

1 Expressive sources and resources in Janáček's musical language

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Broadly speaking either composers want primarily to make shapes, patterns, forms, journeys, buildings, tables, gardens, mud-pies, or they want primarily to utter what wells up from within themselves, or from what is suggested within themselves by the impact of things from around them. If Haydn is the ultimate instance of the 'pure' composer writing 'music about music' (though manifestly not deficient in humanity), Janáček can surely be seen as the ultimate composer of *Affekt* in whom music becomes the medium for expression so immediate as to transcend the linguistic metaphor to become in itself the thing that feels and moves.

Suppose, when traversing the back routes of his loved and hated native land by coach or train a vast pang of inarticulate emotion swells up around the composer's heart – 'my country'; suppose, thinking of his parents, his earliest memories, impressions, motivations, sensations, thoughts – 'my childhood'; suppose, reliving the deepest, tenderest, most painful intimacies, their mixture of harsh and delicate, tender and cruel, guilty and carefree, blighted and flowering, dampened and burning – 'my life'; suppose, then, the composer would seek to 'express' these feelings, to capture the unutterable, as music purportedly can, in a chord-sequence, in a turn of phrase, a rhythmic gesture, a timbral combination, how would he do so? *What* chords, intervals, rhythms, timbres? They would need to be precise, notated without ambiguity (let alone mistakes) as performance-instructions to players; also accurate containers of the complex of emotions and sensations, to be conveyed to the listeners so that they understand aright. It would be Janáček above all, and in some respects Janáček alone, who would be able to show how such things might be done.

But only if the means were sonorous – utterance, articulate or

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inarticulate, though not necessarily verbal. His *raison d'être* for writing music, and his main source of material with which to, is the sound of a human being in a condition of body and soul that compels such utterance. The human sound, whether heard or imagined wrung from the depths, or casually observed in, as it might be, the vocal intonations of two girls chatting as they wait for a man who doesn't turn up. Here with something concrete to start from, Janáček speculates about their characters, their lives, their futures; notates their converse as if collecting a folk-song, finds the clue to its rhythmicisation and pitching; and eventually from these, the harmony and coloration that will realise its latent musical life:

Perhaps it was like this, strange as it seemed, that whenever someone spoke to me, I may [not have] grasped the words, but I grasped the rise and fall of the notes! I knew what the person was like: I knew now he or she felt, whether he or she was lying, whether he or she was upset. As the person talked to me in a conventional conversation, I knew, I *heard* that, inside himself, the person wept . . . I have been collecting speech melodies since 1879; I have an enormous collection. You see, these speech melodies are windows into people's souls – and what I would like to emphasize is this: for *dramatic music* they are of great importance.¹

The same eager appetite to record is applied to birds, beasts, the mosquitoes of Venice, even the waves on the seashore at Vlissingen: there he is, notebook in hand, pencil poised, ears pricked.² One feels he could have understood the language of 'rocks and stones and trees' and give contour to 'what the wild flowers tell me', so long as they spoke in noises not signs.

Thus far it could almost be the attitude of an ethnologist, a naturalist, even a speech-therapist. But not quite. Janáček, in being after all a composer, can take the idea further: 'Identical ripples of emotion compel rhythms of tone which accord with rhythms of colours and touch. This is the secret of the conception of a musical composition, an unconscious

¹ Janáček in an interview (8 March 1928) for the Prague literary fortnightly *Literární svět*, translated in Mirka Zemanová, ed. and trans., *Janáček's Uncollected Essays on Music* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1989), pp. 120–4 (pp. 121–2).

² See Zemanová, *Janáček's Uncollected Essays*, Plate 8 – a reproduction of a photograph of Janáček on the seashore at Vlissingen, Holland, taken around 8–10 May 1926.

