

## Reviews

### **‘The Czech Language Is Not Difficult to Sing’**

*Karel Janovický, the London-based composer and coach to the cast of the Royal Opera House’s Rusalka, talks about Dvořák’s fairy-tale and Czech music*

**In the space of two years Opera North, Glyndebourne, the Royal Opera House and Grange Park have all staged Dvořák’s Rusalka. Has Renée Fleming’s espousal of Rusalka’s ‘Song to the Moon’ contributed to the opera’s popularity?**

Renée Fleming’s recording has been one of many over the years. It is true that it took 110 years for *Rusalka* to come to Covent Garden, but *Rusalka* was made popular here long before, in 1959 in fact, by the Czech conductor Vilém Tauský at Sadler’s Wells, and *Rusalka*’s aria by the Australian singer Joan Hammond. The critics did not like the opera at the time – it was a fairy tale, the main character was mute (not all the time, of course), it had *leitmotifs* in it seen at the time merely as a cheap version of Wagner, and the producer, Wendy Toye, was known for her successful productions of pantomime. And on the first night one of London’s last pea-soupers seeped into the theatre and gave the Prince laryngitis. Despite all this, *Rusalka* had firmly been put on the map.

**Why was the ROH’s Rusalka booed on the opening night?**

It was not the music or the singers that met with the audience’s disapproval. Ovation after ovation was given to the conductor, the orchestra and the singers. The music was sublime. The conductor’s shaping of the music was exactly as Dvořák had intended. It was the production brought over from the 2008 Salzburg Festival that people booed. It attempted to tell two different stories at the same time – the one on stage was different from the one expressed by the music and the original libretto - Jaroslav Kvapil’s finest. The surtitles were telling a fairy tale while on stage even Vodník was a client in a brothel. Was this an act of alienation? The new take on the story manages to shock, and so other opera houses have already booked the production for themselves. Blame Bertholt Brecht and Kurt Weill who tried something similar in the 1920s.



**Karel  
Janovický**

**What are the particular challenges for the singers with the libretto in Czech?**

The singers need to know and understand how to project the meaning. They also need to know how to pronounce the words and how to sing them. The Czech language is not difficult to sing. There are only five vowels and Czech consonants are short and crisp. You can do as fast a *patter* in Czech as in Italian. In fact, if – as a singer – you have mastered Italian, you'll find Czech easy. There are difficult sounds for some English and German speakers to pronounce - like *the palatals* (dě, tě, ně - pronounced with the tongue against the palate) and ř (a very short trill with the teeth closed and just two or three flips of the tip of the tongue). However, there is a great tradition of choral societies in this country that sing in Czech and use native speakers to coach them. Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass* is very popular but it is sung in Old Slavonic that does not have the strange and problematic ř.

**Are there British soloists who you consider to have a real feeling for Czech?**

Yes. Janice Watson has perfect Czech, so has Timothy Robinson who has recorded all of Dvořák's *Cypresses*, Anne Murray, Ian Caley, John Upperton, the late Philip Langridge, Clive Bayley, Jeff Lloyd-Roberts, Janis Kelly, Robert Poulton - there have been many, and all excellent. Indeed, ambitious singers today need to have some Czech music in their repertoire.

**Would you agree that Smetana's and Dvořák's operas are sometimes let down by cumbersome and outmoded plots?**

I strongly disagree. The sense of drama needs to be brought out by the producer. You cannot judge an

opera by plot alone. Both *Aida* and *Seraglio* have fairly formulaic plots.

**Do you find Janáček's Excursions of Mr. Brouček a difficult work with an uneven libretto?**

I don't think it is either. Janáček did have problems with his librettists, and often wrote 'the book' himself, and he set the prose to music the way people speak in emotional situations. *Osud* (Fate) is a typical example which David Pountney made into a great piece of opera. He also triumphed with *Mr. Brouček* at the ENO. Producers tend to be shy of *Mr Brouček*, although – or because - it gives them a lot of space. Janáček needs a producer with ideas.

**Can you see a time when Smetana's 'Libuše' would be performed in the UK?**

Why not? It took 47 years for the ROH to stage Martinů's *Greek Passion*. Why not *Libuše*? *Libuše's* Prophecy, 15 minutes long, is a stunning piece for a soprano and should be heard. There are other Czech operas that should be staged. Bělohlávek's recent concert performance of Dvořák's *Jakobín* should speak for itself. *Čert a Káča* (The Devil and Kate) is a great family entertainment. Vítězslav Novák's *Lucerna* (Lantern) is a wonderful opera, to name but a few.

**What is Sir Charles Mackerras's greatest legacy for Czech opera?**

Charles Mackerras studied with the legendary Czech conductor Václav Talich. He got to know the country and the music first hand. He also knew the fate of people like Talich under the Communists. The first thing he did in 1953 was to put on *Kát'a Kabanová*, Janáček's most approachable and easily staged opera. Mackerras was a fine musician and *Kát'a Kabanová*, in Norman Tucker's translation, was an instant success. With his uncanny sense of tempo, it was idiomatically true to what the composer must have wanted. Having learned the language, Mackerras who could travel freely to the then Czechoslovakia, had Janáček's originals copied - courtesy of the very helpful Janáček Fund in Brno - he then deciphered his manuscripts and edited his scores. Mackerras was also responsible for bringing in the rest of the operas, including *The House of the Dead*, and the *Glagolitic Mass*.

**Have you coached any other opera companies?**

Yes. I have worked with the Glyndebourne, Welsh National, Grange Park, as well as the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, and with Manchester, Cambridge, BBC and other choral societies in this country.

**Interview by Jana Sommerlad**