‘Janáček *versus* Expressionism’.

To recapitulate: in this project, the music was always my guiding force; and the idea of the waltz – a circular dance – that begins and ends the opera gave a geometric structure to the final realisation of its staging. Even with judiciously placed monitors (for technical use and unseen by spectators) singers have to be able to see the Maestro; and, despite the huge stage space, they inevitably gravitate towards singing in a straight line at the front. Building the Vikárka six steps high helped enormously to house the large chorus downstage of the principals and yet in a manner in which they could still be seen – and it also gave a focal point for the action. The two sides of the stage were connected by the Vikárka/Temple of the Lunar Arts and allowed great use of large circular movements, appropriate for cyclists and equally for a large chorus of men and women. Out of initial complexity came simplicity, and the very best comments came from spectators who said: ‘I felt as though I was in Brouček’s dream myself’. For that modest deception was entirely the purpose!

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