

Nationalism in Janáček's Music Theories

Béla Bartók's discovery of the origins of Hungarian folk music is a well known subject among today's music scholars, befitting his reputation as one of the twentieth century's greatest composers. Equally understood is that Bartók's creative mastery stemmed from a keen ability to reconcile oftentimes conflicting musical traditions: his conservatory training, the folksongs he collected from rural peasants, and in time, even the urban art songs performed by gypsies which he had initially rejected as insincere and inauthentic.¹ Much less researched, however, is the story of Leoš Janáček, whose impenetrable music theories and idiosyncratic style of composition make him a difficult subject to formally analyze. Now, as this most curious Czech composer slowly gains in stature as a permanent fixture in the repertoire, a question naturally springs to mind: Might Janáček's music owe its appeal to a similarly successful synthesis of opposing musical traditions? Since a complete response cannot possibly escape the realm of conjecture, it must suffice simply to demonstrate that, at the very least, the development of Janáček's compositional style follows a similar trajectory. Thus, this paper will examine how this academically trained grandson of a *kantor*² might have felt compelled by nationalist chauvinism to begin a lifelong quest for alternate and distinctly Czech music theories, only to end up deconstructing those theories according to the

¹ Béla Bartók, "Gypsy Music or Hungarian Music?" *The Musical Quarterly* 33 (April 1947): 240-41.

² Mirka Zemanová, *Janáček* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 10.

philosophical and scientific models of the surrounding German-speaking world in the hope of granting them mainstream respectability.

To understand the nationalist roots of Janáček's music theories, it will be helpful to recall the history of the Czech-speaking lands. In 1620, Bohemia and Moravia were defeated by the Habsburg Empire at the Battle of the White Mountain, an event which continued to resonate strongly at the time of Janáček's birth. Henceforth, as Habsburg subjects, the Czech people were required to adopt the German language and Catholic faith of their new rulers, although many chose to retain their native language and customs at home.³ It was against this historical backdrop which drove the 14-year-old Janáček, living away from his family and tormented by his Germanized Czech schoolmates, to announce in a letter to his uncle: "You don't know how I love the Czechs, and you wouldn't believe how I hate the Germans."⁴

Janáček's nationalist sentiment, however, was slightly more complex, being a composite of both Czech and Moravian identity. Under Habsburg rule, Bohemia and Moravia were divided into separate provinces for the security of the empire, not to be politically reunited until 1918. In the meantime, Czech culture to the outside world became increasingly synonymous with that of Bohemia, which enjoyed a greater proximity to the German cities where many influential thinkers and artists resided. In addition, a burgeoning middle class helped make the capital city of Prague an internationally respected cultural hub. By contrast, Moravia's capital city

³ John Clapham, et al., "Czech Republic," in *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40479> (accessed December 13, 2009).

⁴ Zemanová, *Janáček*, 20.

of Brno was far less developed, and political power there was mostly retained by the clergy, who kept the people grounded in their Slavic cultural heritage. It should be no wonder, then, that as a native of this neglected, more provincial half of the Czech-speaking world, Janáček constantly felt the need to assert himself as both a fully Czech composer and a distinctly Moravian one.⁵

Much like the path onto which Bartók was guided by his Hungarian nationalism, it was Janáček's desire to forge a uniquely Czech musical identity which led to his interest in collecting the folksongs of the surrounding peasants.⁶ For Janáček in particular, whose musical studies at the age of eleven had torn him away from the rural village of his childhood,⁷ the music of the countryside held an especially comforting allure. The folk music of the Czech-speaking lands was hardly a monolithic entity, however. Unlike Bohemian folk music, which was heavily influenced by the Western art tradition of major-key diatonic melodies, duple and triple meters, and symmetrical forms, the Moravian folk tradition retained the extended melismas, rhythmic freedom, and improvisatory elements of its Byzantine forebears. In short, it was music primarily meant to be sung, rather than performed as dance accompaniment.⁸ Given this polar diversity of musical traditions, the establishment of a distinct musical identity for the Czech people likely proved to be a complicated task for Janáček.

⁵ John Tyrrell, *1854-1914: The Lonely Blackbird*, Vol. 1 of *Janáček: Years of a Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 9-13.

