

LEOS JANÁČEK: A RECOLLECTION

HE WAS BORN IN 1854, the son of a Moravian schoolmaster, and christened Leos Janáček. The name was well chosen, for throughout his life he was to prove himself lionhearted. He possessed, however, another quality which I feel lay even deeper than his courage, and which he was always trying to express through his inborn musicality

Throughout his life he felt wonder and enjoyment in the world – in nature, in animals, in flowers and birds and above all in the everyday life of the people around him. Janáček could echo the Psalmist: 'The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.'

These qualities filtered through to me as a student under his direction. Very shy I felt as I walked up the pleasant tree-lined Smetana Street to study at Brno Conservatoire. It was the month of September 1927, and I was one of the youngest students, only seventeen and a bit. I was one of 200, all of whom felt grateful and proud as they passed Janáček's little house within the grounds of the Conservatoire. We all knew that we owed our chance of becoming musicians to the courage and perseverance of one man.

My first impression of him confirmed my feelings of nervousness, although he himself would probably have laughed at the idea that he was frightening. He was a stocky, rather tubby figure, full of energy, surmounted by an abnormally large head of bristling silver hair and blazing blue eyes, which lent force to all he said.

His speech was very characteristic and most alarming. His words came out in staccato patterns like a cross between a machine gun and a typewriter. All his life he spoke with a Lachian accent. He often gave his operatic characters speech rhythms typical of his own way of talking, as in *Katya Kabanova*, where the matriarch says, 'You must learn better manners...better manners... better...manners.' If one of his pupils had shown a lack of originality in composition, a favourite rebuke was to rap out 'What's in your head, boy? Straw?'

He often told us how he constantly listened to the speech of people going about their normal occupations, and noted their intonations. 'I don't need to understand the words' he said, 'I can

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tell by the tempo and modulation of speech how a man feels, if he is excited, if he lies, or if this is just a conventional conversation. I have been collecting these speech rhythms for over fifty years, and I have an immense dictionary. These are my windows into the soul of man, and when I need to find a dramatic expression I have recourse to my library'.

At the age of eleven he became a pupil in an Augustine monastery where the boys were given general education and also studied church music. It was here that he first developed his deep love of Moravia, and an enthusiasm for all things Slavonic, which was to colour his music throughout his life. He later studied at the Organ School in Prague, and then in Leipzig and Vienna. He worked extremely hard, and acquired a habit of strict discipline in work, which he passed on to his pupils. 'First you must know the rules' he would tell us. 'Then sometimes you can afford to break them'.

Perhaps the first happiness that Janáček achieved in music was his collection of Moravian folksongs, undertaken in collaboration with Frantisek Bartos, the famous Czech philologist. He went to Hukvaldy, his native region, and from there to Southern Moravia where the songs and dances were more sparkling and gay. Wherever he went he made friends of the local people, who therefore were 'not shy to sing and dance in front of the gentleman from Brno'. Even in my

day his interest in folksong was undiminished, although he was over seventy. On Sundays he used to walk with some of his students to Moravian Festivals in outlying villages, talking of music all the way. The exhausted students used to be glad to climb on a bus for the journey home; not so Janáček who looked forward to the walk back.

The manner of his death was typical of his life: he died trying to help somebody. He was on holiday at Hukvaldy when a young girl was missing from the village, and he insisted on joining in the search. He became overheated and exhausted, complications set in, and he died in the hospital in Ostrava on 12 August 1928.

This was his credo:

*Grow out of your innermost selves;
never renounce your opinions.
Do not toil for recognition,
but always do all you can,
so that the field allotted to you may prosper.*

In 1974, after an absence of over thirty years, I went back to the little house in the grounds of the Brno Conservatoire (now the Janáček Museum). All was as formerly, even Pani Janáčkova's mending basket was in its accustomed place. Over all brooded the spirit of the great Janáček.

**'What's in your head, boy? Straw?'
'I hope not, Mistre, I hope not'.**



Leos Janáček in 1916