

John Tyrrell

JANÁČEK: YEARS OF A LIFE

Vol. 1: (1854–1914), THE LONELY BLACKBIRD;

Vol. 2: (1914–28), TSAR OF THE FOREST

Faber & Faber, London 2006, 2007

If anyone, it appears that Prof. Dr. John Tyrrell has for over 40 years been the leading Janáček specialist and one of the world's foremost authorities on Janáček. Tyrrell is Professor of Musicology at Cardiff University and a world authority on Czech music in general. When I first came across his name in professional literature almost a decade ago, of course in connection with Janáček, I was overcome with feelings of great respect and admiration for his outstanding opus of works such as *Czech Opera* (Cambridge, 1988; Czech translation, 1991), *Intimate Letters: Leoš Janáček to Kamila Stösslová* (London, 1994), a score revision (with Charles Mackerras) of the opera *Jenůfa: Její pastorkyňa* (full score, Vienna, 1996; piano-vocal score, Vienna, 2000), *Janáček's Works: A Catalogue of the Music and Writings of Leoš Janáček* (Oxford, 1997), *My Life with Janáček: the Memoirs of Zdenka Janáčková* (London, 1998) and, last but not least, his incredibly extensive and thorough contribution as Editor-in-Chief of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (second edition; 2001). Tyrrell has therefore done a remarkable service in a number of single publications, of which the present biography of Janáček is unquestionably the crown of his Janáček research.

This monograph is by all means not the first monograph on Janáček, but it is undoubtedly the most in-depth study of Janáček's life and work so far. Before Tyrrell's monograph, the standard resource for information on Janáček (after Janáček's first biographer, Max Brod, who was Janáček's German translator and managed to maintain an important friendship with him) was Jaroslav Vogel's magisterial contribution. Mention should also be made of an earlier contribution by Vladimír Helfert, who in 1939 published the first volume of his Janáček biography and some later biographical contributions from Bohumír and Miloš Štědroň. Tyrrell's monograph on Janáček is, however, not only the most detailed biography of this composer in any language so far, but, for all its length, the most absorbing, informative, enlightening and readable.

The above-mentioned Tyrrell's monograph on the life and work of Leoš Janáček, one of the most prominent Czech composers and music teachers at the turn of the century, entitled *Janáček: Years of a Life*, is without a doubt Tyrrell's life work. This monumental biography is actually comprised of two parts, the first published two years ago and the

second a year later by *Faber and Faber*. The first volume of this biography, subtitled '*The Lonely Blackbird*' (London, 2006), has 971 pages and covers the first 60 years (1854-1914) of Janáček's doubts, failures, unhappiness, and unabashed creativity. The second volume, subtitled '*Tsar of the Forests*' (London, 2007), charts the final 14 years (1914-1928) of Janáček's creative affirmations and provides a detailed description of the most productive period of Janáček's creativity and of his life in general. Though it covers only 14 years as opposed to 60 in the first volume, the second volume has 1,074 pages.

The clue to Janáček's late-found genius already lies in the subtitle of the first volume, '*The Lonely Blackbird*'. This is a reference to a Janáček song that sums up the melancholic aspects of his life up to 1914. Tyrrell ends this first volume on the day of Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against Serbia, a little over three weeks after Janáček's sixtieth birthday. It was, however, not until 1916 that Janáček achieved widespread recognition when the National Theatre in Prague finally gave a performance of his opera *Jenůfa*, completed more than a decade earlier. Hence, the melancholic '*Lonely Blackbird*' finally becomes the '*Tsar of the Forests*'.

Tyrrell's division of his great enterprise – sixty years for the first volume, fourteen for the second – speaks itself of the division in the composer's creative life, between decades of disappointment and sustained brilliance at the end. Janáček was nearly forty when he started the work by which he first became well known, *Jenůfa*, almost fifty by the time that work was brought to performance (in 1904), and into his sixties before it had been presented anywhere beyond his home town of Brno. Even after *Jenůfa* had reached the stage, Janáček remained a provincial figure, and acted as such. As Tyrrell points out, the decade after the *Jenůfa* premiere, the decade of the composer's fifties, produced astonishingly little, despite his late-won success after so much frustration. He would have to wait until past his 60th birthday for proper recognition.

Through many years of extensive and extremely detailed examination of accessible archival sources, particularly in the Czech provinces and elsewhere, the author succeeded in piecing together a highly accurate study of Janáček's life and work. It seems that no-one is more thoroughly prepared for this task and that no detail is too small for Tyrrell. The chapters of the monograph are divided between the 'chronological' and the 'contextual'. The essentially chronological structure of the book is thus interrupted by stand-alone, separate essays (four on the composer's health are contributed by a medical expert, Stephen Lock, and five of them on the composer's finances and on average earnings in the Habsburg Czech Territories by Jiří Zahrádka, curator of the Janáček Ar-

chive in Brno) on subjects as various as the influences on Janáček's operas, the autobiographical aspects of what he wrote, the state of his finances, and the medical reasons for his death. In the chapter on 'Janáček and Modernism', Tyrrell charts how Janáček skirted all the obvious influences, digesting here and there little snippets of Debussy, Berg and later Stravinsky, but always remaining true to his startlingly original and individual music poetics. Tyrrell also provides fascinating insight into Janáček's creativity, with chapters on how he composed, his knowledge of opera, programme music and leitmotif. There are also very useful chapters on Pan-Slavism, Janáček as teacher, theorist and ethnographer, and his discoveries of Moravian folk music or of 'speech melodies'.