³ From Janáček's feuilleton 'Sedm havranů' [Seven Rooks], first published in the Brno daily *Lidové noviny* (30 November 1922), and translated in Vilem and

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spontaneous compilation in the mind.³ After conception, however, the problems begin: continuation, for a start, then continuity into whatever forms and organisations such material will suggest and be able to sustain. The empirical approach – ‘successive minute touches linked together by instinctive clairvoyance’ as Debussy in characterising Musorgsky also characterised himself – is all very well, but there has to be coherence and direction however spontaneous, and logic, even grammar, however wayward or erratic. Janáček of course knew all this, and here too his solution is typically extreme. Strange though it is to think of him as a theorist of music, he attacked aesthetic and linguistic problems with all his wonted assiduity, fervour and oddness for most of his life, alongside the composing or, more usually, in unconscious prophecy of it. The almost impossibly elusive current of utterance mooted above, equally with the prosaic chit-chat of daily life, and every shade of feeling in between, as it emanates in sound, were for him deliberated theoretical goals as well as artistic starting points of tingling immediacy. He wished by his notions of ‘percolation’, ‘interpenetration’ etc.,⁴ to elaborate a thoroughgoing quasi-scientific dossier of affective usage wholly congruent with, indeed inseparable from, his ‘enormous collection’ of human and animal sounds. Old Janáček hearsay – ‘a chord that bleeds’, ‘a chord that makes you wring your hands’ and so forth – can now be substantiated from what amounts to a composing-kit, however sketchy and in some obvious ways absurd. For Janáček even the most ordinary chord-connections contain an explosive emotional potential. Thus the $\frac{6}{4}$ is ‘like the swallow flying which almost touches the ground, and by that refreshing, lifts into the heights’, and the 4–3 ‘ruffles’ the V^7 –I cadence ‘as a breeze ruffles the surface of a fishpond’.⁵ If these bed-rocks of tonal cliché can evoke such fantasy, the idea that more complex

Margaret Tausky, eds., *Leoš Janáček: Leaves from his Life* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1982), pp. 101–4 (p. 103).

⁴ These terms are both attempts to render into English different connotations of Janáček’s concept of ‘prolínání’; further details can be found in Michael Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1994), pp. 72–9. [ed.]

⁵ See Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist*, p. 115. ‘4–3’ refers here to the intervals formed in a perfect cadence by the seventh of chord V^7 and the third of chord I in relation to the tonic (e.g. F–C and E–C in C major). Janáček’s theory of harmony in fact rests on the hypothesis that in chord progressions all the notes in both chords relate to the bass note of the second chord. [ed.]

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dissonances can cut, or be cut into, with a knife, like a knife,⁶ suddenly ceases to be so preposterous.

The aim is for music to achieve its purpose, the intense utterance of feeling, via the startling physicality of its every sonorous constituent. Together, they reach the auditor direct, circumventing formalist routines and play of conventions. Music's innermost meaning lies 'above', 'behind', 'beyond' the working-relationships of its notes that make its intrinsic, non-referential grammar.

This sense of what music can legitimately and naturally do leads inevitably to claims still more ambitious. Janáček would, one senses, have endorsed with enthusiasm these questions from the Shostakovich/Volkov *Testimony* that resounds with his own Slav urgency:

Meaning in music – that must sound very strange for most people. Particularly in the West. It's here in Russia that the question is usually posed: What was the composer trying to say, after all, with this musical work? What was he trying to make clear? The questions are naive, of course, but despite their naïveté and crudity, they definitely merit being asked. And I would add to them, for instance, Can music attack evil? Can it make a man stop and think? Can it cry out, and thereby draw man's attention to various vile acts to which he has grown accustomed? To the things he passes without any interest?⁷

'All these questions began for me with Mussorgsky', Shostakovich continues. They are equally germane for Janáček. The problem is, how with such views of music as essentially a humanistic moral agent, can it be composed as an art, disinterested, uncommitted, as organisation into grammar and form of pitches and durations and timbres?

Composers who put the *cri expressif* before all else usually have an internal music-machine to turn the wheels, which flows, courses, surges, spins; a force they can drive or be driven by – Schubert, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Mahler. But when the utterance-type lacks this inner stream, or cannot reach it easily, cannot swim, or finds it dammed, choked, frozen –

⁶ See Janáček's employment of the term 'zářez' (incision) in relation to certain types of voice-leading: Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist*, pp. 66–7.

⁷ Solomon Volkov, ed., *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dimitri Shostakovich*, trans. Antonina Bouis (London: Faber, 1979), p. 181.

