Putting a place to the music

The writer wanted to drive through the Czech Republic and stop in towns of composers

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The village of Hukvaldy, in Moravia

HUKVALDY, Czech Republic – The door to the house was locked so I went around to the back. It was a spring afternoon, late in the day, and the shadows of the chestnut and apple trees in the Moravian hills around me lengthened with the approach of dusk.

I had come to the birthplace of composer Leoš Janáček (1854-1928), whose evocative music I had first heard in the 1980s as the soundtrack to The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the film starring Daniel Day-Lewis, Juliette Binoche and Lena Olin and based on Milan Kundera's erotically charged novel.

At the time, Janáček's stirring lyricism, sharp rhythms and folk melodies seemed to sum up the Slavic soul: grounded in the earth, bold, inventive. But in his solo piano and chamber pieces, the flip-side of that soul emerged: something more reflective, melancholic, wise.

Janáček's music represented what eastern Europe was all about, the unity of opposites. For him and other nationalist Czech and Moravian composers – Dvorak, Smetana, Martinů, Fibich, to name a few – music was inseparable from the land and people that nurtured and inspired it.

"Music means nothing if it is not rooted in life, in blood, in the milieu," Janáček said in a letter to his friend, the young German-Jewish writer Max Brod (to whom we also owe the rescue of Kafka's manuscripts from oblivion). "Else it is a toy we need not value."

Now, on my third trip to the Czech Republic since the Velvet Revolution of 1989, I wanted to discover the source of that sentiment. Beginning with Janáček, my plan was to drive to Prague from easternmost Moravia with stops along the way in the towns of great composers. I knew their music mostly from CDs and the odd concert back home. Seeing their birthplaces, I hoped, would revitalize the listening. I'd be able to put a place, not just a face, to the music.

So now, on a sunny afternoon in May, I was outside Janáček's last home in Hukvaldy, a 14th-century village in the foothills of the Beskydys, a pinewood forested ridge in the far reaches of northeastern Moravia, 360 kilometres east of Prague. Just west of Hukvaldy is the town of Pribor, birthplace of a much more famous Moravian, Sigmund Freud (and also of Janáček's mother, Amalie). Nevertheless, it is Janáček who is held in higher regard by

the people here.

Janáček‘s last house in Hukvaldy

Janáček's quaint little peaches-and-cream-coloured house has been turned into a modest museum, and the sign at the entrance said I still had an hour before it closed for the day.

The locked door indicated otherwise. I figured I'd scout out the backyard, maybe press my face to one of the windows and get a peek at the composer's furniture. The guide book said his lectern was there, the one where he stood to compose.

But in the end I didn't have to sneak a peek. Like Janáček's music, the house eventually opened itself up to me, revealing its secrets.

Through one of the back windows a caretaker spotted me in the yard, and with what sounded like an invitation in Czech to come in, he unlocked the front door and welcomed me to the reception desk. The TV was on, and I now understood the source of the delay. He'd been watching a soccer match. The last visitor on a quiet afternoon, I was a bit of a surprise, hence the locked door. Now the caretaker good-naturedly took his keys and unlocked each of the three downstairs rooms of the house for me, then left me to go back to his game. The floorboards creaked as I went alone from salon to bedroom to kitchen.

It didn't take long. Janáček's lectern was there, its top faced with a thin sheet of leather in whose lines I imagined, palimpsest-like, I could read the notes to one of Janáček's scores. There were old family photographs in black-and-white, three green ceramic-tile stoves, a small harmonium, paintings in gilt frames, lace curtains on the windows, Persian carpets on the floors, a few hardbound scores of Janáček's operas on the bookcase shelves. Nowhere in sight were the cylinder field recordings that Janáček – à la Bartok after him – had made of the speech and music of countryfolk he'd come to know from his travels, recordings that helped him arrive at his own style of music. But that didn't matter to me now. I'd been enveloped by the atmosphere of the place: tranquil, unpretentious, rural, Old World.

After a while I joined the caretaker in the reception room. While he kept his eye on the game, I picked over some postcards and books and Supraphon CDs for sale. The contrast between the old and the new was very Janáček: modern sports, old music, and between them a caretaker doing double duty with both. At closing time I left him and returned to the sounds of nature outside.

Kamila Stösslová and Leoš Janáček go for a stroll

In the village I joined locals and daytrippers sipping from steins of Radegast lager on the terrace opposite the Baroque-style gate to the village park, a forested expanse where deer roam freely amid the ruins of a large medieval castle. Next to the village's 18th-century church where Janáček was baptized and later sang at mass, I could see the elementary school where Janáček's father taught (and where, incidentally, Janáček, the 10th of 14 children, was born). Other pilgrimage spots for Janáček-seekers are the serpentine forest trail that was the inspiration for his piano cycle On the Overgrown Path, the cemetery where his parents and one of his brothers are buried, and the former inn where Janáček improvised dance music on the piano during summer festivals.

"If I have achieved anything, it is due to the beauties and life of this community," the composer told the village's organizing committee in 1916. "Your soul is full only if you fill it." Years later, shortly before he died, Janáček fine-tuned the sentiment: "Beautiful landscape, quiet people, soft dialect as if you cut butter," he

wrote in an article about his hometown. That quietude is still there, for those who seek it.

The coda to Janáček's story in Hukvaldy is the tragedy of his own death there. It's a romantic ending. Married with children, Janáček had for years also cultivated a platonic love affair with another woman, Kamila Stösslová, the young wife of a Jewish Bohemian antique dealer. During the last 16 months of his life, Janáček wrote his dark-eyed mistress almost daily. Those letters were the most passionate of more than 700 he sent her since their relationship began after a chance meeting in a Moravian spa town during the First World War.

Kamila Stösslová and her baby son in 1917

The end came in the summer of 1928 when, on a visit to Janáček in Hukvaldy, Stösslová's 11-year-old son got lost in the woods. Searching for the boy himself, Janáček caught a chill and came down with pneumonia. He died a few weeks later in Ostrava, the closest city, a coal-mining town to the north near the Polish border. He was 74 years old.

Those same woods are now trod by people searching for what Janáček left behind: peace and inspiration on paths overgrown, a certain lightness of being made bearable by the passage of time, the essential harmony that is Hukvaldy.

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