Janáček

The Eternal Gospel
The Ballad of Blaník
The Fiddler's Child
The Excursions of Mr Brouček

Gweneth-Ann Jeffers *sop*, Adrian Thompson *ten*
Edinburgh Festival Chorus
Elizabeth Layton *vn*
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra
Ilan Volkov *cond*

Hyperion CDA67517 (60 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

To what extent does Janáček belong to the nineteenth century – even the 'long nineteenth century', the boundary of which is defined by this journal as the beginning of World War One? After all, Pierre Boulez, champion of all things looking forward in some way to his particular compositional utopia, has recently conducted an all-Janáček BBC Promenade Concert,[1] and (according to his pre-concert talk) has been interested in the composer since the time when, during an idle moment, he picked up a score of the *Sinfonietta* in William Glock's flat in the 1960s. And if Boulez can co-opt Wagner as a twentieth-century composer without the German personally having entered the 1900s, surely Janáček must be seen in this way? Janáček lived through 46 years of the twentieth century proper, born too early to have his birth registered in the *Grove Music Online* (now *Oxford Music Online*) 'Timeline of Contemporary Music', which begins in 1881, and not sufficiently aligned to any of the editor's revisionist agendas to have any of the works he wrote in the twentieth century noted, or indeed his death.[2] But his career decidedly came alive in the 1900s. He only came to national, let alone international, prominence when he finally managed to secure performances of *Jenůfa* in 1916, at the age of 62, and by general assent his most characteristic music was written after this date. The section on the composer in Richard Taruskin's *Oxford History of Music* is entitled 'The oldest twentieth-century composer', and the world's most famous musicologist is nothing if not clear which century Janáček belongs to: he 'participates in the suddenly quickened tempo of stylistic change that seized European composers around the turn of the century. This made him a modernist.'[3] Taruskin sees Janáček as participating fully in what he describes as 'maximalism': 'a radical intensification of means towards accepted or traditional ends (or at least toward ends that could be so described)'.[4] There are significant differences between Janáček and the other

[1] *Glagolitic Mass* (original version, reconstr. Paul Wingfield), *Sinfonietta* and Capriccio for Piano and Wind, BBC Symphony, Royal Albert Hall, 15 August 2008.

[2] See 'Timeline of Contemporary Music', in *Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/page/resources (accessed 30 November 2008).

[3] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Music*, vol. 4, *The Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 422.

[4] Ibid., 5.

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maximalists, though: 'Unlike all of the other maximalists (save Ives) whose music we have examined in detail, Janáček never tried to generalize his new methods into a rationalized technique. Indeed he decried such efforts as leading to music that "depends on just notes or ignores man and his surroundings", or music that "seeks only an acoustic quality".'[5] Janáček is interested in none of the constructivist mechanisms of Bartok (the other composer Taruskin examines in his chapter 'Socially Validated Maximalism') or Schoenberg and his pupils, and none of the elitism, as Taruskin sees it, enshrined in the *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen*: '[Janáček's] music, however novel its ways and means, always avidly sought popular appeal, and the composer measured his success in terms of his popularity'.[6] Certainly Janáček's musical language would have been more familiar to audiences of the time than that of the early twentieth-century composers who have tended to have been accorded historical significance. As the Janáček scholar, John Tyrrell, has written:

> Despite some modal tendencies from Moravian folk music and the whole-tone inflected passages which began to appear in his music after his flirtation with French music around 1900, his harmony operates functionally, and the dissonance which had grown from the characteristic major 9th formations in *Jenůfa* and *Fate* into the increasingly harsh combinations in *From the House of the Dead* reinforces rather than negates the tonal framework.[7]

The years 1908–19 are not generally regarded in history books as years of hope and optimism, especially when the second half of that period is considered. The music of the period that is normally focused upon tends to be associated with alienation and various kinds of psychic upheaval: the exploration of dark, violent themes through music of unprecedented fragmentation and dissonance. Of course, the general trends put forward in broad-brush textbooks and sustained without much thought in the classroom do not tell the whole story, and the music of the second decade of the twentieth century is about more than just the response to World War One or the pursuit of the modernist project. In Janáček's case, as Nigel Simone points out in his essay in the booklet accompanying this CD, 'Leos Janáček and the Rebirth of the Czech Nation', the acceptance of his opera *Jenůfa* for performance after his despair that it would never be done, plus the emergence of an independent Czechoslovakia after World War One, created a greater degree of optimism. As Taruskin has written, 'alienation simply was not this composer's bag'.[8] The works on this disk are not entirely devoid of *angst*, but the chief impression one takes away is indeed of hopefulness, with key moments generally being affirmative and radiant.