⁶ Zemanová, *Janáček*, 60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁸ Ian Horsbrugh, *Leos Janáček: The Field That Prospered* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), 45-46.

Compounding this difficulty was the fact that geographical and historical differences between Bohemia and Moravia also played out in the favored art music of each region: While Bohemian composers such as Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana followed the progressive, late-Romantic ideals of the German-speaking world, Moravian composers like Janáček's teacher Pavel Křížkovský stayed closer to their native folk traditions and conservative, early-Romantic teachings.⁹

Even if these differences could be reconciled, Michael Beckerman points out the difficulty in identifying uniquely Czech musical characteristics: accents on first beats, switching between parallel major and minor keys, and Lydian and Mixolydian scales may be prominently featured in Czech music, but they are certainly not the exclusive property of Czech composers.¹⁰ It can only be guessed whether Janáček understood that a distinctly Czech musical identity would not be easily gained through the melodies, harmonies and rhythms of folksongs alone. In any case, he certainly felt a moral imperative not to quote them in his original compositions, for he saw them as uncredited creative works to be held in no less esteem than the composed pieces of his peers.¹¹

How, then, did Janáček stumble upon the formulation of his pet theories as the key to creating uniquely Czech music? It is sometimes assumed that Janáček pursued his woefully impractical theories in the absence of any formal training, a perception reinforced by the incomprehensible rambling found in many of his

⁹ Tyrrell, *Years of a Life*, 13-14.

¹⁰ Michael Beckerman, "In Search of Czechness in Music," *19th-Century Music* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 64.

¹¹ Paul Wingfield, ed., *Janáček Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129.

theoretical treatises.¹² A cursory review of the extensive music education he received in his early years should immediately lay to rest any misrepresentation of Janáček as a self-taught dilettante, however.¹³ More than just that, it may even provide the clue to his actual motives.

As it so happens, Janáček's Moravian loyalty to traditional forms earned him criticism from his teachers at the Vienna Conservatoire; likewise, he had no interest in propagating the "Wagnerian bombast" popular with his peers.¹⁴ Immediately after his stint at the Conservatoire, Janáček returned to Brno and married Zdenka Schulzová, the daughter of a German mother and Germanized Czech father, whereupon he forbade her to speak any German in the house.¹⁵ It would not be irresponsible, then, to speculate that Janáček's unhappiness with his classmates and teachers in Vienna may have helped rekindle the anti-German sentiment of his youth, prompting a lifelong search for Czech alternatives to German music theory.

That many of Janáček's initial forays as a theorist revolved around the subject of rhythm should be no mystery: unusual rhythms are a prominent feature of Moravian folk music. In his 1901 treatise "*Sčasování* in the Folk Song," Janáček coins a unique Czech term for rhythm which alludes to the way in which acoustic properties of sound are emotionally perceived by the listener. The essay itself outlines a system for interpreting all musical rhythms as a composite of multiple layers, with each layer denoting a different note value.¹⁶ Although the theory of

¹² Michael Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1994), 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴ Zemanová, *Janáček*, 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶ Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist*, 81-82.

sčasování holds no pedagogical or practical use, it clearly demonstrates Janáček's lack of concern with separating emotional intent from technical analysis.

Moravian folksongs, of course, owe these peculiar rhythms to their primarily vocal purpose. Given the primacy of the text being sung, its melodies and forms must first be derived according to the dictates of the spoken Czech language, which features several interesting characteristics. For example, accents usually fall on the first syllable of each word, keeping the intonation of a sentence relatively steady throughout. On the other hand, vowel length does not necessarily correlate with accentuation, allowing some words to contain vowels that are short but stressed, or long but unstressed. Additionally, stress may vary according to a word's placement and context within a phrase. Naturally, all these features lend a unique flavor to any musical line sung in Czech.¹⁷

Janáček's famous concept of speech melody may therefore have been spawned with the recognition that his nationalist urges might be fulfilled by seeking out a music theory that was indebted to the unique language of the Czech people. Speech melodies are musically notated approximations of snippets of conversation showing pitch, note duration, and sometimes articulation and dynamics. Later, animal calls and other sounds of nature were included as potential sources to be recorded. For Janáček, these notebook sketches were not musical snippets to be reproduced in performance, but a private glimpse into a person's character or frame of mind respective to a particular time or place.¹⁸ Thus, Janáček viewed speech

¹⁷ Paul Wingfield, "Janáček's Speech-Melody Theory in Concept and Practice," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 3 (November 1992): 281.

