

LEOŠ JANÁČEK

Born 3 July 1854 in Hukvaldy, Moravia; died 12 August 1928 in Ostrava, Moravia.

Arranged by Manfred Honeck and Tomáš Ille (b. 1971)

Symphonic Suite from *Jenůfa* (1894-1903; arranged in 2013)

PREMIERE OF OPERA: Brno, 21 January 1904; Brno Theater; C.M. Hrazdira, conductor

PSO PREMIERE OF SYMPHONIC SUITE: Dusseldorf, 7 September 2013; Tonhalle; Manfred Honeck, conductor

THESE PERFORMANCES MARK THE AMERICAN PREMIERE OF THE SYMPHONIC SUITE

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 24 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

In the late 1880s, the Czech press reported two incidents that the playwright Gabriela Preissová summarized as follows: "In the first, a lad wounded a girl, his brother's sweetheart, while slicing cabbage. He wounded her in the face deliberately because he loved her himself. In the second, a woman helped her step-daughter get rid of the fruits of her love (the girl threw the baby into the sewer)." Following the success of her play *The Farm Mistress* at the National Theater in Prague in 1889, Preissová was encouraged by the company's manager to write another drama for them quickly, and she borrowed the two crimes of passion described above as the premises of *Her Step-Daughter*. Though *Her Step-Daughter* won favor with audiences upon its premiere on November 9, 1890, it was savaged by the critics, who professed themselves shocked by its brutal realism, and the play was hastily withdrawn by the National Theater.

Just two months later, however, in January 1891, *Her Step-Daughter* was staged in Brno, the capital of Moravia, where it was seen by Leoš Janáček, who was then laboring to forge a creative idiom that would capture Moravian life and language in music as had Preissová in her plays. He turned first not to Preissová's stage works, however, but to one of the short stories from her 1886 collection, *Tales from Slovácko* (the eastern region of Moravia bordering Slovakia, where the author lived during the 1880s), as the basis for a one-act opera titled *The Beginning of a Romance*, though that work was largely a pastiche of the folk songs he was collecting at that time. He then took up *Her Step-Daughter* for a fully original operatic setting, and secured the necessary rights from the author. (Permission to use *The Farm Mistress* for an opera had already been granted to Josef Bohuslav Foerster, critic, composer and teacher at the Prague Conservatory, who premiered the opera under the title *Eva* in 1899.) Janáček made his own libretto from *Her Step-Daughter*, cutting and consolidating the story as necessary, but retaining the distinctive inflections and rhythms of Preissová's stage dialogue. Janáček was at work on the new opera, his third, by early 1894, calling it *Jenůfa* to distinguish it from the original play. "He seldom had time for it during the day," his housekeeper, Marie Stejskalová, recalled, "but he devoted all his free evenings to it. In the morning, I brought a lamp filled with paraffin into his study, the next day I took it away empty. The mistress would look at it: 'He's been writing the whole night through again.' I find it strange that most of *Jenůfa* was written by the light of a paraffin-lamp." Swamped with teaching, other composing projects, collecting and publishing folk songs, running the city's music journal, and raising a family, Janáček worked on his opera for the next nine years, sketching, revising, orchestrating and tirelessly shaping his music to the sounds of the Moravian dialect of the text and the tragedy and redemption of the story.

The composition of *Jenůfa* became part of Janáček's life, and the work took on an intense personal quality as he identified the title character with his own teenage daughter, Olga. "Olga became a young woman during those nine years," Marie Stejskalová explained, "she began to seek her place in the world. And then came her illness [typhoid fever, contracted in May 1902] and her death — and all that overlaid *Jenůfa*. The more sick that Olga became, the more obsessed she was with her father's new opera. And sensitive as he was, he put his pain over Olga into his work, the suffering of his daughter into *Jenůfa*'s suffering.... The master once came to me: 'Marie, do you know *Zdravas, kralovno* [a Czech version of the *Salve Regina*]? I went to get my prayer book, and looked up *Zdravas, kralovno*. The master took the book into his study, and after a while I heard the beginning of the song [Jenůfa's aria in Act II], which has now gone round the world. People weep during it. I think this is because the master's heart so wept and bled when he wrote *Zdravas, kralovno*." Olga's condition continued to deteriorate as *Jenůfa* neared completion until her death became imminent. Marie Stejskalová remembered that day, February 26, 1903: "In the afternoon, Olga was quite well. We all sat at her bed. During that time the master was just finishing *Jenůfa*. The whole time that he composed it, he had to tell Olga about it; she knew it well. Now she

asked: 'Daddy, play me *Jenůfa*. I will never hear your opera in the theatre.' The master sat and played. If Olga had asked him to have his hand cut off, if that would have relieved her for a moment, he would have done so at once. When the mistress heard the beginning of *Jenůfa*, she held her head and ran into the kitchen so as not to burst out crying in front of Olga. The latter lay there peacefully, and without moving listened to the entire opera. The master's hands trembled, he was white as death, but he went on to the end. When he got up from the piano, Olga said to him: 'It's beautiful, what a pity that I won't see it.'" She died that night, just short of her 21st birthday. "I would bind *Jenůfa* simply with the black ribbon of the long illness, suffering and laments of my daughter, Olga," Janáček confided in his memoirs.

Jenůfa was premiered in Brno to an enthusiastic reception on January 21, 1904, though the production facilities were barely adequate and the orchestra seriously undermanned. The opera was immediately recognized as a milestone in Czech cultural life, but it took twelve years for the National Theater in Prague, the country's leading opera house, to agree to stage the work — Janáček, it seems, had offended the company's director with an injudicious (if justified) review of one of his compositions many years before. Janáček, at age 62, had finally achieved recognition not only as a composer of world stature, but also shown how music could embody the speech and spirit of his beloved homeland. During the remaining twelve years of his life, he created a remarkable series of stage works that contain some of the most powerful music drama ever conceived: *Katya Kabanova*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *The Makropoulos Affair* and *From the House of the Dead*. It was the most remarkable late blossoming by any composer in the history of the art, and its catalyst was the opera into which he almost literally poured his life's blood: *Jenůfa*.