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Schumann, Brahms, Berg are instances – schemes and artifices are needed; games, codes, constructivistic manipulations of material not ‘naively’ born from music in its primeval state. Though their eventuality appears spontaneous, its making has been contrived, even arbitrary. And when the utterer by instinct is by technique a stutterer – whether because the need for scaffolding or gameplaying denies in its defiance of naturalness the utterer’s ‘from the life’ directness, or through sheer lack of musical skill, or even talent, to match the sensitivity of the vibrations and the intensity of the vision – then there are radical problems for which only radical solutions will suffice. Examples of this are Musorgsky again, and Janáček, and indeed Shostakovich too, were it not for his being cursed, contrariwise, with one of the most facile music-machines ever seen. (Instances of vision outweighing skill or talent would include very obviously a Gurney or a Satie, rather controversially a Delius or an Ives.) What all these composers have in common, however different and mutually incomparable, is the primacy of expression. Each has his unique ‘letter to the world’, or, as Wordsworth said of the poet, he ‘rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him’; he has a message and will burst if it is not delivered. They all stand at the polar opposite from the Stravinskian position which objects in sheer self-defence to music’s capacity to say anything whatsoever outside itself.

It is not immediately clear how Janáček relates to these fellow-utterers. To Musorgsky for passionate commitment to naturalism, the expression of emotional truth via truth to human speech. But Musorgsky’s manifest deficiencies in compositional technique and miraculous capture, in a handful of songs and some moments of opera, of exactly what he was after – exquisite musical precision in the teeth of incompetence – are like Janáček only in the upshot. For Musorgsky despised learning and training, whereas the youthful Janáček could not get enough. His bottomless craving for discipline is touchingly evoked in the early pages of Michael Beckerman’s *Janáček as Theorist*.⁸ Then came the revealing moment (possibly apocryphal) when his youthful work was deemed ‘too correct’; a judgment inconceivable *chez* Musorgsky, notoriously ‘corrected’ by an overseer who mistook empirical genius for ignorant ineptitude or wanton perversity. (The truth being in Musorgsky’s case a bit of all three.) The mature Janáček offers a comparable

⁸ Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist*, pp. 1–14.

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mix, again involving well-meant and sometimes well-made improvements to scores wherein brilliance and clumsiness are often juxtaposed and sometimes combined. He was determined, clearly, that his music could never again incur the same charge!

The middle category can be discounted. Janáček did not need scaffolding or schemes to unbind utterance. He is, rather, the most urgent of all composers. Once he found himself, in late middle life, the sheer impetuosity precludes Schumannish letter-and-word-play as much as Brahmsian note-play, let alone the sedulous ramifications and sophistries of a Berg. What he shares with this composer-type is a more personal trait, the obsessive fixation upon an unattainable muse to whom every aspect of his art is referred. Yet while his mature musical speech is nothing if not obsessional, the two fixations do not go hand in hand. He would never chain in codes the fetishistic initials or names or events: blurring directness, not swathed secrecy, is his intonation. But neither does he contain a mighty machine like Schubert, nor the infinite interweave of Wagner's leitmotivic procedures, nor the melodic fertility (and sequential shamelessness) of Tchaikovsky, nor the improvisational splurge of Mahler. The native endowment is song-and-dance length, Dvořák as prototype, manifested in modest, blameless Slav-nationalist successes like the *Lašské tance* (Lachian Dances; 1893) or the faded lyricism of the *Idylla* (Idyll; 1878) and the Suite (1877). When he gets into being himself the lengths remain brief and the units become tiny, but the shapes are large, and the powers of driving continuity inexhaustible.

The problem is to discover just how music as such can be reconciled with an aesthetic of unmitigated expression grounded in human utterance and guided by such peculiar theories (however well they worked for him in practice). His getting into being himself is a matter first of finding the right genre to take these overriding preoccupations – opera; then of finding what can be done with opera that squares with them, what can be put in and left out, what it can, when radically deconventionalised, astonishingly turn out to be able to do. The crucial leap, precipitated by the harrowing illness and early death of Olga, comes between *Jenůfa* (1894–1903; rev. 1906–7) and *Osud* (Fate; 1903–5; rev. 1906, 1907), the first a masterpiece in a received mould (Smetana not so far behind, except in stature), the second a Confession, of the utmost artistic oddity, an apparently unworkable maverick which, as it happened, prognosticates his late flowering into total idio-

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syncrasy. Once opera could be made wholly odd, other genres followed: song cycle, string quartet, piano sonata and lyric (here alone are precedents, for this is what the small piano lyric had always been for), all the way to 'Concerto' (the two bizarre works of 1925–6), 'Symphony' (*Sinfonietta*; 1926) and 'Mass' (*Glagolitic*; 1926; rev. 1927).

