

Zdeněk Skoumal*¹

*Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Langley, Canada

¹Zdenek.Skoumal@kpu.ca

Janáček's Rhythmic Freedom

ABSTRACT

Background

Janáček's approach to rhythm is relatively free; although still employing traditional rhythmic structures, the music displays rhythmic flexibility that gives his compositions special vitality. It engenders a sense of freshness and unpredictability in the context of interesting rhythmic designs. The freedom results from changing phrase lengths, shifting placement of motives, and added beats. In music with text or program it may allow more specific text/music relationships.

Rhythmic freedom may already be seen in Janáček's earliest compositions (added measures, missing time signatures); it was further developed through exposure to folk music and his well-known employment of speech melodies. Its presence — and in Janáček's mind its existence — is justified through its relationship to real life, an outgrowth of the speech melodies, where rhythmic freedom is deemed 'natural'. He wrote: 'If one speaks about the rhythmic setting of a tone, it is necessary to notice how it unfolds in our own life. Our own life makes time grooves on a tone' (Janáček 2007–2008, vol. 1, 361). By this he means that rhythm should not be simply a regular series of time points and patterns, but rather a flexible element that adjusts to changing situations. Natural phenomena, being typically associated with asymmetry and change, are seen to imply asymmetrical and changing rhythms. Conflict, as an unavoidable part of life, appropriately relates to rhythmic conflicts. Such rhythmic freedom forms a significant structural element of Janáček's later works.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

This presentation looks at excerpts from three late works to demonstrate how Janáček's rhythmic freedom allows text-music relationships in his vocal music and rhythmic conflict in his instrumental music.

The first song from the song cycle *The Diary of One Who Vanished* illustrates the text's effect on the rhythmic design: the length of the rhythmic groups is constantly changing, following the text, while a primary motive that initially appears at the end of measures shifts to the beginning of measures. The shift may be interpreted an establishment of the main character's new obsession.

The third movement of the wind sextet *Mládí* contains a built-in rhythmic conflict: the accompaniment is based on three-measure groups, while the main melody is based on four-measure groups. The two parts coexist peacefully when the accompanimental groupings stretch to four-measure groups, but in the latter part of the movement its three-measure groups persist while the melody makes various futile attempts to fit in. The result is rather humorous and as such the passage may suggest a narrative analytical approach.

The third movement of the Second String Quartet begins with a gentle rocking motion in all four instruments, the 9/8 time signature reflected in repeated quarter-note/eighth-note patterns and three-beat groups. And yet, in the third measure we find a rhythmic conflict that disrupts this serenity: the first violin adds an extra beat to its third group and is no longer aligned with the other instruments. This might be interpreted as an attempt to correct the initial pattern — which begins on an upbeat but sounds as a downbeat — or programmatically perhaps as a kind of liberation or enthusiasm of the first violin — Janáček's message to his beloved Kamila, to whom the quartet is dedicated.

When the lower parts attempt to correct the misalignment with their own extra beat, the violin omits a beat to form a two-beat group and prevents the intended correction. And thus the conflict continues; it is only partially resolved at the end of the section where the accents are ultimately aligned, but not the rhythmic patterns. As in other Janáček passages, the metrical conflict does not involve consistently misaligned patterns, but rather those that are constantly shifting and thereby reflecting or suggesting dramatic developments.

Methods

Janáček himself was always deeply conscious of the extra-musical meaning of a piece. Jaroslav Vogel writes: 'Few composers, in fact, have had a greater tendency to approach every subject from its dramatic point of view than Janáček. This was due to his extraordinary imagination, the vital need to place his works in a localized scenic context linked organically with the inner theme' (Vogel 1981, 10). The nature of this music literally invites a narrative analytical approach. The musical details may suggest that Janáček himself was following a narrative at the time of composition, but more often the relationships are not specific. Due to Janáček's acute awareness of speech inflections and other natural sounds, his compositions with text naturally display to a close relationship between text and music, not only as standard word painting, but also as one that reflects various psychological states.

The analyses employ ideas of more recent rhythmic theories as well as those of musical narrative. Harald Krebs' concepts of 'direct' and 'indirect' rhythmic dissonance are particularly appropriate for the passages examined here.

Implications

Janáček's music has often been praised for its rhythmic character; this is partly due to its use of rhythmic features of Czech and Moravian folk music (such as the typically short, symmetrical designs). Nevertheless, as this study suggests, its use of rhythmic freedom is equally important and may also allow closer relationship between text and music. The vocal piece analysed indicates that such analytical approach may be successfully applied to the study of Janáček's operas.

Keywords

Janáček, Rhythm, Text-Music Relationships, Musical Narrative.

REFERENCES

- Burghauser, Jarmil, 1984–1985. ‘Hudební metrika v Janáčkově teoretickém díle’ [Musical time in Janáček’s theoretical works], in Řada hudebněvědná (ed.), *Sborník prací filozofické fakulty Brněnské univerzity 19–20*, vol. 33–34. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, Filozofická fakulta, 137–53.
- Forte, Allen, 1983. ‘Motive and Rhythmic Contour in Brahms’s Alto Rhapsody’, *Journal of Music Theory* 27: 255–71.
- Janáček, Leoš, 2007–2008. *Teoretické dílo (1877–1927)* [Theoretical works (1877–1927)], 2 vol., ed. Leoš Faltus, Eva Drlíková, Svatava Příbáňková, and Jiří Zaharádka. Brno: Editio Janáček.
- Krebs, Harald, 1999. *Fantasy Pieces: Metrical Dissonance in the Music of Robert Schumann*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Novak, John, 2016. *The Symphonic Works of Leoš Janáček*. Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang.
- Vogel, Jaroslav, 1981. *Leoš Janáček: A Biograph*, rev. ed. Karel Janovický. New York (NY): W.W. Norton and Company.