

Speech melodies and “pinning down” the present in essays by Leoš Janáček and Milan Kundera

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Abstract: I ask myself the question: can those who compose music be called interpreters? Not of their own work but of the sonorities they imagine while writing. When composers take over (note on staves or record with technical means) sonorities from the environment, which they then use in their works, are they or not interpreters, in the sense of translating what they hear? Should we only mention Vivaldi and Haydn or, closer to us, Messiaen and Stockhausen, composers of all times have used, translated, interpreted the sounds of nature in their works. That is what the Czech Leoš Janáček does also, only that, by registering ambient sonorities, he has a further goal, unlike the others: pinning down the present time. This idea is revolutionary in music, so it has drawn many researchers' attention. A privilege of music, interpretation wears in literature the coat of exegesis. A great contemporary thinker, Milan Kundera is the author of the essay *Testaments betrayed*, in which he compares literature with music, having as references, among other writers, Hemingway and Kafka, which he joins with the great composers Stravinsky and Janáček. Fascinated by his fellow citizen's musical-ontological concept, he dedicates the fifth part of the study to him, entitled *À la recherche du présent perdu*. The study presents the way in which Janáček pins down the past in an own essay, *Smetanova dcera (Smetana's daughter)*, where he uses his renowned *nápěvky mluvy (speech melodies)*. The result is amazing: through the daughter's voice, one seems to hear the father, the great Bedřich Smetana's voice in a fragment of life resurrected after time has passed. Kundera asks questions and formulates answers, interpreting, translating Janáček's concept. This work does not interpret, but brings to the knowledge of the interested musicians aspects which, although belonging to renowned Czech intellectuals, enrich and embellish the spirituality of the world.

Keywords: Janáček, Kundera, essay, melody, speaking.

1. Introduction

The truism according to which humans have always been preoccupied with the passage of time has long fallen into disuse. Some claim nowadays that time passes faster than in the past, an idea that tends to share the same fate. We are all deeply preoccupied with the tumultuous

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present, with the immediate, with the superficial that becomes the past in a second and is quickly set aside, although not necessarily forgotten... Together with the others, artists adapt themselves to the times, look for opportunities to transform their work into “cultural objects” to be sold in the great “market of spiritual goods”. With reception which we can normally assess through our emotions and aesthetic experiences, art tends to increasingly be measured in money, thus becoming the target of financial placements, which subsequently bring in a secure, effortless profit, also devoid of any sensibility.

There are, however, writers and artists preponderantly preoccupied with the world of ideas, of aesthetic emotions and inner experiences, with what feeds man’s overloaded soul. One of these is Milan Kundera, a “novelist, script writer, dramaturge, essayist and poet, whose works combine erotic comedy with political critique and philosophical speculations” (***, *Milan Kundera | Biografie, cărți și fapte* [Milan Kundera. Biography, books and facts], 2018). Born in 1929 in the Czech Republic and having asserted himself from an early age in his native country, where he joins and then is excluded from the communist party because of his political convictions, he manages in 1975 to emigrate to France and also becomes an important representative of French contemporary culture. Milan Kundera is pianist and musicologist Ludvík Kundera’s (***, *Ludvík Kundera*, 2020) son, so it was perfectly normal that he also studied music. Beyond other activities, his father had a determining contribution to the knowledge of the great Czech composer Leoš Janáček (Tyrell, 2001), which explains the writer’s tendency toward music and towards one of his great fellow citizens.

2. The second section

Very few things are known in Romania about the Czech composer that the two Kundera, Ludvík (the father, a musician) and Milan (the son, a writer), appreciate so much. A window towards knowledge is represented by Mrs. Haiganuş Preda-Schimek’s (2010) study about Janáček, one of my studies about Janáček and Shostakovich (Dumitriu, 2021) but also a doctoral thesis defended at the “George Enescu” National University of Arts from Iaşi in 2020 (Cantea, 2020). The present work thus constitutes itself as a new stage of knowledge, being in fact a preamble for a future book, which I intend to dedicate to one of the most important composers of the 20th century.

