

Whether or not the opera is a masterpiece matters little, especially to the childlike. Whatever conviction it fails to carry arises from a fundamental conflict between the esthetic of the composer and that of the librettist. A virtue of Gruenberg's music is its mystery; a virtue of Erskine's prose is its elucidation. That both together somehow manage to amuse the listener is almost as much a miracle as it is a fact.

*Randall Thompson*

## JANACEK'S HOUSE OF THE DEAD

THE music of Janacek is just as singular as his career—in old age he stepped out of complete obscurity. Unusual, too, are his operas, the text as well as the score. Both of the works concerning the tragic fate of women, *Jenufa* and *Katja Kabanowa*, have been presented in Berlin. The *Listige Füchlein*, a pregnantly symbolic fairy tale of animals and humans, found no welcome in Germany. The *Sache Makropulos* (1926) is the only one laid in the present time, a “business” opera with telephones and hotel rooms. But the heroine is a singer born in 1576 and still surviving. All this material certainly lacks universal appeal. Its diversity is characteristic of Janacek. He has no theory, he did not winnow literature for his compositions; he merely composed to whatever left a deep impression on him.

In his later years Dostoievsky's *Memoirs from a House of the Dead* made a lasting impression on him and he felt the urge to write music to it. He did not, as is usual, have a poet prepare the text and the scenario, but drew it up himself, though he never wrote a formal “book.” The dialog of the novel was set directly to music. From several characters of Dostoievsky, he created a new figure. Scenes were selected, combined, omitted, just as he pleased. It is certainly the most unusual method by which a libretto has ever been composed.

Never have more undramatic events than these in the house of the dead been presented on an opera stage. Three acts deal with the commonplace routine of a Siberian prison where nothing ever happens. The actionless development is introduced and closed by the admission and release of the political

prisoner, Gorjantschikoff. Through the entire drama the prisoners drag out their sad existence. They work, they eat, they fight, they even improvise a play on a holiday, a hilarious abridgment of *Don Juan*—but primarily and continually, they tell stories. Each reports, with all the detail possible, just what has brought him to Siberia.

But this is far from being a dramatic protest against the rule of the knout in Czarist Russia. Janacek narrates, he does not judge. As a matter of fact all these people are quite properly in jail—thieves, murderers, serious offenders. But they are also human beings, poor devils. That is the point Janacek wants to make—if he wants to make any. "In every creature there is a spark of God," the composer has written on the score.

This is no drama. But to point to Janacek as an example of the modern epic theatre would be a great error. He simply distrusted all dramatic rules. He was able to permit himself such indulgence because he was strong enough as a musician to forge the necessary links.

Janacek's creative power has its source in the springs of Bohemian folk music—springs that still flow freely. In the sphere of the new music, Janacek is one of the very few (and perhaps one of the last) who still has any relation to genuine, simple music-making, to song and dance, to merrymaking at fairs, and to the melancholy of highways. He is far more direct here than Mahler because he is less civilized. But he is not a casual arranger of folk music like his compatriot Weinberger. His is a profound nature.

He loves a colorful, tumultuous orchestra. An example is the *Festliche Messe*, whose splendid color has a pagan effect. He is enthusiastic about brilliant brasses, expressive woodwinds, sweet, divided violins, threatening drums. So deep in his blood is this festive note that he cannot restrain himself from singing, even in this melancholy House of the Dead. He is so stubborn in following his tonal conceptions that he often assigns to the instruments passages quite impossible to perform. The orchestra sometimes plays with complete independence; without the stage, against the stage; always with the rhythmic and melodic spirit of folklore. The prevailing mood is at best suggested and

that not always consistently. There is never any question of interpretation or psychological analysis of the events. But each time the singing voice leads the melodic line, shaped according to the accent of the words in typical Slavic fashion, half psalmodic, half gesticulatory, back to the God-forsaken atmosphere of the prison.

His inconsistencies are not to be regarded as deliberate tricks. When the Pope, giving his blessing, enters to the tune of a march almost of the character of a fox-trot, no trace of irony is intended. Another example is the surprising overture to this sorrowful opera, a cheerful piece, suitable for a concert, with cadenzas for the solo violins. Later we read that for the prolog, sketches for a violin concerto were tried out. This might be called dilettantism, but it is a productive dilettantism, as with Moussorgsky, of whom Janacek often reminds us. A lusty, genuine stirring music but quite inimitable. This naturalistic principle of Janacek's music is fruitful only to a limited extent. In the hands of a less original composer it would degenerate into crude barbarism.

*Aus Einem Totenhaus* was first presented in Mannheim. In Berlin it was the last effort of the Krolloper, an unforgettable performance inspiring directed by Fritz Zweig, set in a dark background by Neher, scenically designed with understanding by Curyel. The production again demonstrated what the avant-garde have lost in this theatre. The public, at least that portion of it which does not cling in stupid obstinacy to Wagner, has every cause to regret that the closing of the Krolloper has deprived it of the opportunity to gain a more thorough understanding of this unusual, last work of Janacek.

*Hans Gutman*

## SOURCE BOOK OF AMERICAN MUSIC

I CONFESS that I anticipated no particular pleasure in reading *Our American Music* by John Tasker Howard. American music seemed to me a dull and trivial subject, of more interest to historical societies and Sons and Daughters of the Revolution than to those whose musical interests outweighed the