

# A Study in Subtlety

Director Annilese Miskimmon and conductor Stuart Stratford talk to David Kettle about their approach to Janáček's transcendent opera *Jenůfa*

'I think the least interesting thing in the opera should be that a baby is killed.' It's hard to ignore the shocking act at the centre of Janáček's *Jenůfa*, but Annilese Miskimmon, who directs Scottish Opera's new production, is keen to stress that it's actually just one element in the complex web of relationships and motivations that the work picks apart. 'In fact, everyone's kind of a victim in the opera,' she continues, 'and a catalyst in their own fate.'

It's not so much that *Jenůfa* is a dark piece, more that it poses some tough questions about people in difficult circumstances. Is it out of love or shame, for example, that the Kostelníčka kills the illegitimate

baby of *Jenůfa*, her stepdaughter? Why does *Jenůfa* remain infatuated with the wayward and uninterested Števa, who may be about to be conscripted into the army, rejecting the love of his dependable half-brother Laca? And can she really show such sudden, saintly forgiveness at the work's conclusion? 'I think it's interesting when people do the wrong things for the right reasons,' continues Annilese. 'That's the most destructive force sometimes.'

And though it's easy to see the opera as firmly rooted in its original setting in a claustrophobic Czech village, conductor Stuart Stratford points to the work's broader significance. 'As an audience member, you have to be drawn in and

think: yes, that could have been me, or my mother, or my son. I think it's vital to relate the opera to the very human frailties that people have, which are the same when it was premiered in 1904 as they are more than a century later.'

Annilese's new staging is a co-production between Scottish Opera and the Danish National Opera, where she's Artistic Director and General Manager. 'Janáček isn't well known in Denmark,' she admits, pointing to recent productions of *Káťa Kabanová* and *The Cunning Little Vixen* that have made their mark there. And indeed, Scottish Opera was one of the first companies to look seriously at Janáček's operas in the UK, in a series of productions with Welsh National Opera in the 1970s and 1980s.

More recently, there was a well-received small-scale production of *Káťa Kabanová* that toured Scotland from the Western Isles to the Borders in 2009, a co-production of *The Adventures of Mr Brouček* with Opera North the same year, and a revival of *The Cunning Little Vixen* with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2011.

*Jenůfa* comes from early in Janáček's career. 'It's basically his first major opera,' explains Stuart. 'On the one hand, it's Czech Puccini, with fantastic lyrical lines, a real sensitivity of colour and lots of delicate stuff going on – but there's also a lot of forward-looking material that moves towards Bartók, with motor rhythms that drive the opera on and make it sound very 20th century. It's still so fresh now, and Janáček is one of those composers you can never get tired of – his music is too difficult to play and sing for a start!'

Alongside the contrasting lyricism and modernity, the third big element in Janáček's score is Moravian folk music, whose distinctive melodies and rhythms recur throughout the opera's vocal lines, as well as in a couple of stand-out set pieces.

For Annilese, the opera's rural setting is key to her thinking behind the new production. 'I've seen *Jenůfa* done in lots of different ways, and of course it's meant to take place in a rural, peasant setting, but at the same time I've sometimes felt a bit uncomfortable about that because it's somehow disrespectful not to engage with the characters as being closer to us than we'd want to admit.'

For her new production, she's relocated the action to a naturalistic setting in the west of Ireland, in September or October 1918. 'The atmosphere is very much like the west of Ireland was, with a fabulous richness coming from that kind of Catholic/Gaelic community spirit and connection with each

other – which can also be perverted into something more destructive.

'And for two months in 1918 the English government tried to conscript Irish men into the British Army, which went down very badly – that was our window to get the Števa recruitment story in.'

The Irish setting also provides an appropriate backdrop for the opera's folk-inspired episodes, for which Annilese is planning to draw on her own experiences. 'I used to go over to a place called Rathlin Island, which is actually off the northern coast of Ireland, to do drama with the tiny population there – you'd do a show, and then there would be a ceilidh in the village hall.

'But when the people danced and sang, they were singing things they'd never consciously learnt, and dancing in a way that they'd just picked up. That's what we're aiming for in those sequences in the opera – in the same way as when people go to ceilidhs, they're not performing.'

The new production also marks the return of renowned soprano Kathryn Harries to Scottish Opera after a break of several years. 'She's probably one of the leading Kostelničkas of our day,' says Stuart. 'She's appeared in about a dozen productions, but she's coming to it entirely afresh, and

she's open to all the possibilities of this new production.' Also returning are tenor Peter Wedd, fresh from playing the terrifying Pedro in James MacMillan's *Inés de Castro*, as the loyal Laca, and Sam Furness, one of the recent *Opera Highlights* tour singers, as Števa.

