



**“HEARTILY DEVOTED TO YOU: MEMORIES OF WHAT HAS NEVER HAPPENED - On Ivo Van Hove’s staged version of Leoš Janáček’s *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*” by Krystian Lada, dramaturg**



When 63-year-old Leoš Janáček met 26-year-old Kamila Stösslová in the summer of 1917 in Luhačovice, love was most probably the last thing one would have expected from this unusual encounter. He, a married man and a composer well on his way to becoming known internationally after the exceptional success of his opera, *Jenůfa*, that had premiered in Prague a year before; she, a happily married mother of two boys and a woman of little intellectual pretensions. A brief meeting in the Moravian spa town had apparently enough of an effect to ignite 11 years of intimate correspondence and an impossible, yet real relationship between Leoš and Kamila.

### **Intimate Letters**

From July 16, 1917 to July 25, 1928 Janáček wrote over 700 letters to his muse, 37 years his junior. Kamila replied to his spasms of admiration, passion, and even erotic ecstasy, expressed in about 200,000 words, with a little more restraint – in no more than 49 letters, written rather irregularly.

In Janáček’s letters, the greeting *Dear Madam* was soon replaced by the more intimate form *My dear Kamila*, and *Kamilka, my darling*. In his messages to Kamila, Janáček opened his personal and artistic soul, extensively and in often highly poetic terms that describe the progress of his recent composition, new premières and details of family life.

Stösslová kept more of a distance in her letters to the composer, addressing him with *Dear Maestro* until the end of their exchange. Her letters are of a rather practical nature. In her usually short sentences, Stösslová describes her daily agenda, shares some updates regarding her recent grocery acquisitions or expresses her polite worries about Janáček’s poor health conditions and the unstable financial situation of his family. “(Kamila) was not particularly intelligent”, recalls Zdenka Janáčková, the composer’s wife, in her memoirs. “She told me she didn’t like going to school and didn’t like learning. That was certainly true because her letters were full of spelling mistakes. In music, she was totally ignorant, knowing almost nothing about composers. She called Leoš’s pieces ‘those notes

of yours’, and hadn’t heard of Wagner. In literature, she wasn’t any better. Once she wrote to Leoš: ‘Send me something to read that’s not too long, a love story with a happy ending.’” Instead of passionate love letters, Kamila would provide Janáček’s household with bread and butter, and some other goods that were in short supply during the war.

However ignorant Kamila was about the composer’s artistic creations and his music, she had a profound influence on Janáček’s composing and career. In the period of their letter exchange, Janáček created his greatest works – many of them, explicitly inspired by the dynamics of their relationship and her person – and became famous. “To live in the way Zdenka expects”, wrote the composer to Kamila, commenting on his marriage, “that’s a way I cannot live: it’s worse than torture.

And I won't allow my freedom of thought and feeling to be taken from me. You're as necessary to me as air. I wouldn't be what I am. None of my compositions could grow from this desert at home. I'd die like any ordinary unwanted person." Janáček's intimate correspondence with Kamila offered a liberating alternative to his middle-class life.

### **Burning Desire**

Exact data on the number of letters exchanged between Janáček and Kamila is, however, hard to calculate. Janáček burned many of Kamila's letters from the later years on her request, keeping each letter from her until the next one arrived. "Now I'm reading all your letters which I haven't yet burned. With a heavy heart, I'll sacrifice to the pure fire the most intimate letters, which many people would take the wrong way. I'll keep the rest." Some others were burned by Janáček's wife in a jealous rage: "Zdenka must acknowledge this. You're my light: I live as long as it burns.

I don't want to live without you. There's peace in our house; Zdenka burned the letter. [...] And my letters? If you need them as proof that I, alone, am guilty, that with my unbridled passion for you I misled you into [writing] certain words, then keep them. If you want to be of one mind with me, then burn them. That's what I'll do now – so that I can protect you from everything." The empty envelopes in Stösslová's archive prove that Kamila must have burned at least some of his letters as well.