Oriented towards the musical sphere (composition, picking up folklore, musical pedagogy), Leoš Janáček’s activity also features an important publishing direction that musicological studies and music reviews but also writings of – theoretical and applied – linguistics of the Czech

language are part of. An exceptional merit in gathering all these activities have Nigel Simeone, John Tyrell and Alena Němcová, authors of the only Janáček catalogue (Simeone, Tyrell & Němcová, 1997) published until now. The mentioned authors grouped the materials they had at their disposal (with the initials JW, from Janáček Works) in fifteen categories: JQ/I: (10) Stage works; JW/II: (14) Liturgical works; JW/III: (9) Choral-orchestral works; JW/IV: (45) Choral works; JW/V: (17) Vocal works; JW/VI: (18) Orchestral works; JW/VII: (13) Chamber works; JW/VIII: (33) Keyboard works (piano for both hands and four hands, organ); JW/IX: (13) Unfinished works, for various instruments or ensembles; JW/X: (23) Lost works, for various instruments or ensembles; JW/XI: (9) Planned works; JW/XII: (5) Arrangements and transcriptions; JW/XIII: (5) Folk music editions; JW/XIV: Spurious works; JW/XV-a: (310) Writings published during Janáček's lifetime; JW/XV-b: (44) Writings unpublished during Janáček's lifetime; JW/XV-c: (3) Undatable writings; JW/XV-d: (24) Lectures and Papers. Therefore, there are over 600 bibliographical entries, out of which more than half don the literary cloak.

The starting point of my exposition is represented by the comparison between music and literature, as conceived by Milan Kundera in a part of his essay *Les testaments trahis* (*Testaments betrayed*), written in French (Kundera, 1993). A refined connoisseur of the past and present of literature and music, the Czech writer formulates the present time as the central theme of his essay and the way in which it can be “pinned down” (sic!¹) in a literary or musical work. The work is structured in nine so-called parts, each with a poetic, allusive title. The title of the 5th part, *À la recherche du présent perdu* is a subtle allusion to the title of Marcel Proust's famous novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In search of lost time*)² (Proust, 1913-27). In fact, the Czech writer wishes not to lead in a completely different direction, as the chosen title is much less metaphorical than it seems. Therefore, upon reading the part entitled *À la recherche du présent perdu*, we ascertain that he means the lifetime passion of a great Czech composer, about whom Kundera confesses: “Janáček is the creator of what I consider the most important opera aesthetic in the era of modern art. I say «I consider» because I don't wish to hide my personal passion for him” (Kundera, 1995, p. 73).

Janáček composed no less than ten operas, a few of which being numbered among the most important lyrical works of the 20th century. Kundera writes about these: “Janáček's feat was tremendous: he discovered a new world for opera, the world of prose. [...] I've said he discovered the

¹ We will see later why I have used this term and not another.

² A psychological novel written by Marcel Proust from 1906 to 1922, published in seven volumes from 1913 to 1927 (***, *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In search of lost time*], 2022).

world of prose, for prose is not only a form of discourse distinct from verse; it is also as aspect of reality, its daily, concrete, momentary aspect, and the opposite of myth” (Kundera, 1995, p. 73). For composers, assembling opera librettos has always represented a veritable trial, few being truly content with the literary material supplied by librettists. It is also Janáček’s case, who gradually reaches the conclusion that only he is capable to assemble a libretto, based on which he can write an opera exactly the way he wants to. It was not only his literary preoccupations that contribute to making this decision but also his special interest in the audible manifestations of the surrounding world and their notation, which had in time become a daily activity.

Therefore, the core of the problem, which I am drawing your attention to, like Milan Kundera in the 5th part of his essay, is constituted from those *speech melodies, nápěvky mluvy* in the Czech language, the mode through which, during his whole life, Leoš Janáček noted on paper snapshots of daily life. The research of these small literary-musical fragments gained special momentum in recent decades, with Bohumír Štědroň³ and John Tyrrell⁴ among those who deepened Ludvík Kundera’s initiatives. Beside the above-mentioned *Catalogue*, various books and studies have been published, among which some have examined in detail an activity that certain of the composer’s contemporaries considered bizarre but which reveals an especially complex understanding by Janáček of the sonic phenomena in nature but also of the Czech language, be it spoken, recited or sung.