'Unmitigated expression': Janáček places a higher premium upon this dangerous weapon than any composer before or since. Not that music before him had lacked the desire or the means not just to be freely expressive but to encapsulate emotion within a sonorous image so fully that one has to say that this music means, or says, this thing. Its pre-romantic history lies in tropes from madrigals and lute songs, onomatopoeia and charged-up rhetoric from Monteverdi to Purcell, Charpentier, Rameau, the entire charter of baroque *Affekt* and its individual intensification in the hands of J. S. Bach. Nietzsche's notion of a 'lexicon' in Wagner of the most intimate, decadently perfumed, *telling* fragments, the miniaturist in him who palpitates with expressive life whereas the colossal remains stillborn, simply brings into the open what had been achieved with consummate success in countless unflawed gems of Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and was to flower further in Brahms, Fauré, Wolf, Webern.

As this latter list shows, it is a gift that lies at the opposite end of music's spectrum from opera. The phrase that speaks low, bearing a secret caress or a private message, is a creature of small spaces and small forces – song, solo piano, music for the chamber. Opera is, obviously, a collective genre that needs to raise its voice to cross footlights and be heard in the upper circle. The illusion of intimacy is one of its resources. That it can whisper was well known to such professional masters of the caress as Puccini or Massenet; their desired reaction is corporate, a unison 'oooh!' throughout the house. At the other extreme, the most famous whisper in all opera, the declaration of love in *Pelléas*, is overheard not shared. Janáček's intimacy is guiltless as Debussy of titillation, but otherwise resembles neither extreme. He is doing something else. Each individual within an attentive audience must feel that this music's utterance is directed to them alone. Even in communal scenes this tendency can be sensed; in the monologues it is undisguised. In Wagner's monologues or duologues the audience is witness to a situation and its participants – this Wotan or Sachs, these two lovers, or two squabbling brothers, or two contrasted sisters (and

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so on). The presentation is detached, indeed objective, for all the nudging commentary in the orchestra's tissue of leitmotives and the heated immediacy of the musical language in general. Whereas Janáček compels every hearer to identify with the single figure – the Forester, say – and with every person in a group as their turn comes – the circle of regulars at the village inn, or badger, vixen and dogfox, owl, in the forest. Nothing could be further from the various ways in which opera usually proceeds; different though they already are, Janáček is in contradistinction to them all; he makes verismo and Wagnerismo seem as stylised as aria and cabaletta. Music in Janáček's operas is his means of dissolving the distances and boundaries of convention, not of establishing them. And inasmuch as the same goes for his concert-music, thus far does he differ from all other composers.

Auden declared that in *Pelléas* Debussy flattered the audience, meaning (presumably) that, being given so little in the way of the usual vocal delights, their only compensation is the glow of cultural refinement their sacrifice has won them. Yet *Pelléas* is for the most part lovely to hear, if a little washy and deficient in dramatic momentum. These particular criticisms clearly do not apply to Janáček! But he is still more deficient than Debussy in grateful voice-centred lyricism, and can often be harsh, insistent, obsessive, tedious; even his brevity can seem aggressive because so foreshortened and brusque. Whole stretches and one or two whole works could fairly be called repellent for all his growth straight out of Dvořák and Smetana, and his non-relation to any of the commonly hated veins of 'ugliness' in twentieth-century music. He neither 'flatters' the specialised susceptibilities of the refined, nor wows his audience *all'italiana* to bring down the house. In this genre of music more posited than any other on pleasing, he does not try to please. More often, he stings, shocks, burns. His music to go with the whipcracks and chain-bearing in *Z mrtvého domu* (From the House of the Dead; 1927–8) renders physical pain that makes the hearer wince; crueller still is rendition in sound of mental and spiritual anguish. Compare the lashing in *Elektra*, the crushing in *Salome*, the torture in *Tosca*, or even such deeper expressions of psychological distress as the Kiss and its outcome in *Parsifal*, or Tristan's delirium. The audience writhes in its plush-covered seats with a groan of satisfaction. These places are protected, and distanced, by music, as surely as the padding and plush separate the soft body from the hard frame. Only such exceptional moments as Boris with

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the vision of the murdered boy, Golaud twisting Mélisande by her hair, Katerina Ismailova's song about the black lake, the music for the hanging of Billy Budd, dare go so naked as Janáček does by habit. While *Wozzeck*, enthusiastically hailed in the last year of his life ('a dramatist of astonishing importance, of deep truth . . . each of his notes has been dipped in blood'),⁹ can seem altogether too well-dressed, in interesting, absorbing, intricate, richly inventive *music*. And in *Lulu* the discrepancies between its gorgeous sonic opulence, its intellectual fascination and the moral then physical degradation of its characters can often be hard to bridge.