### **Zápisník – the Album**

As from October 1927, a series of entries in an album, referred to as *památník* or *zápisník* in the letters, was added to the written exchanges between the composer and Kamila. (The original Czech title of Janáček's song cycle bears a similar name – *Zápisník zmizelého*.) This black-bound book was originally kept in Písek, in the Stössels' house, as a commonplace book. During his visits, Janáček would write messages for Kamila – both in words and music – to be read by Kamila during his absences. "So read how we have simply dreamt up our life", reads the opening sentence written in the album by the composer. On a total of 84 pages, Janáček left 13 short compositions, mostly just a few bars long. In some of them, he tried to capture Kamila's voice through notes.

Kamila took the album with her to Hukvaldy, Janáček's birthplace, when she visited his house at the end of July 1928. Janáček kept noting down new entries in the album until August 10, 1928, two days before his death. "And I kissed you. And you are sitting beside me and I am happy and at peace. In such a way do the days pass for the angels", were his last written words in the album.

### **The Diary of a Peasant**

No more than a month after the first letter to Kamila, Janáček mentioned his plans for composing *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*: "In the morning I potter around in the garden; regularly in the afternoon a few motifs occur to me for those beautiful little poems about that Gypsy love. Perhaps a nice little musical romance will come out of it – a tiny bit of the Luhačovice mood would be in it." Here, Janáček refers to 23 short poems entitled *From the Pen of a Self-taught Peasant*, published anonymously in the Brno daily paper *Lidové noviny* (People's Paper) in May 1916. Janáček was a regular reader of the newspaper and often contributed his original articles to it. Some other of his compositions,

including one of his most popular operas *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1924), were also inspired by the texts published there. The respective poems were written in Wallachian dialect – the dialect of the district where Janáček spent his childhood. The speech melody of his native region must have been the source of his inspiration. It was only by the late 90s when the supposedly anonymous author of the texts was identified as a Wallachian writer Josef Kalda.

The poems portray a farmer's teenage son named Janíček who is torn between his family duties and his deep attraction to a Gypsy girl named Zefka. At first, he resists her tempting eyes by sending her away. Eventually, however, he wanders into the woods apparently to cut a peg for his broken cart and finds Zefka there; he succumbs and makes love to her. Even though he is angry with himself for betraying his moral beliefs and bringing shame to his family by falling in love with an outsider woman, Janíček still looks forward to every night, when he can go to the woods and be with his Gypsy girl. When Janíček realizes that Zefka is bearing his son, he decides to leave his family to live as a Gypsy with her.

After his return to Brno from Luhačovice, Janáček immediately started to compose the piece, working at the same time on other important works. It was not until 1919 that the song cycle for tenor, contralto, three women's voices and piano was finished and premiered in 1921 in Brno. The first scenic performance was given only five years later.

### **Gypsy Love**

Janáček repeatedly mentioned that he composed the *Diary* under the influence of his affection for Kamila: "I don't have words to express my longing for you, to be close to you. Wherever I am I think to myself: you can't want anything else in life if you've got this dear, cheerful, black little "Gypsy girl".

I know that my compositions will be more passionate, more ravishing: you'll sit on every little note in them. I'll caress them; every little note will be your dark eye." Many images from the poems appeared in different places in their correspondence – Kamila as a Gypsy girl; the woods as a place of seduction and danger. Janáček's wife recalled Kamila's appearance: "She was of medium height, dark, curly-haired like a Gypsy woman, with great black, seemingly bulging eyes, an 'ox-eyed Hera' [...] with heavy eyebrows, a sensuous mouth. She gained my husband's favour through her cheerfulness, laughter,

temper-ament, Gypsy-like appearance and buxom body [...] She was natural, sometimes even uninhibited." For Janáček, his forbidden desire for a much younger and married woman felt like loving a Gypsy – a common image of the ultimate outsider in his time; to have a relationship with a Gypsy meant to transgress the social norms.