It is known about Janáček that he was a great patriot, a nationalist intellectual in a positive sense, profoundly preoccupied with the spirituality of the people he belonged to. This determined the language of his origins and the musical folklore in Moravia to be at the center of the composer’s attention, who went out in the field to pick up folklore but also assumed the role of music critic and musicologist. As I have previously mentioned, his press contributions in this quality are especially numerous.

The circumstance of being face to face with peasants placed Janáček not only in the situation of registering the melodies played by these, but, from a certain point on, of also noting what they were speaking. Thus, the composer took up the habit of noting snapshots of the surrounding life, which he continued and perfected after finishing the activity of picking up folklore. Janáček would register what he heard with notes written on staves ad hoc, to which he mostly added words, which explained the respective situation. His intention was to pin down the present, in order to subsequently

³ Czech musicologist, pedagogue, publicist and pianist (1905-1982). (Poledňák, 2008)

⁴ British musicologist (1942-2018), the author of a few books and articles about Janáček. (***, *John Tyrrell*, 2012)

capitalize on it in his works. Kundera states that: “what most interested Janáček in his research on spoken language was not the specific rhythm of the language [...] or its prosody [...], but the influence on spoken intonation of a speaker's shifting psychological state; he sought to comprehend the *semantics of melodies* [...]; for Janáček, only the note that is expression, that is emotion, has the right to exist” (Kundera, 2008, pp. 74-75). All the documents reunited under the name of *nápěvky mluvy* (speech melodies) prove the preoccupations of a veritable psychologist but also of a linguist, who clothes the concatenations of syllables and specific accents in his own musical-literary, often indecipherable semiography, but which, I underline once more, is meant to pin down the present, to stop time.

In the essay published at the prestigious Parisian publishing house, Milan Kundera raises the problem of the mode through which every one of us keeps the memory of the present time. “Try to reconstruct a dialogue from your own life [...]. The most precious, the most important situations are utterly gone. Their abstract sense remains [...], perhaps a detail or two, but the visual-acoustic concreteness of the situation in all its continuity is lost” (Kundera, 2008, pp. 69-70). Through his persevering work of pinning down the present, Janáček acts exactly contrary to this human tendency. In the archive of his memorial museum in Brno are kept a few notebooks of the composer's daily notes⁵, written proof of fragments of life, which he witnessed and considered worth fixing in time.

Gradually, the musician coagulates a veritable theory of *nápěvky mluvy* (*speech melodies*): “Janáček's speech-melody theory is not set out in a single document but is distributed among more than 90 printed articles and several unpublished sources” (Wingfield, 1992, p. 282). On 8 March 1928, just a few months before his death, Leoš Janáček revealed his credo in an interview which he granted to the Prague newspaper *Literární svět* (The literary world)⁶.

Not only in the context of the present study, but also for the great Czech artist's entire life and activity, the following statements, extracted from that interview, have exceptional importance: “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! At once I knew what the person was like: I knew how 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 perhaps wept. Sounds, the intonation of human speech, indeed of every

⁵ For a concrete example, see <https://melgun.net/travaux/the-notebooks/>

⁶ The photography of the page in the newspaper where the interview was published can be seen at <http://archiv.ucl.cas.cz/index.php?path=LitS/1.1927-1928/12/1.png>

living being, have had for me the deepest truth. And you see – this was my *need in life*.” (Leoš Janáček in Zemanová, 1989, p. 121)

Maybe it is from these statements that Milan Kundera departs from when he discusses the problem of catching and fixing in time the surrounding reality in a musical version. “The question is: should a musician acknowledge the existence of the world of sound outside of music, and study it?” (Kundera, 2008, p. 74), he writes and continues with a further two questions, urging his readers to a profound meditation. The first seems easier: “What is a conversation is real life, in the concreteness of the present moment?” (Kundera, 2008, p. 75), while the second is downright troubling, especially for a musician: “What is the melodic truth of a vanished moment?” (Kundera, 2008, p. 76) In the essay *Testaments betrayed*, Milan Kundera gives us his answer as a writer - music lover, referring to Janáček and his *nápěvky mluvy* (*speech melodies*): “The search for the vanished present; the search for the melodic truth of a moment; the wish to surprise and capture this fleeting truth; the wish to plumb by that means the mystery of the immediate reality constantly deserting our lives, which thereby becomes the thing we know least about. This, I think, is the onto-logical import of Janacek's studies of spoken language and, perhaps, the ontological import of all his music.” (Kundera, 2008, pp. 76-77)