¹⁸ Tyrrell, *Years of a Life*, 478.

melody as a source of creative inspiration, not a systematic method for acquiring motifs to be cynically exploited in his compositions. Bridling against a rival's accusation suggesting otherwise, Janáček blustered: "Is it conceivable, however, that I could furtively take collected speech melodies, these cuttings from alien souls so sensitive that they hurt, and 'compile' my work out of them? How is it possible to spread such nonsense?"¹⁹

Like his concept of *sčasování*, Janáček's theory of speech melody is too reliant on subjective and personal interpretation to ever be applicable as a tool for composition or music analysis; nevertheless, it does provide insight into the nature of his nationalist impulses. Hearing a railway guard calling out the name of a town, first in Czech as "Moravany" and then in German as "Morawaan," Janáček notated the speech melody of both versions, then judged that the German name "cut harshly and roughly" and "ground into grumbling the sweetness" of the Czech name.²⁰ While he then used this observation as a springboard to warn against shoehorning Czech texts into German melodies and forms, it is quite clear that elevating the nuances of Czech speech above those of German was an entrenched component of his *modus operandi*.

It is ironic, then, that Janáček's desire for mainstream acceptance often led him to seek approval of his theories from the writings of predominantly German thinkers such as the philosopher Johann Herbart.²¹ The stereotype of the provincial Moravian prevailed even within Prague circles, and Janáček was painfully aware of

¹⁹ Mirka Zemanová, ed., trans., *Janáček's Uncollected Essays on Music* (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹ Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist*, 15-17.

how this image often conspired with the regional loyalties of the Bohemian elite to limit his chances for recognition as a serious Czech composer. Consequently, even his most abstract theories were meticulously and systematically deconstructed according to the modes of scientific thought fashionable with the German-speaking intellectuals of his day.²² Perhaps his greatest moment of self-validation came in 1913 when he read the work of psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, who had deduced that one-tenth of a second was the amount of time needed to switch one's attention to a new stimulus; Janáček had reached the same estimate regarding harmonic changes several decades earlier.²³

Thus, Janáček's professed devotion to creating a distinctly Czech musical identity did not prevent him from keeping abreast of international developments so distant from his own field of profession, demonstrating his willingness to incorporate good ideas from unlikely sources. In addition, despite his own emphatic insistence that he was incapable of straying from the Moravian folk tradition of constructing tunes around words, there are many instances in his works where the text was clearly chosen to fit pre-composed melodies;²⁴ obviously, these nationalist ideals did not trump aesthetic considerations. And then there is the matter of Kamila Stösslová, the dark-skinned Jewish beauty who became the object of Janáček's longings and served as the inspiration behind most of his compositions during the last decade of his life.²⁵ Comparing her to Greek and Gypsy characters from his

²² Paul Christiansen, "The Meaning of Speech Melody for Leos Janáček," *Journal of Musicological Research* 23 (2004): 245.

²³ Beckerman, *Janáček as Theorist*, 53-54.

²⁴ John Tyrrell, "Janáček and the Speech-Melody Myth," *The Musical Times* 111 (August 1970): 793.

²⁵ Zemanová, *Janáček*, 139.

operas,²⁶ Janáček likely viewed her as the exotic “other”; and yet, this affection was no less intense than the pride he felt for his Moravian homeland. Perhaps, like Bartók in his later years, Janáček finally learned to temper his nationalist spirit with goodwill towards all traditions, resulting in the beloved pieces of his “Indian summer” which have cemented his legacy.

As the music of Janáček steadily accrues belated recognition among today’s audience, new scholarship will continue to dispel the false notion that his iconoclastic music theories were merely the pet projects of an untrained dabbler. While the absolution of this oft-maligned composer’s reputation is certainly an admirable endeavor, what proper narrative should be left in its stead? It is in the interest of answering this question that the nationalist intent behind Janáček’s various theories, including those of *sčasování* and speech melody, should be considered in future research.

²⁶ Ibid., 224.

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