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JENŮFA AND THE END OF THE AFFAIR



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IT TAKES A VILLAGE



Set design for *Jenůfa* by Charles Edwards

A small Moravian community is the setting
for one of the 20th century's greatest operas

BY ROGER PINES

Jenůfa will change your life—or, to be more specific, your *operagoing* life. Once you experience this kind of emotional impact in opera, your idea of the art form and its communicative power changes forever.

I first heard *Jenůfa* at the Vienna Staatsoper, as a music student in my early twenties. My companion and I emerged from the performance literally unable to speak. We headed for the only affordable place we could go to recover—McDonald's! There we sat, vainly attempting to pull ourselves together after the most shattering evening we'd ever spent in an opera house.

Jenůfa brings out the best in an opera company, perhaps because it centers on a genuine community within which performers are compelled to play the drama honestly; the externalized gesticulating that frequently passes for acting in opera goes by the board. Instead performers must work from the *inside*, and from that comes absolute honesty onstage.

Those accustomed to “standard” Italian, French, and German repertoire could conceivably approach *Jenůfa* as music from another planet. The score is indeed tied to the rhythms and inflections of Moravia, the composer's homeland. And yet—even at first hearing—this opera's accessibility is evident, whether in exuberant folk-like melodies or full-blown lyricism.

We owe the text and score to two remarkable creative artists: Gabriela Preissová (1862-1946), who wrote the original play; and the composer who adapted it, Leoš Janáček (1854-1928). Country life provided Preissová with wonderful material; her story “The Beginning of a Romance” served as the source for Janáček's second opera, which bore the same title. Following her successful first play, *The Farmer's Woman* (1889), Preissová wrote a second play, *Her Stepdaughter* (1890), Janáček's source for *Jenůfa*.

This extraordinary drama is about ordinary people: Jenůfa, a village girl; feckless Števa, whose illegitimate child she bears; Laca, who slashes Jenůfa's cheek out of jealousy but is eventually rewarded for his devotion; and Kostelnička, whose murder of her stepdaughter's child leads to the opera's hair-raising climax. These central figures—and the villagers surrounding them—reach out across all boundaries to touch our very core.

Alas, that was hardly the prevalent feeling when Preissová's play premiered. Prague critics found the dramatic content distasteful. Their general attitude: “Where we come from, people just don't *do* this sort of thing.” They didn't realize that accounts of similar events in a local paper prompted Preissová to write her play in the first place! (The cold critical response so distressed her that she produced no other writing of comparable significance.) She happily gave Janáček permission to set *Her Stepdaughter* as an opera, and his dedication to the work impressed her. She must have been gratified that, even though cuts were necessary, Janáček's libretto made no changes at all in her actual language, except in the first-act recruits' song and the third-act wedding song, which were traditional texts.

The first play ever adapted by a Czech composer for opera, *Her*



LACA



JENŮFA



KOSTELNICKA



ŠTEVA

Stepdaughter spoke to Janáček on many levels. He spent his entire life in Moravia, where the story is set, and he instinctively understood every aspect of village life. His familiarity with villagers' actual inflections, whether in speech or song, led to a naturalness and inevitability in the way *Jenůfa's* score developed.

An emotional being by nature, Janáček was also a busy man, his energies consumed daily by teaching and conducting obligations—not to mention his difficult marriage. That he found time to compose at all seems miraculous. *Jenůfa* took nine years (1892–1903) to complete, during which Janáček spent much time in his beloved Moravian countryside. Preissová later recalled that the composer “studied the cries of young men at their folk dancing, he went off to the mill where he listened to and noted down the noises of the turning and rumble of the mill wheel.”

Janáček struggled in creating this work. His family's maid, Marie Stejskalová, whose memories provide

an invaluable glimpse into Janáček's private life, wrote, “Sometimes it seemed to me that the master was battling with *Jenůfa*, as if he went into the study not to compose but to fight.” A few years prior to beginning *Jenůfa* the composer's son Vladimír, not yet three years old, suffered a

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fatal illness. Now, as Janáček was finishing the opera, his only surviving child, Olga, fell ill as well. In her final days, she insisted that her father play through *Jenůfa* for her. She died shortly thereafter, at just 20. The inconsolable Janáček would later write in his autobiography, “I would bind [the score of] *Jenůfa* with the black ribbon of the long illness, the pain, and the sighing of my daughter Olga and my little boy Vladimír.”