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Jenůfa is set in a remote village in Moravia in the late 1800s. Jenůfa, young and attractive, is loved by two half-brothers, Steva and Laca, but she returns only the affections of Steva, by whom she is pregnant. Laca, still devoted to Jenůfa, hopes that Steva will be conscripted into the army so that he can press his own suit with the girl, but Steva, haughty, often drunk and unrepentant over Jenůfa's pregnancy, avoids being drafted. At the end of Act I, the jealous Laca, unaware of Jenůfa's pregnancy and convinced that Steva loves her only for her beauty, slashes her cheek with his knife, and is immediately remorseful.

Act II takes place five months later, during winter, in the isolated cottage of Jenůfa's step-mother, the Kostelnicka (a female sacristan, or keeper of a church's vessels and vestments; her proper name is not given in the opera), who has hidden Jenůfa through the final months of her pregnancy and the birth of her son, Stevuska, eight days earlier. Jenůfa sits at a sewing table, a scarf covering her scarred cheek. Jenůfa and the Kostelnicka share their anxieties, Jenůfa fussing over the child, the Kostelnicka voicing her disappointment in her step-daughter and suggesting that she pray to God "to take the infant off your hands." Jenůfa says that she feels faint, and the Kostelnicka sends her off to bed with a sleeping draught. The Kostelnicka, disgusted that the father has not tried to find Jenůfa, summons Steva to her cottage to tell him of his son's birth and to urge him to marry Jenůfa. He says that his love for Jenůfa vanished when she was disfigured, and that he has become engaged to the mayor's daughter. He offers to give Jenůfa money for the child, "only please don't tell everyone it's mine." Refusing to see either the mother or the child, Steva runs away as Jenůfa is heard crying out in her sleep.

Just as the Kostelnicka asks who will save Jenůfa, Laca enters. He has visited her regularly during the past months, always declaring his love for Jenůfa, whom he has been told is away in Vienna. She reveals that Jenůfa never left the village, but was secluded until she gave birth to Steva's child, and that Steva has refused to marry her. When Laca, who has never abandoned his desire to marry Jenůfa, worries that he would have to take on Steva's child as well as a new wife, the Kostelnicka tells him that the infant has died. She sends Laca off on an errand. In a wrenching scene, the Kostelnicka wrestles with her conscience until she decides to drown the baby in the icy mill-stream. She wraps the infant, "the fruit of sin," in her shawl and rushes out. Jenůfa, still groggy from the sleeping draught, awakes and misses Stevuska, but thinks that the Kostelnicka has taken him to show her friends at the mill. She removes a picture of the Virgin from the wall, places it on the table, kneels, and utters a tender prayer for the protection of her child. The Kostelnicka, shivering and terrified, returns. When Jenůfa asks her about little Stevuska, she replies that he has died while Jenůfa has been unconscious with a fever for two days. Jenůfa resigns herself to her loss, as well as to the news that Steva will marry the mayor's daughter. Laca returns. Jenůfa thanks him for the kind words she has overheard during his visits, and accepts his ardent proposal of marriage. The Kostelnicka blesses the union, but curses Steva: "Woe to him, and woe to me." A violent gust of wind blows a window open. The Kostelnicka, deeply troubled, observes that it is "as though death were peering into the house."

Two months later (Act III) the guests arrive at the Kostelnicka's cottage for the wedding of Jenůfa and Laca. The festivities are interrupted by news that an infant's body has been found in the thawing mill-stream. The gathering crowd suspects Jenůfa of having drowned her own child, but the Kostelnicka confesses her guilt. Jenůfa is at first furious, but then realizes the profound love that drove her deeply religious step-mother to commit such an act. When the full story is revealed, the mayor's daughter breaks her engagement to Steva: "There's no girl who would marry him now." Jenůfa forgives the Kostelnicka, who is led away by the mayor, and finds comfort in Laca's abiding love for her.

The Symphonic Suite from *Jenůfa* was arranged in 2013 by Manfred Honeck and Czech composer and guitarist Tomáš Ille (b. 1971), a graduate of the Prague Conservatory and Academy of Music, who has written for concert, film, theater and educational activities. His compositions and arrangements have been performed by the Czech Philharmonic, Czech Nonet, Pilsen Philharmonic and other of the country's leading soloists and ensembles. Honeck and Ille wrote, "The Suite features typical Czech elements similar to those found in the Dvořák Violin Concerto, including dances and dramatic moments characteristic of Janáček's style. The instrumentation follows mostly the original instrumentation of Janáček, with a few exceptions. The Suite is in a single movement played without pause and presents gripping and important melodies and dances from the opera. These include: Dance (Act I, Steva and Chorus): *Daleko, široko do těch Nových Zámků* ('Far away in the town of Nových Zámků'); Aria (Act II, Jenůfa): *Tož umřel můj chlapčok radostný* ('He died then, my darling baby boy'); Dance (Act I, Chorus): *Všeci sa ženija* ('They're all for marrying'); Aria (Act I, Grandmother Buryja): *Každý párek si musí svoje trápení přestát* ('Love must always endeavour to triumph o'er misfortune'); Dance (Act III, Chorus): *Ej mamko, mamko, maměnko moja!* ('Hey mother, mother, little mother mine!'); Act II, final scene; and Act III, final scene."