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GEOFFREY CHEW

JENŮFA AS A SOCIAL DOCUMENT

The reception of Janáček as a composer of *Literaturopern* is curiously complex. It depends above all on the treatment given to the composer in Carl Dahlhaus's seminal collection of essays, *Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper*, first published as a collection in 1983 (the individual essays appeared earlier).¹ And Dahlhaus's use of Janáček is entirely characteristic of the author's method, teasing the reader by taking problematic aspects of the composer's practice to make witty, paradoxical points. In this way he relates *Literaturoper* to traditional nineteenth-century opera and to Wagnerian music drama on the one hand and to twentieth-century musical modernism on the other – while stressing its oddities. So he sees *From the House of the Dead* as an example of fragmentation rather than coherence, and *Jenůfa* as a piece drawing on an anachronistic model, the bourgeois tragedy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rather than contemporary Realism as most Czech commentators have seen it. In *Jenůfa*, he says, “the structure of the bourgeois tragedy is still retained through its transplantation into a peripheral peasant setting: *Jenůfa* is, one might say, Hebbel's *Maria Magdalene* as an opera”.

This becomes for Dahlhaus a means of simultaneously agreeing and disagreeing with the famous footnote of Theodor Adorno in his *Philosophy of Modern Music*. Adorno wrote of the “exterritorial, yet in its consistency magnificent, art of Janáček”, saying that “in contrast to the manifestations of blood-and-soil ideology [*Blut und Boden*, a party-line tenet of National Socialism], true exterritorial music—whose material, even if familiar as such, is quite differently organized from that of the Occident—has a power of estrangement that affiliates it to the avant-garde and not to nationalistic reaction.”² The aspects of Janáček's music which Dahlhaus describes support Adorno's verdict – yet for Dahlhaus, this not only redeems Janáček for the avant-garde but puts him, and his *Literaturopern*, firmly back into the central canonic territory of music history itself. (And, as Erik

¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper: Aufsätze zur neueren Operngeschichte*, Munich and Salzburg: Katzschler, 1983.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1958, chapter “Schoenberg and Progress”, n. 4.

Levi's contribution to this volume demonstrates, the National Socialists themselves were not quite as alienated by *Jenůfa* as Adorno evidently thought they ought to have been.)

Canon-formation is not my central concern here, though; I would rather take another aspect of Dahlhaus's reception of Janáček, the literary model the composer took for his *Literaturopern*, as a point of departure in order better to understand the social ideology represented by his operas. And my focus will be on *Jenůfa*, compared by Dahlhaus with the bourgeois tragedy of Friedrich Hebbel.

Hebbel's *Maria Magdalene*, the play Dahlhaus quotes, dates from 1843. It has clear similarities with *Jenůfa* and indeed also with *Káťa Kabanová*. The heroine, a young girl from a repressively confined pious family, is pregnant by her betrothed, who rejects her after her brother is accused (falsely, it later turns out) of theft, and imprisoned. Even after her brother is exonerated and released from prison, she finds no freedom; her brother is challenged to a duel on her account, dies in consequence, and she too dies, like Ophelia or *Káťa*, by drowning herself in a river. The central role here of an implacable Fate (which Hebbel develops in his foreword as a mark of tragedy in general and the bourgeois tragedy in particular) represents a significant link with the tradition to which *Jenůfa* belongs, and also to that of Ostrovsky's *Storm*, the nineteenth-century Russian play from which *Káťa Kabanová* was taken. All three pieces represent serious social criticism of the contemporary societies in which they are respectively based, even if *Jenůfa* presents such criticism in terms of an anachronistic model. Indeed one could imagine that if *Maria Magdalene* had been a Russian or Czech play rather than a German one, Janáček might have been attracted to the idea of setting it as an opera.

All the same, there are also important differences between *Jenůfa* and Hebbel's play, which must complicate any interpretation of the opera based on Dahlhaus's notion of a *Literaturoper*. To understand this, it may be necessary to return to the topic of Naturalism – rather than Realism – which has dogged criticism of Janáček since early in his career. This provides another strand in the intertexts to *Jenůfa*, distinct from Hebbel's notion of tragedy yet obviously akin to it in some ways.

