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JONATHAN G. SECORA PEARL

A MUSICAL JOURNEY THROUGH LANGUAGE

Janáček's relationship with speech melodies is well-documented in the latter years of his life, when his confidence had grown, and his reputation as a composer had finally spread beyond the confines of the Brno vicinity. However, such wider recognition did not arrive until he was already 60 years old. We have evidence of recorded *napěvky*, in Janáček's terminology, from at least 1897, when the composer was already in his forties.¹ But what of his earlier experience? What drove the fiery young musician in the direction he chose? What were his early and abiding interests in language and psychology that may have led to these later activities? What was their influence on his development, and what legacy has he left that might have greater significance beyond the world of musical performance?

We know that Janáček was driven from an early age in his music. At the age of 11, he was sent to Brno to be a choir boy and to study music. Thus began his formal training. It was also at that time, under the tutelage of Pavel Křížkovský at the monastery in Brno, that he must first have been influenced by the tradition of the National Revivalists, whose influence still held sway. His love for the Czech language, whether or not this had already taken root during his childhood, was certain to increase during his youth. He was taught German, however, in his German-language secondary school in Brno. The teasing and harassment he received, as a Czech boy attending a German-language school, served perhaps to strengthen these feelings.

From 1869, he attended the Brno Imperial and Royal Teachers' Training Institute, and passed his examinations there in 1872. He was particularly interested in the psychology lectures given at the Institute:² this is the first sign we have of his broader interests, which grew into a desire to view music in the larger frame of humanistic studies. By 1874, when he completed his training at the institute, he had come to favour the idea of becoming a musician rather than a teacher.

¹ The question of the starting date of Janáček's concept of speech melody is authoritatively summarized in John Tyrrell, *Janáček: Years of a Life*, vol. 1, London: Faber, 2006, pp. 479–80, where it is concluded that the best candidate is summer 1897.

² Mirka Zemanová, *Janáček: A Composer's Life*, London: John Murray, 2002, p. 21. See also John Tyrrell, *Janáček*, p. 64.

Thus, with the encouragement of Křížkovský and Emilian Schulz, the director of the Institute and his future father-in-law, he set off to continue his training at the Prague Organ School.

It was also in this year, 1874, that Wilhelm Wundt was to publish his influential *Physiologische Psychologie*, which would later be extensively studied by Janáček.³ Janáček's copy of the 1908 edition of this work, housed at the Moravian Museum, is covered throughout with underlinings, translations of terms, and assenting or dissenting opinions scrawled in the margins. Hardly a page goes by where his pencil was inactive.

One year later, in 1875, he had completed his studies in Prague, and returned once again to Brno, where he soon took over as choirmaster of the Brno Beseda, and eventually also took a post at the Teachers' Training Institute. After three years of work in Brno, and having finally received full accreditation as a teacher, Janáček decided his calling was to become a composer, which meant a return once again to being a student. In 1879, he enrolled at the Conservatory in Leipzig, the city where Wilhelm Wundt had just four years before become a professor. It was also in 1879 that Wundt established his soon-to-be-famous laboratory for experimental psychology. Unfortunately, I have no evidence linking Janáček's decision with Wundt's presence in Leipzig; but, according to a contemporary account, the academic environment in Leipzig in those days was such that lectures by noteworthy professors were often casually attended by a variety of students, often led only by curiosity:

[I]n these delightful years, there was almost no limit to the field over which a curious student ... might roam. He could indulge his most desultory intellectual inclinations, taste at any spring, and touch any topic in the most superficial way in his effort to orient himself. ... [T]here were others besides myself who yielded to the charm of spending much of each day in the lecture rooms.⁴

Although I have been unable to determine whether Janáček attended any of the professor's lectures, or indeed whether he even knew of Wundt's presence at the university, Wundt's later influence on him is clear. At the founding of the Brno Conservatory, Janáček was to remark:

Only an experimental field is the source of true learning. Everything must be scientifically prepared, then narrowed and separated. Thus will you get grain, without chaff. From the grain the seed germinates in your creative mind. You may build yourself a Temple of Creation, and lose yourself in it, but still discipline your inspiration, so that it doesn't become diffused. By experimental musical psychology you will reap a richer harvest.⁵

³ Wilhelm Wundt, *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie [...] Mit [...] Holzschnitten*, Leipzig, 1873–4.