The composer's despair was magnified by the Prague National Theater's rejection of *Jenůfa*—the subject matter was deemed unacceptable. Janáček's spirits rose, however, when the National Theater of Brno (the city where he lived and worked) premiered it successfully on January 21,

1904. Janáček still looked to Prague for the imprimatur of national acclaim; when the National Theater there finally produced *Jenůfa* eleven years later, the public, including many Czech cultural leaders, showered Janáček with long-overdue praise.

Although Janáček preferred his original title *Její pastorkyňa* (*Her Stepdaughter*, sometimes translated *Her Foster Daughter*, after the Preissová play), Max Brod retitled it

Jenůfa. Brod had enthusiastically reviewed the Prague production; his German translation of the libretto made *Jenůfa* possible for important German and Austrian theaters, where repeated successes created a lightning bolt of international recognition for Janáček. At the time of the 1918 Vienna production he was 54, with six more memorable operas still ahead. *Jenůfa*, however, remains his most popular work.

For the audience, *Jenůfa*'s richness stems in part from vignettes of the individual "types" making up the opera's community: Grandmother Buryjovka, whose cautionary words are ignored by her grandsons, Števa and Laca; the sensible mill foreman, hard-pressed to understand Laca's frustration; the pompous Mayor, his condescending wife, their shallow daughter. Naturally, there are also the villagers themselves, carefree in the folk singing and dancing of Act One and appalling in their "rush to judgment" when *Jenůfa* is suspected of murder in Act Three.

The heart of *Jenůfa* is Kostelnička's relationship with her stepdaughter.



The Mayor, his Wife and their daughter Karolka

These are magnificent characterizations: the older woman, whose emotional agony and "tough love" emerge in monologues of near-Wagnerian scale; and the title heroine, whose journey from innocence to grief to wisdom emerges in music of incomparable expressive warmth. Janáček is a terrific operatic psychologist,

especially in presenting Kostelnička's transition from the village's formidable, deeply respected sextoness to a woman regarded as a murderer by all but *Jenůfa* herself. Her first-act address to *Jenůfa* reveals that Kostelnička had herself been the downtrodden wife of a cruel, unfaithful husband (she fears that

Jenůfa will suffer the same fate if she marries Števa). We eventually become aware of the importance of religion in her life; she knows that killing the child will damn her forever. "I sought to save *Jenůfa*'s life and her happiness," she says in her harrowing confession.

What of the heroine herself? HGO's *Jenůfa*, Patricia Racette, does not find her wholly sympathetic in the early scenes: "She's not nice to Laca, she's dismissive, which is cruel in itself, isn't it?" But, in *Jenůfa*'s forgiving both Laca and her stepmother for the wrongs they have done her, Racette



Houston Grand Opera's *Jenůfa*. Costume designs by Jon Morrell

finds “a message about graciousness and forgiveness —also about the complexities in life, how they affect people around us, and how good people can behave badly.”

Among significant opera composers of his time, Janáček stands apart above all for the degree to which his vocal style is inextricably linked to the sounds of Czech and his orchestra to his homeland’s folk music. Performances over the decades, however, have shown that his operas are sophisticated enough to place the composer in the same company as his contemporaries—Strauss, Puccini, and the rest—as a true man of the theater. His sense of dramatic timing in *Jenůfa* is unerring, especially in Act III, when Janáček creates one devastating effect after another: Jano’s frantic interruption of the wedding to reveal that a baby’s body has been found under the ice; Laca’s volcanic explosion of fury, frightening the outraged villagers into silence; Kostelnička’s declaration of guilt, cutting like a knife through that silence.

But I believe there is another vital reason for Janáček’s partisans to exalt him so passionately: simply stated, his *heart*. Never in his operas will listeners feel him standing at a distance. Instead he is fully present, entering into his characters’ every situation, projecting a humanity as profound as that of Giuseppe Verdi. But, while the emotions of Verdi operas were predominantly those of the royal and nobly born, Janáček looked to common people to bring forth his mastery of opera. *Jenůfa* shows how brilliantly he succeeded. ©

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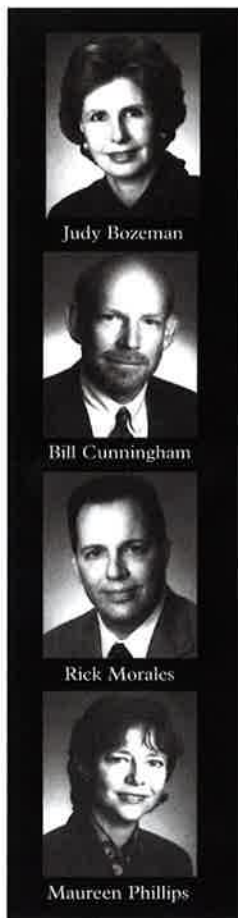


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