

Janacek – Piano Works (1997)

Written by bluesever

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Disc 1: 01. *Tema con variazioni* (Zdenka-Variations) – Tema. Andante – *Variazioni I – VII* 02. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 1. *Nase večery* (Our evenings) 03. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 2. *Listek odvanutý* (A leaf blown away) 04. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 3. *Pojďte s nami!* (Come with us!) 05. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 4. *Frydecká Panna Maria* (The Madonna of Frydek) 06. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 5. *Stebetaly jak lastovicky* (They chattered like swallows) 07. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 6. *Nelze domluvit!* (Words fail!) 08. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 7. *Dobrou noc!* (Good night!) 09. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 8. *Tak neskonale uzko* (Unutterable anguish) 10. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 9. *V placi* (In tears) 11. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 10. *Sycek neodletel!* 12. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 11. Andante 13. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 12. Allegretto 14. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 13. *Più mosso* 15. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 14. *Vivo* 16. *On an overgrown path* (*Po zarostlém chodníku*) – 15. Allegro – Adagio 17. *Reminiscence* (*Vzpomínka*) for piano solo

Disc 2: 01. *Piano* – 1. *Predtucha* [*Sonata 1.X.1905 (From the street)*] 02. *Piano* – 2. *Smrt* [*Sonata 1.X.1905 (From the street)*] 03. *In the Mists* (*V mlhách*) – 1. Andante 04. *In the Mists* (*V mlhách*) – 2. *Molto adagio* 05. *In the Mists* (*V mlhách*) – 3. *Andantino* 06. *In the Mists* (*V mlhách*) – 4. *Presto* 07. *Concertino for piano and chamber orchestra* – 1. *Moderato* 08. *Concertino for piano and chamber orchestra* – 2. *Più mosso* 09. *Concertino for piano and chamber orchestra* – 3. *Con moto* 10. *Concertino for piano and chamber orchestra* – 4. *Allegro* 11. *Capriccio* – 1. *Allegro* 12. *Capriccio* – 2. *Adagio* 13. *Capriccio* – 3. *Allegretto* 14. *Capriccio* – 4. Andante

Rudolf Firkusny – piano Members of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra Rafael Kubelik – conductor

These works, which on closer acquaintance prove to contain almost overwhelming warmth of heart, are in the hands of a pianist who first met Janáček when taken to play to the old master at the age of five, and later studied composition with him.

On these two records are contained Janáček's complete works for piano; and though it would be misleading to suggest that they give anything like a complete portrait of this many-sided composer, they reflect something of his development from the early, almost Dvorákian lyricism to the terse, explosive passion of his last phase. They are in the hands of a pianist who first met Janáček when taken to play to the old master at the age of five, and later studied composition with him: there is an agreeable reminiscence of their meetings on the sleeve, confirming the generosity and the empirical nature of Janáček's teaching which I have heard described by other of his pupils.

The earliest work here is the set of Variations which Janáček wrote for his future wife Zdenka while still studying at Leipzig. Like other early pieces, they reflect a number of influences which have been absorbed remarkably well into a warm and distinctly personal style. Janáček himself called the work "my first completely correct work, my Opus 1", and it is pleasant to have it recorded. But not until the sonata and the two piano suites do we really encounter the full force of Janáček's personality. Firkusny gives a powerful account of the sonata. It was written in memory of a worker killed when German troops put down a demonstration on behalf of a Czech university at Brno, Janáček's home capital; he was doubtful of its worth, for with typical impulsiveness he seized the music of the third movement from the alarmed performer at the final rehearsal, tore it up and burned the pieces. Later he threw the remaining movements into the Vltava; but the pianist, Ludmila Tuelova, had prudently made a secret copy, and later Janáček went so far back on his impulse as to allow publication. Even in its twomovement form, it is a noble work. Firkusny has a strong feeling for the atmosphere of the first movement, "Presentiments", and his very acute understanding of Janáček's tempos and their complex relationships can allow him an expansiveness that again recalls Dvorák without the music ever losing the highly charged, compressed nature of its lyricism.

The demands are in some ways more severe with the two piano suites. The twopart set of pieces Along an overgrown path was begun at the time of Jenufa; some of the numbers date from 1902, others from as late as 1911, and with them a new terseness is shown entering the style of a composer whose tendency was increasingly to the laconic. The title, which a somewhat loosely-written trilingual sleeve-note does not discuss, does not refer to the experiences of nature except in so far as they can stand as metaphor or comment on the real subject of the suite—the re-exploration of the unhappiness caused by the tragic death of Janáček's young daughter Olga. This is the 'overgrown path' ; and with it go reminiscences of his birth-place, Hukvaldy, with sketches of a blown-away leaf, a beautiful little musical ikon of the Virgin of Frjrdk (grave chords contrasted with a flowing, graceful theme), a movement of weeping, finally a grim sketch of steady, calm chords which are continually interrupted by the din of the screech-owl, harbinger of death. The second suite of the set is less specific, though the mood is maintained (it also is without titles: those of the first are given on the record in the clumsy translation of the Hudebni Matice edition).

Here, as in the short suite *In the Mist* of similar date (1912) which confirms the melancholy mood, the piano writing has become extremely difficult. Technically it makes severe demands upon the performer, which Firkusny meets without trouble; but the real problem is caused by the extreme unpredictability of the music, but its sudden alternations of violent, jagged themes and the heart-easing lyricism of the passages into which they are flung, by the contrast of terse little nuggets of music and very free rhapsodic passages, so free that there is often a problem of notation. Firkusny records that Janáček often changed his mind about his music, and would impulsively alter passages that had long reached print; as he says, candidly, this leaves many questions of interpretation open to discussion. But his own understanding of the way in which the notes must be treated freely yet within a very controlled idiom seems to me wholly admirable; and he has of course the composer's authority for various changes (most strikingly in the fourth piece of the second *Overgrown Path* set). In the 1920s came the two piano concertos, or the nearest Janáček ever came to piano concertos. The *Concertino* is weirdly scored for two violins, viola, clarinet, horn and bassoon, and I have nothing but admiration for the way in which DGG have dealt with such oddities. In the first movement, it is the horn alone which appears with the piano, in the second only the E flat clarinet, squealing desperately, until the arrival of the strings near the end. Janáček was, it seems, describing nature scenes: the reiterated horn figure of three notes represents a cross hedgehog trying to get back to its lair, the clarinet a squirrel caught in a cage, and so on, with the whole suite probably originally intended to be entitled *Spring*. We are back in the world of *The Cunning Little Vixen*, though it has become more abstract and still more concentrated. With the *Capriccio*, written for the pianist Otakar Hollmann who had lost the use of his right arm in the war, the scoring is still more eccentric (flute, though not till the end of the second movement, two trumpets, tenor tuba and three trombones). The style is, if anything, still more laconic, with sudden jets of melody from the piano and textures that are as tough as anything in the whole of Janáček's music. Not until the last movement is some kind of reconciliation reached, with the flute sailing over dense, packed brass chords against piano flourishes. It is a fierce little work.

Firkusny is apparently as much at home with the stark manner of these late works as in the earlier solo piano music. Apart from the lack of information in the sleeve-note, the presentation of the record is up to DGG's best standards, and the playing of the Bavarian Radio musicians has clearly gained from the coaching of Rafael Kubelik. His approach to Janáček has often been almost too lyrical; here he has all the sharpness and oddity of the late pieces. I strongly recommend this pair of records of music which is still not well enough known, which sometimes presents a gruff face but which on closer acquaintance proves to contain almost overwhelming warmth of heart. --- Gramophone [6/1972], reviewing the original LP release

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