As is well-known, Janáček was accused of Naturalism in the early years of the twentieth century by Zdeněk Nejedlý. In his well-known criticism of *Jenůfa*, Nejedlý casts Janáček as an opponent of Smetana, an upholder of primitivism against culture, and a representative of reactionary Moravian taste against progressive Bohemian taste, and attacks *Jenůfa* for its Naturalism. He writes: "Today we term this concept *Naturalistic*, because it proceeds from the principle that one should simply introduce real, natural elements, such as life provides, into art, and that the work of art itself becomes, by this means, natural and true – the ancient error of all Naturalism, which does not take into account the importance of active artistic creation, which alone brings to life all dead, merely natural material."³

³ Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Leoše Janáčka Její pastorkyňa*, Hudební knihovna časopisu "Smetana", 22, Prague: Melantrich, 1916.

In the case of earlier composers, this material had been actual folk songs; in Janáček's case, according to Nejedlý, it is the famous "speech-melodies" that fulfil the function of the "real, natural elements" that are the stock-in-trade of the Naturalist; indeed he seems to see no more in Naturalism than its use of supposedly ready-made folk material of one form or another.

He argues that Gabriela Preissová, the dramatist from whom Janáček drew his libretto, had worked under the stimulus of literary Naturalism and had chosen the Slovak setting for her dramas as a mere pretext for powerful, brutal narratives. He doubts, accordingly, that the work can justly be called a Moravian drama. Even its dialect is unauthentic as a representation of Moravian speech. And he compares Janáček's *Jenůfa* unfavourably with Foerster's *Eva*, which is also an adaptation of a Preissová drama, *Gazdina roba*. Foerster, says Nejedlý, chose the better of the two dramas, since *Eva*'s love for her child allows the plot to be constructed around moral values; in *Jenůfa*, on the other hand, the *Kostelnička* is nothing but a murderess without mercy. And Janáček's decision to set his opera largely in Preissová's prose (rather than to recast the text in verse in the manner of Foerster's *Eva*) is once again evidence for Nejedlý of Janáček's fatal Naturalism.

To evaluate these claims and charges, we shall first need to look a little more closely at the phenomenon of literary Naturalism, defining it, and situating Preissová – and then Janáček – in relation to it. The term itself was invented in 1858 by Hippolyte Taine, in a famous essay on Balzac, where he outlined a philosophical basis for Naturalism that was to influence all later Naturalist writers, including Zola as well as German and Czech writers of the 1880s, 1890s and 1900s such as Gerhart Hauptmann, Gabriela Preissová and Anna Maria Tilschová (in her early works).⁴ Taine here suggests that a key to the work of Balzac, as a Naturalist writer, lies in the fact that he was a natural scientist. Such a writer will adopt the attitude of a scientist in literature too, selecting his characters according to the way in which they represent the genius of a place and time, and then conducting a laboratory experiment on them by altering the conditions of their existence, for instance, by subjecting them to some quite exceptional stress, observing their reactions, and on this basis arriving at conclusions about their particular qualities. Morality, in such a conception, must be quite secondary or indeed irrelevant. The characters in a Naturalistic work are always on the edge of an abyss of madness or destruction, into which they are hurled, or from which they are saved, by the forces of Darwinian natural selection; the action is devised so as to see this natural selection at work.

It is this, rather than a revised notion of tragedy as in Hebbel's case, which drives the drama, and Naturalism penetrated short stories, novels and drama in Czech writing from the 1880s onwards. The philosophical background to Czech Naturalism can be seen particularly clearly in Anna Maria Tilschová's *Na ho-*

⁴ Hippolyte Taine, "Étude sur Balzac", republished in *Nouveaux essais de critique et d'histoire*, Paris: Hachette, 1865, pp. 63-170.