⁴ Granville Stanley Hall, *Founder of Modern Psychology*. (Eduard Zeller, Rudolph Hermann Lotze, Gustav Theodor Fechner, Eduard von Hartmann, Hermann L. F. von Helmholtz, Wilhelm Wundt), New York & London: D. Appleton, 1912, p. vi.

⁵ Vilém and Margaret Tausky, ed. and trans., *Janáček: Leaves from his Life*, London: Kahn & Averill, 1982, p. 47.

It would be an irony of history if mere coincidence found Janáček at the centre of the founding in Leipzig of scientific psychology, all the while unaware of these events. Given the extensive schedule he undertook to keep, it would be an understandable, though unfortunate, oversight.

In a letter from Leipzig to his fiancée shortly after arriving, he outlines his schedule, comprising nine courses, and occupying more than 25 hours in class. Surely he could be forgiven if he had found little time for extracurricular events. Yet, given Janáček's propensity for overwork, it would not be unthinkable. While attending the Organ School in Prague during the years 1874 and 1875, excelling in his courses, and compressing three years into two, he nonetheless found time for an intensive self-led course in contemporary philosophy and aesthetics, devouring first Josef Durdík's *Všeobecná estetika*, and next Robert Zimmermann's *Allgemeine Aesthetik* and *Geschichte der Aesthetik*.⁶ And as Alena Němcová points out in her contribution to this volume, while his finances may have constrained his choice of venue, the fullness of his schedule did not unduly inhibit his attendance at concerts during his Prague or Leipzig years.⁷

We do know that he was restless and dissatisfied in Leipzig, and that he decided to transfer his studies to Vienna. At the end of February 1880, he left Leipzig, beginning his studies in Vienna in April of that year. But he was to remain there only two months, before returning once again to his adopted home of Brno. The early 1880s in Janáček's life were full of personal triumphs and failures; it was probably not before 1884, however, that we have evidence of Janáček's interest in folk song and culture.⁸ In 1886 and 1887 he produced his first articles on the subject. He started coming into frequent contact with the prominent Moravian folklorist and dialectologist, František Bartoš, probably around 1885, and Bartoš invited him to assist him as musical expert on his ethnographic excursions.

Especially through these collaborations, which lasted until Bartoš's death in 1906, Janáček gained a broader interest in the interaction of music and language, and began systematic observations of the musical aspects of folk speech. What he seems to have lighted upon was the reality that while music can exist without words, words cannot be spoken without melodic and rhythmic implications.⁹ Spoken language exists in all known human cultures, and it is generally agreed that language proper is a uniquely human attribute. Yet in all this, what is often

⁶ Michael Beckerman, "Janáček and the Herbartians", *The Musical Quarterly*, 69/3 (Summer, 1983), pp. 392–3; and his *Janáček as Theorist*, Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon, 1994, pp. 20–21.

⁷ Cf. Zemanová, *Janáček*, pp. 26–7, 35–6.

⁸ See Tyrrell, *Janáček*, pp. 339–42, for the latest assessment of this subject; of older literature, also Jiří Vysloužil, ed., *Leoš Janáček o lidové písni a lidové hudbě*, Prague: Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění, 1955.

⁹ Cf. Mary Louise Serafine, Robert G. Crowder and Bruno H. Repp, "Integration of Melody and Text in Memory for Songs", *Cognition*, 16 (1984), p. 301.

lost is that language is not unique in this status. As Dean Falk once put it: “What has been forgotten [...] is that no chimpanzee has ever played the violin.”¹⁰

Along with some other cultural phenomena, music shares with language the qualities of ubiquity and humanity. But, unlike the visual and plastic arts, for example, music and language have so much in common that it is often difficult to tease them apart. Both principally involve the auditory domain, they are sounds, and in their most fundamental form, they are vocal sounds. While both have enjoyed the benefits of durability that literacy brings, their basic forms do not require writing. Along with the benefits that writing provides us however are difficulties as well. For one we are often deceived into mistaking writing for the objects themselves.