I am reminding here again that Janáček noted down a few hundreds of concrete life situations, crude realities joined by his literary-musical commentaries. Some of these saw the light of print during the composer's life in the various local and national publications which had him as their collaborator. After Janáček's death from 1928, a few collections of essays, selected and published by Czech musicologists were presented to the interested public in Czechoslovakia and subsequently in the Czech Republic. In 1989, Mirka Zemanová, a musicology specialist born in the Czech Republic and settled in London translated into the English language a few of these publications and gathered them in a book entitled *Janáček's uncollected essays on music* (Zemanová, 1989). Among others, here we find an essay, which Janáček published in Brno in the newspaper *Lidové noviny* (The people's newspaper), XXII, no. 497 of 3 October 1924, in which the author includes a series of these *nápěvky mluvy* (*speech melodies*). The title of the essay is *Smetanova dcera* (*Smetana's daughter*). Under the form of a story, the composer reproduces a discussion, which he had had with his great forerunner, Bedřich Smetana's daughter, Zdeňka Smetanová-Hejdušková (Zemanová, 1989, p. 51) and, next to the formulation in prose, he registers on staves some of his collocutor's words. In my opinion, the essay demonstrates the true virtuosity that Janáček had reached in noting down the present moments and the almost perfect skill of his questions. To these are added his theoretical concept, which we can consider as a

precursor of the concepts of musical narratology (the fictional world of music) and direct discourse (quoting a speaking situation in which one or several persons participate)⁷.

For competent readers, for music lovers even more, what surprises from the outset is the musical form, which the composer renders to this literary work, that of circles of ideas having a common theoretical centre.

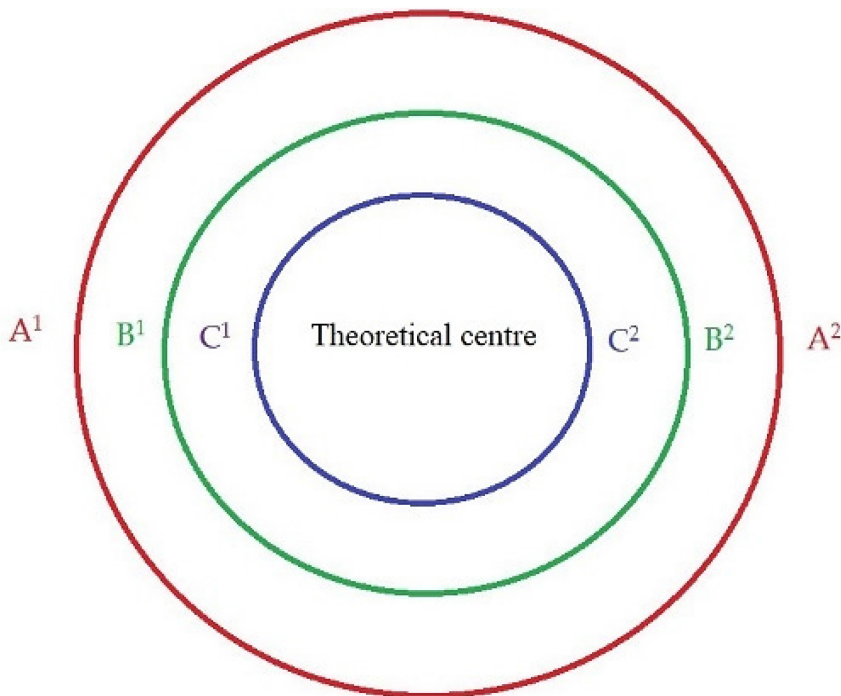


Fig. 1 Template in concentric circles

Horizontally, it looks like this:

$$\mathbf{A^1 - B^1 - C^1 - The\ theoretical\ centre - C^2 - B^2 - A^2}$$

Therefore, the musical form determines me to consider that reproducing the content of the essay can be interesting not only for musical historiography but also for analytical musicology.

In A¹, with the role of introduction, we find out how Janáček waits for Zdeňka in front of a store, from where she buys a lemon. It is an absolutely banal situation, from which we can surmise that their meeting

⁷ Both notions are treated in depth in Štědroň, 2006, pp. 79-108.

had been previously arranged. While heading home, she is astounded to observe him noting something in a notebook.

