

Stephen Wadsworth

Discovering Janáček's Operas

Several years ago I read, back to back, *Alive!*, the story of the Andes survivors, and *Watership Down*, a novel of rabbits holding their own in the open. I was struck by their bond as life-affirming tales of survival. In one week recently I heard recordings of Leós Janáček's operas **From the House of the Dead**, a shattering view of life in a prison camp, and **The Cunning Little Vixen**, whose theme—the blessed regeneration of nature—rises like the moon from simple scenes of a fox's living and dying. These operas, like those books so different in form and content, also celebrate life similarly.

Janáček (1854-1928), Moravian composer, conductor, teacher, student of the music of speech patterns and of the sounds of nature, was a humanist and an optimist who found in opera the form in which he could most richly express his deep love of life and people. Despite, or maybe because of the tragic deaths of both his children (aged 8 and 21) and an increasingly cold marriage, this man smiled radiantly at life, for all its frowns. Life went on, offering him new glories. In most of his operas, boundless happiness is achieved—even if fleetingly—only in the wake of death and dying.

Janáček's musical themes, based on the short phrases of Czech folk music and his own brusque dialect, are brief. His constant repetition and permutation of terse fragments of melody tease, even torture the ear. He lets you have a flood of lyricism but then brutally halts it with gnarled rhythmic twists and contrasting themes, pulling something vital out from under you. These flash floods give you the feeling that you can never

quite grasp the truth or purity of an emotion for more than a few seconds—as in life. Too bad Janáček never went through with his thoughts of capturing Tolstoy's flighty, impulsive Anna Karenina in an opera.

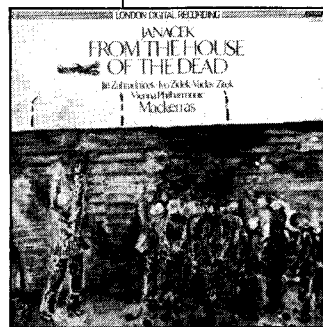
He wrote nine operas, most of them available on Supraphon Records with seasoned casts of Czech singers. Many of these singers appear in London Records' unfolding series of Janáček operas—this one centered around a leading Janáčekian, Sir Charles Mackerras, who conducts the Vienna Philharmonic. Recently the operas have been staged in extensive cycles in

In *Jenůfa* (2-Angel, S-3756, \$19.96). In *Jenůfa*, composed 1893-1903, the most widely produced of his operas, it is the revelation of her baby's murder that opens the heroine's eyes to a truer love and brighter future than she has ever known. Nowhere in Janáček is that feeling of *almost* grasping beauty and truth so viscerally, so disturbingly omnipresent. Supraphon, with whom Angel shares rights to this recording, has published in Europe a more recent recording of *Jenůfa* with the sensational Gabriela Benackova, whose rich, soft-grained voice is more smoothly produced than most Slavic sopranos'.

That set probably will be released here within the year; meanwhile Angel's Czech cast is powerful.

So is London's on the new recording of *House*, composed 1927-1928, a dense but tuneful score clarified by the digital process. Here, cries of hurt, pain, delirium, and eventually death are juxtaposed

with sarcastic, folksy reminiscences of crime. When a prisoner and a wounded eagle are freed at the end, the other prisoners can dream—but only for fleeting minutes before they are marched back to brutality and nothingness. Janáček's inscription? "In every creature a spark of God." In *Vixen* (2-Supraphon 112 1181-2, \$19.96), composed 1924, Janáček "wedded my muse to the shadow of a forest and the miracle of dawn," and the result is erotic and moving. Bohumil Gregor's warm conducting draws exceptional performances out of only adequate singers. Supraphon provides no English translation, but Erik Chisholm's *The Operas of Janáček* (Pergamon Press, \$9.75) offers detailed commentary. ■



Prague, Düsseldorf, Cardiff, and London, and at least five of them are repertoire pieces around the world. The New York City Opera performs *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *The Makropoulos Affair* this month. London Records, working backwards through Janáček's operas, has started with *Katya Kabanova*, *The Makropoulos Affair*, and now—digitally recorded—*From the House of the Dead*. Last month London taped *Vixen* with Lucia Popp, for release early next year.