Unfortunately, this is not a bygone phenomenon. A recent article regarding the evolution of language and human intelligence, by the prominent American psychologist and primatologist David Premack, will serve as an example. He writes:

Humans have acquired six symbol systems: two that evolved – the genetic code and spoken language – and four that we invented: written language, Arabic numerals, music notation, and labanotation (a system for coding choreography).¹¹

He describes the uniqueness of human language syntax, and gives the following sentence as an example:

“If Jack does not turn up the thermostat in his house this winter, then Madge and I are not coming over.”¹²

The problems are principally two: First, he relegates music, along with dance and Arabic numerals, to an existence only in notation, as if what were notated in this way ceased to exist independently of its written form. Further, the example he gives, ostensibly of “spoken language”, has all the earmarks of writing, and in this written form, lacks the richness of living spoken language.

It was this capturing of living speech that most fascinated Janáček. Unfortunately, as Premack’s article illustrates, we are still in desperate need today of appropriate means to record these events. For it is clear that the standard forms of notation, whether musical or linguistic, are lacking in their ability to present a full picture of the vibrancy we experience in life. This is not so much a failing, as merely a reflection of the nature of transcription. The expression “something is lost in translation” applies to all sorts of notation and transcription equally well.

Indeed, it may apply to these cases even more strongly, because translations between languages are still modifications in kind, from speech to speech or from

¹⁰ Dean Falk, *Primate Diversity*, New York: Norton, 2000.

¹¹ David Premack, “Is Language the Key to Human Intelligence?”, *Science*, 16 January 2004, p. 318.

¹² *Ibid.*

writing to writing. However, to encode in writing what are in essence auditory phenomena, whether linguistic or musical, is a reduction like that which takes place when a three-dimensional object is projected on to a two-dimensional surface. It is a projection like that in the cave of Plato's *Republic*, in which the real world loses not only its depth but also its colour. Writing is a mere impoverished snapshot of what it represents.

Whether or not Janáček intended or believed it to be more, his encoding of speech melodies was just this sort of reduction, a shorthand that could be used to remind him of the experience he had had. In fact, we find in his transcriptions not complete descriptions, but rather anecdotes, that might have been (by another sort of individual) merely written as words. For the sensitive ears of Janáček the dramatist, however, always seeking a means to capture and bottle up the passions of life, it would be unthinkable not to record some glimmer of the intonation and rhythm of the speech. They remind us of theatrical scenes or vignettes, with words, intonational contours, often even stage directions of a sort, describing the circumstance or the attitudes of the players.

Necessarily entwined with the question of speech melody are matters of notation and interpretation. We begin with the real-world experience, an utterance in speech. This is perceived by a listener, then recorded in musical notes. Finally, if we are to consider them as stage directions (or as a musical score) the final step would be to re-transfer these notes into sound. The reality is that something is necessarily lost at each turn, a fact of which we must consciously be aware if we are not to be deceived into too literal an approach.

In music we are presented with a score which represents discrete events of definite length and pitch. But this is in a sense an illusion. The absoluteness of these notes is only apparent on the page, just as the discreteness of words is only apparent in written form. Through experience we come to divide the sound stream into meaningful units; to put it simply, convention allows us to divide linguistic streams into words, and musical streams into notes. These are the units that we are explicitly taught to set on paper.

But this is far from the entire story. There is more to language than words and syntax, just as there is more to music than pitches and durations. In the human performance of music or language we expect something more than mere note-by-note perfection or precision of pronunciation. Something living, some passion, must also be expressed. It is clear from Janáček's transcriptions of speech, and further from his writings about them, that it was just this passion that he sought to distil.