## 'I think directors have done a disservice by making Jenůfa an innocent victim and the Kostelnička a black-clothed battleaxe'

Harries as Kostelnička is joined by Lee Bisset in the title role and theirs, according to Annilese, is the opera's key relationship. 'I never like it when the Kostelnička is portrayed as a baddie – it's just not very interesting. We're having lots of discussions at the moment on how we can make her more 3D, which is very easy with a singer like Kathryn.

'I think directors have done a disservice by making Jenůfa an innocent victim and the Kostelnička a black-clothed battleaxe, because I don't think that's what Janáček has written. It's very beautiful at the end of

the opera, when the Kostelnička confesses to her crime and Jenůfa is able to forgive her in a really profound way, because she understands that this terrible thing has happened because of love.'

And it's Janáček's unexpectedly optimistic ending that's one of the things that most fascinates Stuart. 'One of the opera's many messages is that Jenůfa, with all she's been through, is able to break the cycle of hatred, and there's a fantastic sense of optimism generated in the orchestral writing at the opera's conclusion. It's one of the greatest endings in all opera, I think.'

For her part Annilese, too, believes the ability to transcend tragedy is the opera's central message. 'The worst thing that can happen to you as a child is if your mother dies, and the worst thing that can happen to you as a mother is if your child dies. But there's something very purifying about that worst thing actually happening to you. And if you can negotiate your life after that, you do have a certain power. I think that's what the opera's really about.'

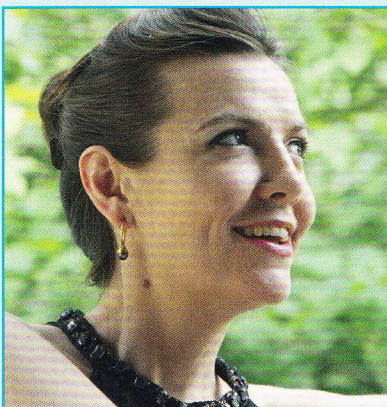
---

*Jenůfa* is supported by:  
The Scottish Opera Syndicate

*Jenůfa*: See page 15 for full performance listings.

## Q&A ...

Lee Bisset, who sings Jenůfa, grew up on Loch Lomondside. She has sung Janáček roles with English National Opera and Longborough Festival Opera, and previously appeared with Scottish Opera in two of the *Five:15* operas.



### When did you realise that you wanted to become a professional singer?

I don't remember a specific moment. A few years ago I found an essay that I had written in Primary 6, aged 11, explaining why I wanted to be a singer, so it was earlier than that.

### Are there any parallels between your rural background and that of Jenůfa?

There are some parallels with any small community, where you know everyone in the village, all their relations and what is going on in their lives. All classes mingle with one another, but everyone is still very aware of their own place in the pecking order. Unlike where I grew up, it seems that no one ever leaves Jenůfa's village – they are stuck with their position there, and cannot escape the mistakes they make. It puts everyone's behaviour under the microscope.

### What do you find challenging or exciting about Janáček, musically and emotionally?

Janáček is the culmination of what Mozart, Verdi, Puccini and Wagner all sought to do in marrying music and drama. He can pinpoint in the shortest musical phrase exactly what a character is feeling. He is so concise in his musical expression. His characters, particularly his heroines, are complex, real people taken to their emotional limits.

### How do you explain Jenůfa's forgiveness of her stepmother, the Kostelnička?

It is extraordinary – the culmination of her exploration of love and compassion through the opera. Her love for Števa leads her to have pre-marital sex, and Laca's love for her causes him to slash her, so she sees what love can drive people

to. And then, loving and losing her baby opens her up, almost spiritually, to a whole other level of love. She understands that her stepmother did a dreadful thing, but that she was motivated by her love for Jenůfa and her desire to protect her. By the end her compassion and understanding of others is immense.

### What did you like about *Five:15 Operas Made in Scotland*?

I really enjoyed the company ethos, where everyone had their moment to shine, their meaty chunk of performing, and then knuckled down to play a supporting role in one or two of the other operas. I thought the concept of *Five:15* was genius: bite-sized, edible chunks of new opera, varied enough that there was something for everyone. Audiences went away animatedly discussing new opera! There was a real buzz, and that is exciting for a performer to feel.

### Your career takes you around the world. Are you enjoying being back 'home'?

Hugely! I love Glasgow. I have family to visit, and close friends from school. It is very much home to me. I'm really enjoying re-learning the city since my student days, delighted to find the places that are still there, and seeing what has replaced those that have gone.