This is nowhere more apparent than in *The Eternal Gospel*, a 'Legend' for soprano, tenor, chorus and orchestra dating from 1913–14, based on a text by Jaroslav Vrchlicky. Though the subject matter is religious, it makes better sense, as Simeone suggests, to regard the 'visionary humanity' of the text as what attracted the agnostic composer. Especial lyrical warmth is to be found in the setting in the second section of what is rendered in the anonymous translation as 'Here near the firmament all is clear', beautifully floated by the tenor, Adrian Thompson.

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5 Ibid., 424.

6 Ibid., 444.

7 John Tyrrell, 'Janáček, Leoš', in *Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/14122 (accessed November 30, 2008).

8 Taruskin, *Oxford History of Music*, 444.

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It is found again at the end of the second section, 'New sap is flowing, reviving wilted grass'. This music is expanded at the end of the work, and it would be easy for less thoughtful performers to inject an inappropriate degree of triumphalism here and at the climax of the work at the end of section 3, but Volkov avoids this and delivers just the right degree of weight and expansiveness. No doubt the work's relatively short length (18 minutes on this recording) and the language of the text militate against frequent consideration by choral societies outside the Czech Republic, but it is a work worth programming more often. The choral singing by the Edinburgh Festival Chorus is excellent and, to this non-speaker, the Czech pronunciation seems highly convincing.

Taruskin doesn't explain in so many words the technical features of Janáček's maximalism (most of the rest of his section on the composer expounds the theory and practice of 'speech melody'), but one might suppose they revolve around the formal organization – the piling up of harmonically contrasting repetitive blocks identified by Tyrrell,[9] familiar from the composer's best-known orchestral work, the *Sinfonietta*. The block-like approach is certainly evident in *The Eternal Gospel*, though most obviously in terms of melodic repetition: the sections are of greater length than in the generally punchier later music. The mosaic structure is more sharply etched in *The Excursions of Mr Brouček* (1908–17), a suite for orchestra extracted from Janáček's two Brouček operas, especially in the 'Introduction: The Late Evening' and the 'Song of the Hussites'. The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra's violins cope well with the high angular writing in 'Moon Waltz', though in other places more warmth might be felt to be desirable in the string tone. 'Dawn' begins with a violin solo, and the orchestra's leader, Elizabeth Layton, is also the assured soloist in *The Fiddler's Child* (1913), a ballad for violin and orchestra. It is this that contains the most troubled music of the disk, reflecting a narrative in which the ghost of a deceased destitute fiddler lures his mortally ill child to a better world beyond the grave. The work is a powerful demonstration of the way in which a compositional technique that could lead to highly episodic writing can be made to sustain an arc of considerable intensity. The highly atmospheric performance skilfully balances lyrical flow against menacing interruption (reviewing an Aldeburgh Festival performance in July 1999, Robin Holloway wrote of the work's 'vehement ejaculation and urgent strangeness'[10]). Much of the work varies, extends, and develops a four-note motif that Simeone identifies as representing the oppressive village mayor: the final cadence, in which the motif leads to a major chord, is a remarkable moment of melancholy release.

The latest work on the disk to be composed, *The Ballad of Blanik* (1919), inscribed to founding president of Czechoslovakia, Dr T.G. Masaryk, is in fact the most romantic in gesture and tone. It is also the shortest at eight minutes and, whilst never less than diverting, it has the air, in comparison with the other works, of something of a filler.

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[9] Tyrrell, 'Janáček, Leoš'.
[10] Robin Holloway, *Essays and Diversions* (London: Continuum, 2007): 50.

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