B¹ features a few subtle questions, which reveal Janáček's interest in finding out information about Smetana, interrupted by other, apparently banal, matters, but which may be part of a premeditated plan of the essayist-composer. Firstly, by telling her that she probably inherited her father's manner of speaking, he sets Zdeňka a trap, while actually chatting her up. Slightly naive, she confesses her age (63) but also divulges the fact that she has no access to the house in Litomyšl, where Smetana had been born.

C¹ reveals concrete memories of Smetana's daughter about her father: he had an absolute ear (he could always intone an *A*) and would work in the morning. Like in a game of tennis, the two interlocutors take the initiative of dialogue alternatively, as Zdeňka also asks Janáček questions.

Somewhat suddenly we reach the theoretical core of the essay, in which Leoš Janáček expresses his opinions to the way in which in daily life each one of us quotes someone else's words, trying to imitate the respective person's discourse as much as possible. "In that moment it is as if our acquaintance comes alive within us, whether he or she is far away or nearby, alive or already passed away." (Leoš Janáček in Zemanová, 1989, p. 56) We will understand the goal of these thoughts subsequently.

C² also reveals concrete memories of Smetana's daughter but now she takes a step forward and quotes her father, a fact noted immediately by Janáček in his notebook, how else than through a speech melody. Janáček's next, almost enthusiastical exclamation clarifies his statements in the preceding paragraph: "In the quotation of Smetana's words, I hear Smetana himself. This is probably how Bedřich Smetana used to speak. [...] This a tiny fragment of Maestro's speech, transmitted right into our own time by his daughter, through the truthfulness of an immediate idea" (Leoš Janáček in Zemanová, 1989, p. 56). Here is how the melody of Zdeňka's speech "plumbs by that means the mystery of the immediate reality constantly deserting our lives" (Kundera, 2008, pp. 76-77), as Milan Kundera says.

B² features a few banalities about the precarious situation of the copyright of Smetana's offspring, while A² has the role of an ending full of tragedy and pain. In her old age, Zdeňka lacks in means of subsistence and ends up being insulted by a bailiff.

In the concentric circles of the text, Janáček's written expression is laconic, assembled almost exclusively out of sentences, while the theoretical centre also features the extension of phrases. Almost everywhere, especially in the ending, the language reminds one of the way

in which Caragiale expresses himself in some of his tragic short stories: preferably briefly, directly and somewhat crudely. Out of copyright reasons, I cannot reproduce here the essay in its entirety but I warmly urge those who master the Czech language to read the original, while equally directing those who know English towards the version of the essay in this language, included in the compilation made by Mirka Zemanová.

3. Conclusions

At the beginning of this study, I presented the contents of the Janáček Catalogue, where we can number over 300 publications. It is a huge contribution brought to literature by a musician, not only to the musical-theoretical one, but also to the one studying verbal human expression, maybe even to theatre studies.

Beyond the numeric aspect, the fact that the Czech musician was so tenaciously preoccupied with capturing the springs of the water of life, as the famous *nápěvky mluvy* (*speech melodies*) are, represents in itself an ingenious, modern, novel idea up to him. The way in which he used this type of thinking in conceiving most of the works he dedicated to lyrical theatre does not represent my preoccupation of now.

The main goal of this research is bringing Janáček closer to Romanian musicians' knowledge and conscience, first of all in his quality as a publicist. Unfortunately, neither are his compositions known in Romania as they would deserve. I would say quite the opposite. And the last ten-twelve years of his life, with the wonderful love letters, which Janáček addressed to Kamila Stösslová, represent a unique case in the history of music Publishing this correspondence in the Romanian language remains a desideratum, which should preoccupy us...

At the end, another statement regarding Janáček, which Milan Kundera makes in his essay *Testaments betrayed*, seems revealing to me: "It was his passion: to put the living word into musical notation; he left a hundred of these «intonations of spoken language». In the eyes of his contemporaries, this odd activity put him at best among the eccentrics and at worst among the naive who did not understand that music is a created thing and not the naturalistic imitation of life" (Kundera, 2008, p. 74).

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