I also worked backwards, from the last opera on the latest recording, *House* (2-London LDR 10036, \$21.96)—following Janáček's ever keener and more eccentrically precise dramatic imagination back to its first flowering

Peter Caranicas

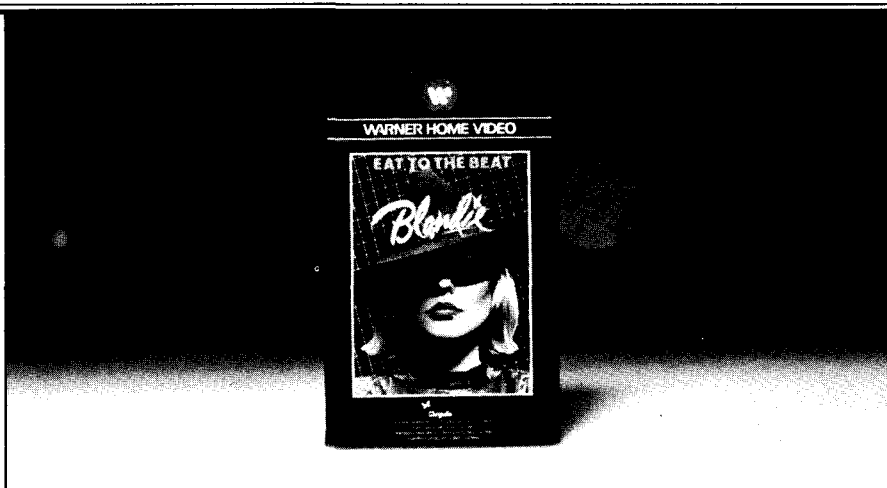
The Challenge of Videodiscs

The music world is abuzz with speculation about the new video technology and how it will affect recorded music. It has even coined a new expression—"video music"—to designate some of the art forms that could develop from a fusion of the two media. As might be expected, rock music leads the way in market experimentation; but jazz, classical, and other genres are quickly following suit.

Fans of the semipunk rock group Blondie converged in droves upon record stores last year to buy its *Eat to the Beat* record album. Today, those who happen to own a videocassette recorder (VCR) can also go to their nearest video dealer and buy an *Eat to the Beat* videocassette containing the same songs as the audio album. It's the first release of a major record album in a video version. While the video album costs a lot more (about \$60 compared to \$8), it also offers the visual bonus of the group in concert, as well as trick shots, special video effects, and such visual surprises as footage of an H-bomb explosion, all set to the exuberant *Eat to the Beat* soundtrack.

Is the hefty extra expense worth it? Only for diehard Blondie fans, most of whom are too young to be able to afford a VCR. But 1981 will be remembered as the year of the videodisc's large-scale introduction. Prices may settle to \$15 per disc program, or even less, as the costs of creating a videodisc are spread over millions of copies.

And selections aren't limited to rock. A small New York company, Improvising Artists Inc., has released several progressive jazz programs on videocassettes, with video special effects orchestrated to the music. Los Angeles video artist Ron Hays has created a number of spectacular, abstract visual



DON KUSHNIK

Eat to the Beat is the first major record album to be released in a video version.

accompaniments to the music of Richard Wagner. Rock-musician-turned-video-producer Todd Rundgren has woven a whimsical video program around Holst's *The Planets*. The MCA and RCA videodisc catalogs list ballet, modern dance, symphonic, and operatic performances.

A major obstacle to the growth of video music could be presented by the thorny issue of artist and union royalties and residuals. Assuming, however, these are overcome by negotiation, it may turn out that video music programs will be even more popular in the long run than feature films, the principal engine driving the emerging videocassette business today.

But before video music can develop, the manufacturers of video equipment and programs will have to pay greater attention to audio quality. None of the prerecorded cassettes on the market have stereo soundtracks, and the VCRs that play them are designed simply to be plugged into ordinary home TV sets, all of which have notoriously low-quality audio. The laser-optical videodisc sys-

tem on the market today—sold by Magnavox and Pioneer—does have stereo capability, but most current videodiscs are available only with monaural sound. RCA's player, which uses a different technology and is now being introduced, has no stereo capability at all, although future models may incorporate that feature.

If video music ever becomes as significant a factor in the consumption of music as audio records, it will certainly have much impact on the popularity of artists and institutions. In popular music, visually appealing performers (Olivia Newton-John, Kiss) may be favored over the simple or visually dull (Phoebe Snow, Barry Manilow). In classical music, the introduction of video may benefit forms that demand visual attention—ballet, modern dance, opera—the same way the introduction of sound once drove motion pictures to new heights of popularity.

Whatever the outcome, video, like stereo before it, will place new demands both upon artists and technicians, all to the benefit of the consumer. ■