

Franz Welser-Möst leads powerful performance of Leoš Janáček's *Jenůfa*



The Cleveland Orchestra, chorus and soloists combine in a profoundly disturbing yet beautiful performance at Severance Music Center. Roger Mastroianni

By Daniel Hathaway

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CLEVELAND, Ohio – How can an opera be so profoundly disturbing, yet so achingly beautiful?

That was the conundrum after hearing Leoš Janáček's *Jenůfa* at Severance Music Center on Saturday, in a performance by Franz Welser-Möst, the Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus and 11 first-rank soloists.

Welser-Möst chose the Czech composer's 1904 opera as the centerpiece of this season's Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Opera & Humanities Festival because of its resonance with the theme of reconciliation. That's a complex process that "transcends mere forgiveness and forgetfulness," festival curator Elena Dubinets writes in the elaborate program book. "It entails recollection and progression."

Said to have been drawn from real life, *Její pastorkyňa*, the play by Gabriela Preissová that Janáček adapted for his opera, is set in a claustrophobic village in the Slovácko region of Moravia. It holds up a mirror to the morality of the time and suggests that its grim story of infanticide and redemption makes the characters prime candidates for reconciliation.

Half-brothers Števa and Laca are both in love with *Jenůfa*. *Jenůfa* loves Števa and is secretly pregnant with his child. Jealous, Laca slashes her face (he claims it was an accident), and Števa abandons her, repelled by her disfigurement.

Laca, who now hopes to marry *Jenůfa* instead, finds out about the child and becomes furious. In a desperate attempt to help, *Jenůfa*'s stepmother drowns the baby under the

ice at the family mill, but tells them both it died naturally. Her plan seems to work and the pair agree to marry. But when the ice melts in spring, the child's body is discovered, forcing Jenůfa's stepmother to confess.

The opera ends with a remarkable reconciliatory duet between Laca and Jenůfa. With neither sets, costumes nor projections other than supertitles, the orchestra, soloists and chorus paint images sheerly through Janacek's colorful and evocative music. Welser-Möst led a smartly paced performance that brought instrumentalists and singers together with expressive precision.

In the opening scene, Latonia Moore brilliantly introduced herself as Jenůfa as she waits for her fiancée Števa to come home. She sings over a haunting tide of minimalist textures that carry the action forward and turn into more incisive gestures as the opera progresses.

Janacek also uses traditional Czech music — real or made-up — to infuse his score with character, and is said to have introduced the speech rhythms of the Czech language into the singing. The latter may be indiscernible to non-Czech ears, but there's a subliminal sense of ethnicity that mysteriously comes through.

Outstanding among the soloists was Nina Stemme as the Kostelnička, or church sacristan, who recounted how the brothers' father would drink and beat her, projecting her commanding tone into every corner of Mandel Concert Hall.

Tenor Samuel Levine brought out the personality of the jealous Laca in his conversation with the grandmother Buryjovka (mezzo-soprano Marianne Cornetti), and tenor Miles Mykkanen perfectly embodied the swaggering drunkard Števa.

The excellent supporting cast includes Will Liverman (Mill Foreman), Kyle Albertson (Mayor), Simone McIntosh (Karolka), Olivia Vote (Mayor's wife), Lucy Baker (Shepherd), Sarah Mesko (Shepherdess) and Sarah Hutchins (Barena and aunt).

The chorus, prepared by Lisa Wong and deployed on either side of the elevated platform from which the soloists sang, with smaller groups at the stage end of the dress circle, contributed festively to the first act. Their return to that position marked the beginning of the final act, where they had less to do in preparation for the wedding (no music, their orders read!).

The final scene marked the commitment of the characters to the reconciliation process and the rebuilding of fractured relationships that had plagued their strange "family." Does everyone live happily ever after? We don't find out in the 1904 narrative. Perhaps a sequel is in order.

The production will be repeated 7 p.m. Thursday, May 22, and 3 p.m. Sunday, May 25. Tickets are available via clevelandorchestra.com.

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