rach of 1904 (she became an author of a rather different kind in the works of her later years, those that were approved by the Communist authorities). Tilschová and her husband spent a couple of summers at a village in the *českomoravská vysočina*, the uplands between Bohemia and Moravia, in the company of house-party guests who included the historian Jaroslav Goll: they spent their evenings discussing philosophical and historical issues, particularly Goll's theories about the nature of Czech village society and the survival in it of archaic patterns of behaviour. There is, of course, no mention of the name of Goll or of Tilschová's own presence in the book; yet the stories are set, obviously enough, in that village, and they also subtly incorporate aspects of Goll's ideas – from a woman's point of view. They concern village characters whose scope of action is circumscribed by their poverty, their social hierarchy, including copious possibilities for public shame, their traditional attitudes and their distinctive, unconventional, and certainly un-Catholic, morality. They are placed within stressful situations, for example, unexpected storms and flooding, or the discovery of the dead body of a girl, which force them into courses of action (including, by the way, infanticide and elaborate, doomed attempts at covering up the truth and preventing scandal) that can be understood, it is implied, only in terms of the genius of the place and time.

These stories represent a distinctive version of the Czech Naturalism that can be found in numerous dramas and novels of the early twentieth century, most notably including the drama *Maryša* (1894) by the brothers Mrštík – another subject of symphonic poem and opera, considered for setting by Janáček. But the first of the series, the earliest in Czech literature to reject Romantic and Neo-classic models, were the two celebrated dramas of Gabriela Preissová, *Gazdina roba* (1890) and *Její pastorkyňa* (1891). Preissová had lived in Hodonín, a border town between Moravia and Slovakia, and both these dramas are set in Slovakia or Moravian Slovakia. Both of them use their village settings as a means of exploring peasant society and mentality, and adopt the strategy I have already mentioned as being typical, placing the central characters in extreme circumstances that challenge conventional morality and reveal its inadequacy. And it is typical that both of them, like Tilschová's stories among a number of other Naturalist works, are centrally concerned with women's issues. *Gazdina roba* deals with the problems of social class and divorce: Eva, a poor but forceful peasant girl, is courted by Mánek, son of a rich farmer, but rejects him because she has been insulted by his mother, and marries a cripple instead. Their baby daughter dies, and Eva feels herself trapped in a loveless marriage; when Mánek, now also married, makes advances to her again, she agrees to go to Austria with him and live with him as his mistress, anticipating (since the local notary has been divorced and remarried) that she too will ultimately be able to marry him. It turns out that her social status precludes this, however, and suicide is the only option left to her. Similarly, *Její pastorkyňa* deals with the problems of pregnancy outside wedlock and infanticide: intolerable pressure is placed upon the two central characters, the Kostelníčka and Jenůfa, when Jenůfa turns out to be pregnant with Števa's child,

and the only option apparently open to the Kostelnička is to kill the infant and conceal the corpse.

However, Preissová's Naturalism in these two dramas is itself not quite without its problems. The consistent imbalance between her female and male characters, which was perhaps one of the reasons for the appeal of *Její pastorkyňa* to Janáček, means that her plots are a gift to an operatic composer – but means equally that the forces of natural selection work unequally on the characters within the plots, and the essential dynamic of Naturalism is thus disturbed in them. Eva's downfall is not due purely to the forces at work in her milieu, but also to the obvious weakness of the character of Mánek, who might have altered the outcome if he had been more resolute. Equally, and for the same reason, the downfall of the Kostelnička is not due purely to the social forces at work in *her* milieu, but also to the obvious weakness and stupidity of Števa, who might have altered the outcome if he had agreed to marry a pregnant and disfigured Jenůfa. Much Czech writing of this period, including Preissová's, is indeed feminist in its own way; yet it seems forced to argue that she is being so schematic in her construction of dramas as to gender the differences in her characters consistently in this way. And she seems not to have had a fixed view of the ideal balance between the characters in *Její pastorkyňa* in any case, if one takes into account her reworking of the drama as a novel in 1929, where we are treated, soap-opera-like, to the move of Jenůfa and Laca to another part of the country where they can be anonymous (so out of reach of a theatre or opera house, presumably) with the Kostelnička, after her release from prison, and her horror at the prospect of babysitting for the couple.⁵