Janáček's portrait is enriched with accounts of his difficult childhood spent away from his family, his unpromising career, his unhappy marriage to Zdenka Schulzova (a piano pupil, 11 years younger than him), and the tragic deaths of their two children. Paradoxically, the double tragedy may have been the wellspring of Janáček's genius. There are also descriptions of his life companions, foremost among them being friends like Dvořák and a number of other less known teachers and friends at the Organ School in Brno, with whom he continuously maintained close ties through correspondence, as well as enemies such as the infamous Zdeněk Nejedlý or the for Janáček's creativity devastating Karel Kovařovic who had one of the most powerful positions in Czech opera. As many biographers have emphasised, Janáček's affair with singer Gabriela Horvatova (the first Kostelnička in *Jenůfa* whom Janáček's long-suffering wife Zdenka in tactfully describes in her memoirs as an 'exotic singer') during the war and his bizarre, decade-long infatuation with a young married woman, Kamila Stösslova, the *inamorata* and *muse* of his late years, to whom he wrote vast quantities of explicitly passionate letters, acted as a creative stimulus. Tyrrell also hints that Janáček died as a result of his infatuation with Stösslova, catching pneumonia after exhausting himself in her service and taking an extreme cure at a spa. Janáček's relentless, self-pitying, fantasizing, manipulating relationship with Stösslova and his concomitantly truculent relationship with his wife may not readily stand up to such scrutiny. Tyrrell does at least restore her to her proper place in Janáček's life.

Thoroughly detailing the 'sober facts' of the composer's everyday life of dealing with colleagues and family members, travelling to hear operas in Prague or to collect folk songs in villages, studying and reading, the monograph is full of spicy details. So if you want to learn when Janáček got into trouble by mistakenly occupying a first-class railway compartment, or conversely, when he had to turn back because he had forgotten his ticket, you need look no further. There is, however, abso-

lutely no tendency, as in so many composer biographies, towards hagiography. Tyrrell doesn't avoid Janáček's less agreeable aspects, such as his harsh treatment of his wife, his dark-sided nationalism, notably anti-semitism, his miserliness about money, etc. The objectivity of the biography is also evident in the fact that the biographer doesn't seek to over-dramatise such traumatic events as the deaths of both the composer's children or the convolutions of his feelings for women other than his wife.

The reader is thus confronted with an incredibly precisely drawn image of a great composing and influential teaching personality who left a strong mark on the musical life of particularly Brno and Prague in the first half of the 20th century. Of exceptional value are specific citations from his correspondence with other artists, revealing Janáček's creative endeavours, painting his professional career, pointing to conditions in the institutions in which he taught, and ultimately unveiling strong national differences in the period in which he lived. The presentation of Janáček's anything but boring life is thus continuously scientifically supported by Tyrrell's calm, objective methodological narrative proceedings with which he succeeds brilliantly in presenting Janáček's world in exhaustive detail. Beyond the purely biographical side of the narrative, the historical, cultural and musical context in the Czech lands is richly drawn and the whole is supported by comprehensive notes and a detailed, supremely helpful chronological index of Janáček's compositions and writings, arranged by type, and a very extensive bibliography.

This biography thus stands not only on Tyrrell's exhaustive research into Janáček's life and music, but also on his evident familiarity with the whole swirl of Czech music in Janáček's time, and with the different cultural atmospheres of Brno and Prague. We soon realize that we are not only being given a history of Janáček, but also the history of a culture and an aesthetic, with an immense arsenal of citations from correspondence, diaries and memoirs (most memorably those of Janáček's wife Zdenka), as well as numerous newspapers, journals and archives. The monograph doesn't avoid succinct commentary on the works which the composer did complete, and puts them in a gratifyingly substantial context of the music of the time which Janáček knew and had opinions about. It's this kind of rich historical perspective that makes Tyrrell's Janáček biography such a memorable achievement. Worthy of special praise is Tyrrell's straightforward style, diligence and patience in documenting. His self-avowed intent is not to mythologize, but to provide a transparent, accurate and balanced account from which readers may draw their own conclusions and create their own narrative.

Despite being professionally faultless and terminologically precise throughout, the text is distinguished by a smooth, agreeable and juicy

style of writing. The monograph is therefore not only interesting because of its impeccable scientific apparatus, enormous quantities of diverse information for connoisseurs and various experts, but also because of its popular style with which Tyrrell manages, in the noblest sense of the word, to convince even those readers searching for an exciting life story of one of the most important opera composers of all time. In this respect Tyrrell appears to be a natural storyteller with a very good story to tell. This monograph is, for the above-mentioned reasons, a magnificent achievement, indispensable not only to those interested in Janáček's life, but also to those seeking a broad view of Eastern European culture before the break-up of the Habsburg Empire. The crucial significance of this book is and will surely remain for many years a bible of the 20th century's greatest opera composer.

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