Be it unbearable physical pain or mental torture; or quivers, ecstasies, visions, desires, delusions; or merely some equivalent of the two girls waiting for the man to arrive (like the tiny cameo for the engineer and the young widow in *Fate* Act I) Janáček's unique grip upon utterance, from mind and spirit, in the body, via the voice, produces this 'intimate letter' from individual to individual that, so far from pleasing – flattering, wooing – his audience, is an exposure of them as much as of his characters. He strips the warm clothing of protective safety to reach naked empathy. To get 'into the skin' of, say, Kát'a's religio-erotic outpourings or Emilia Marty's 337-year-old weariness, he puts every auditor there too, singly – there is no plural.

Also there is no space between the state of being and his rendition of it, whether it be just a flock of silly hens or the repartee of visitors at a summer spa – but it might equally be the farmer's decent son suffused with desire and shame, excitement and compunction – and correspondingly, no space between the music and its recipient. The only thing he does not express is *himself*; the absence of romantic egotistic self-projection is remarkable. As, also, the complete avoidance of preachiness; no judgements are made, no moral is drawn. The incentive is generous but by no means soft. Hard, if anything. Also aggressive: shocking in rawness; rude, embarrassing, button-holing, speaking too close in your face in public places; as excruciating, or as boring, as it would be in reality – the mad mother's accusations and leap from the balcony, the breakdown at the piano, the night of illicit romance and the subsequent admission wrested from guilt by the

⁹ Janáček in his 1928 interview for *Literární svět*, translated in Zemanová, *Janáček's Uncollected Essays*, p. 123. [Chew and Vilain quote the whole of this passage about *Wozzeck* on p. 64 below of this volume. (ed.)]

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conniving elements, the night of icy sex in exchange for a much-desired document, the three prisoners' successive slow motion monomaniac monologues for the first yet umpteenth time. 'Realism' – not so much an art-historical term, as something the dog brings in, mangled and disgusting, a tribute yet also a victim, for its unwilling owner to share – see, feel, smell, taste, with its own keen senses; added to which, the wholly human sense of what everything *means*.

Yet it is not so much an appeal to pious *Family of Man* humanity ('from the heart, let it go to the heart' as its facile motto), still less a compassionate weepie of emotive blackmail anticipating tendencies all-too-familiar nowadays. 'Janáček is, if anything, hard.' He presents documentation of people observed, caught, notated, collected. The truest alignment lies with the photo-document, akin to the work of August Sander, who plonked a specimen of 'businessman', 'architect', 'composer', 'peasant', 'artiste', before his camera, squeezed the bulb, and gave the world the dispassionate image that makes the viewer weep. It's worth remembering that Janáček too began as a 'human naturalist' in observations from the 'field' that claimed quasi-scientific objectivity. For him this employment is without retirement. The humanity is boundless; the attitude towards its all-too-human manifestations is ardently unsentimental, most of all in its refusal to stereotype.

To achieve all this his actual music itself, if not exiguous, ought at any rate not to be given first place. In the old operatic debate *prima la musica, poi le parole*, Janáček would award the *pomo d'oro* to expression, rendered by natural human utterance. Which would imply that music as such must be thinned out – the Monteverdi/Musorgsky/*Pelléas* aesthetic rather than the Mozart/Wagner/*Wozzeck*. In fact it is anything but: rather, it is vehement, assertive, busy, gesticulatory, frantic, emotive, and sometimes violently unrestrained. Simply on the practical level the orchestra has often to be curbed in order that the sensitive *parlante* of the voices that it ostensibly supports can be heard properly. Another kind of convention is at work, surprising but necessary, in this recasting of the genre that throws formality to the winds; for music undoubtedly comes first, possibly in spite of Janáček's wishes. He is in the end a composer, odd though this sometimes seems, and the composer in him cannot be prevented. It's not simply that the music is every bit as close-up as the life it renders – this is the first characteristic to strike every newcomer. It is something about his music itself. It can often be