The problem is heightened when the dramas are reworked as operas. The opera, as it was inherited from the nineteenth century, is a Romantic genre that is antagonistic to a Naturalistic conception of drama and literature, in which characters (however strongly drawn) are not saved or lost by their heroics and their deeply-felt emotion – unless Naturalism is taken to mean merely the choice of a less lyrical musical style and a more violent and unpleasant setting for the drama. There is a strong incentive to give Naturalistic dramas (in the stricter sense of the term) a radical reinterpretation when they are recast as operas. And this appears to have been the case with Foerster's version of *Gazdina roba*: since the lawyer and his wife are deleted from the action, Eva's hope of eventually marrying Mánek is purely chimerical, and the social tensions that fuel the action are replaced by the romantic love of the heroine. It is thus no accident that the play bears the title "Gazdina roba", "The farmer's woman", whereas the opera bears the title "Eva", with Eva converted into a conventional doomed Romantic operatic heroine. (That Nejedlý should have been impressed by the modernity of this is, no doubt, extraordinary.)

⁵ Gabriela Preissová, *Její pastorkyňa: venkovský román*, Prague, Vladimír Orel, 1930 [*recte* 1929].

Jenůfa, however, is a little more complicated. Janáček elected to set the drama more or less as it stood (though with some abbreviation). So he provides no remedy for Preissová's inconsistencies in the conceptual basis of the work, and the result is neither a thorough-going Romantic opera nor a thorough-going Naturalistic one. And he resisted the practice of calling the work simply "Jenůfa", as I have been doing all along. On 16 September 1917, for example, he writes to Universal Edition in Vienna: "Thank you very much for the vocal score, which I received today. I would only ask you that there should not be merely the meaningless title 'Jenůfa' on the title page, but the full title, 'Jenůfa – Její pastorkyňa (Ihre Ziehtochter)'. This 'Martha', 'Mary', 'Juliet' or 'Jenůfa' means absolutely nothing!" Unfortunately, it *does* mean something: it implies a concentration on that particular character that is indeed operatic, and means that the recipient of the piece, listener or performer, will expect its significance to lie in the emotional development of an individual. It will also mean that the recipient will understand all other characters as subordinate to that, and interpret them accordingly: in this process, the Kostelnička will be turned into an irredeemably evil witch, rather than a representative of high-principled piety in her own milieu, whose conventional morality is brought down by the extreme demands of the situation in which she finds herself. It will mean that the central position in this opera of the Kostelnička's aria "Co chvíli", the turning point of the Naturalistic laboratory experiment, at which she is finally driven almost over the edge into the abyss of madness, is jeopardized and compromised. With all the advances that have been made in the understanding of Janáček's intentions and conceptions in recent years, this is a battle that the composer has not yet won.

All these considerations will make it obvious, I hope, that Nejedlý's identification of Janáček's Naturalism is not quite beside the point, but that it is far too flat a characterization of it. In this work, particularly, the composer's aesthetic is rather more complicated than meets the eye. I would not wish to suggest that Janáček was necessarily any better aware of the full meaning of the term Naturalism than Nejedlý. The complexity of the artefact is, perhaps, a result of conservatism rather than radicalism, Janáček's habit of using as little material as possible that was not in the original – and thus of inadvertently preserving some of the inconsistencies and problems of Preissová's original. Thus the work possesses some of the features of Naturalism as this was inherited from the French – side by side with thoroughly traditional features of nineteenth-century Italian or German Romantic opera.

Now, to return to the question posed at the outset: The ambiguities inherent in the basic conception of this opera allow for a variety of readings, and so the conception of the opera is not fixed. The problems themselves free the piece from too definite an ideological slant, and represent one of its fascinations as a work of art. But the influence of Naturalism is sufficiently strong for this work easily to fit within the genre of *Blut-und-Boden* pieces intended to explore the mentality of a particular region: for the Germany of the 1930s, it is a classic exposition of the mentality of a *Heimat*, and indeed the dispassionate scientific Darwinianism

implicit in Naturalism is quite reconcilable with the attitudes governing social engineering and eugenics under the Nazis.

As for modern audiences, we are fortunately not committed to a reading of the opera within the framework of this or any other particular philosophical system. In any case, a totally unified interpretation seems to me to be ruled out. This ought not to depress us: the existence of so many versions of this work, two by Preissová, two by Janáček and one by Janáček with the intervention of Kovařovic, should be a matter for celebration, even before we think of the many various ways in which these can be interpreted – and despite the nightmares that this might cause a conscientious producer.