In the final image of the song cycle, Zefka is pregnant with Janíček's child. Kamila bearing his child was Janáček's greatest fantasy and desire for he had lost both his children with Zdenka earlier during their marriage: "In my soul you're mine forever. Yesterday – as a child. Today – as a woman full of grace. One more image is missing – You, my dearest Kamila, as a mother. A mother who is bending over her child and feeding this child with her blood. Then, and only then, I could call you mine." Towards Opera

### ***The Diary of One Who Disappeared***

goes beyond the form of the traditional song cycle. Alongside the main protagonist sung by a tenor, Janáček introduced the character of Zefka (contralto) and the three spectral off-stage voices of the women (two sopranos and a contralto). The annotation on the scores requests that the singer performing the role of Zefka not appear on the stage until song VII is being played and that she leave equally unobtrusively during song XI. The physical appearance of the contralto on the stage breaks with the typical intimacy of a *Liederabend* and imposes need of a theatrical form for this encounter.

Differing from the young miller in Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*, or the wanderer in *Winterreise*, the young peasant from Janáček's *Diary* eventually gives in to his desires, breaks out of his familiar milieu and leaves his homeland. In that sense, *Diary* goes beyond the purely reflective mode that is typical for the classical song cycles. The Janáček's active decision and its consequences – Zefka's pregnancy – brings not only dramatic tension to the piece but adds dramatic development as well. Further, the piano part is much more than a mere voice accompaniment. It expresses the drama that escalates in section XIII for piano solo in which the erotic encounter of the protagonists is reflected in sound.

### **The Other Voice**

For the scenic version of *The Diary of One Who Disappeared*, directed by Ivo Van Hove, Flemish composer Annelies Van Parys was invited to write four new musical fragments reflecting on Janáček's piece.

Van Parys's contribution breaks the fast-paced rhythm of the piece. In Janáček's cycle, the shortest song for tenor is just 39 seconds long; the approximate duration of all the 22 songs is a mere 37 minutes. Songs composed for the contralto, placed in the middle of the piece – songs IX, X and XI – are, however, the longest pieces in Janáček's cycle. It feels as though the appearance of the female character slows the young peasant's rushing blood. Van Parys's composition explores this new time dimension by stressing the timbre of the female voices: the forward-oriented male energy of the tenor is musically balanced by the suspension of time, mirroring of the male rhythm and the female voices, as well as a climaxless musical texture.

Further, Van Parys emphasises the woman's perspective in Janáček's cycle. *The Diary* revolves around the male protagonist who projects a vision of untamed and mysterious women onto the female character of Zefka – as much as Janáček projected an ideal of pure womanhood on Kamila. In Van Parys's composition, Zefka becomes an active character. She is no longer only seen, but she's looking back at her *gadjo* lover (as the Romani traditionally described the non-Romani people). The new libretto that serves as a basis for the composition is inspired by the traditional female Romani poetry and its metaphors. For instance, in Janáček's composition, the Gypsy woman is compared to a wild animal. In the new compositions, the comparison made by Gypsy women between the *gadjo* man and the white horse, *bălănuș*, is also displayed. Similarly, to Janáček, Zefka ponders on the consequences of her breaking out of the Gypsy clan as well – she's aware that her family won't appreciate her choosing a *gadjo* man.

### **Monologue intérieur**

*The Diary of One Who Disappeared* is the fourth piece in a series of monologues that Ivo Van Hove has been developing with the actors of his theatre company Toneelgroep Amsterdam over the last

few years. Previously there was *La voix humaine* (2009) with Halina Reijn, *Songs from Far Away* (2015) with Eelco Smits and *The Other Voice* (2016) with Ramsey Nasr.

The all-encompassing feeling of the endless departures and farewells, as well as the impossibility of maintaining a true connection with the distanced other, whether it be in time or space – characteristics that were established in the previous monologues – can also be found in Van Hove's staged version of *Diary*. The audience encounters a *monologue intérieur* – this time, by an old man who gets lost in the eternal landscape of the memories and fantasies of who he is, who he was, who he has never become. Inasmuch as music already played a significant role in the dramaturgy of the previous monologues, Van Hove's *Diary* takes it further by fusing a song cycle with the original texts from the intimate letters between the composer and Kamila, their album-correspondence and the composer's last will. "I have nothing more than memories", Janáček wrote in one of his letters. "Well then, so I live in them."